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Manipulating the city through the Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture

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Summary

In 2005, the first Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture took place. Since then, eight editions followed: the event has gradually gained popularity, generating a parallel exhibition in neighbouring Hong Kong (becoming thus a Bi-City Biennale) and figuring today among the most renowned global architectural Rendez-Vous.

Meanwhile, the city and the event have cemented a tight, mutual relationship. Intended both as a discursive theoretical platform and an operative tool to trigger tangible spatial transformations, the Shenzhen Biennale represents a case where to investigate the interconnectedness between ephemeral events and urban space in a time when temporary projects and festivals are acquiring relevance - questioning the mainstream conception of permanent planning as a feature of contemporary cities.

The Shenzhen Biennale is, first of all, an exhibition. As cultural events par excellence, biennials represent well-rehearsed forms of dissemination and display of disciplinary knowledge in the fields of architecture and art. Nevertheless, they also epitomise the increasing festivalisation of contemporary urban spaces, entailing multiple dimensions of spectacle and consumption. Generally observed both as global cultural phenomena and marketing tools locally adopted by cities that strive to emerge in the neo-liberal system of the creative economy, biennials, triennials, and the like are now expanding in all directions - reinventing and redefining both disciplinary boundaries and the notion of "event" itself.

Fitting in this framework, the Shenzhen Biennale embodies an aspirational status: it aims at actively building - rather than simply displaying - the relationship between architecture and urban socio-spatial issues. At the threshold between the intellectual parade and the institutional tool, it is a multifaceted object trying to adopt new methods to investigate and transform urban spaces.

The setting up of such an international event in Shenzhen shows how the social and economic context of an emerging Chinese metropolis has instrumentally renegotiated well-codified paradigms belonging to the so-called "Global North" - which have been ruling the cosmopolitan biennials' circus for a long time - delineating an autonomous ground of experimentation.

The exhibition is an ephemeral three-months show framed in the 'narrative' system of the city, epitomising Shenzhen's ambitions to gain a place on the world-class creative cities' map.

On the other side, the Biennale also represents a powerful tool to tackle local issues by

directly transforming the cityscape. Throughout eight editions, the exhibition has evolved as a self-defined 'urban catalyst': an instrument to manipulate the city's built fabric through the 'reactivation' of spaces - and to question issues related to Shenzhen's hypertrophic urban development.

Physical spaces transformed by the event propel an idealised, overwhelming narrative of visual delight and urban extravaganza. They witness the interlocking of multiple actors (organisers, Urban Planning Bureau, corporate sponsors, curators and designers) who use the event to pursue different objectives and build a vast network of - often not so frictionless - interactions between the exhibition and the local reality. Everybody stroll among the colourful exhibits and enjoy the spectacle in the exhibition's heterotopic space: yet, what is behind - and beyond - the event?

This research aims at deepening the understanding of the Biennale's spatial nature, trying to disentangle the event's multifaceted nature - and its inherent contradictions - through multiple simultaneous stories and perspectives. The ex-post reading of the exhibition's spatial narratives observes the layered relationship between narration and transformation, which the event has gradually set up. It aims to investigate the Biennale's agency in establishing a relational network within Shenzhen's urban space: a close reading of this specific case study, moreover, sets out a broader framework for understanding the role of biennials - and urban events at large - in contemporary times.

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Introduction

The Event and the City

In spring 2018, the Turin-based architectural firm CRA - Carlo Ratti Associati, Politecnico di Torino and the South China University of Technology of Guangzhou submitted a successful application for the Open Call to curate the 8th Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture (UABB), on the theme of "Urban Interactions"[1]. Two curatorial teams managed the two main sections of the exhibition, titled "Ascending Cities" - displayed in the Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning - and "Eyes of the City" - presented in the underground space of the Futian High-Speed Railway Station. I was part of the curatorial team as "Head of Exhibition and On-Site Coordination" for the "Eyes of the City"[2] section.

The choice of the research topic for this doctoral dissertation - the observation of the relationship that the Shenzhen Biennale has gradually established with the city's urban fabric - preceded the Open Call application. Nevertheless, being part of the curatorial team of the Shenzhen Biennale 8th edition allowed me to observe the event from a double perspective, both as an insider and outside researcher. As a researcher, I had free access to the Biennale's archives and original documents. As both a researcher and a member of the curatorial team, I interacted directly with the Biennale's former curators and Organizing Committee. As "Head of Exhibition and On-Site Coordination", I played an active role in the making of the 2019 Biennale, taking advantage of my internal point of view in observing and decoding the dense network of social, economic, spatial and power relationships that the Biennale grafted onto the city, being able to capture the exhibition in its intrinsic complexity.

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1   Curatorial team: Meng Jianmin, Fabio Cavallucci (Chief Curators), Yan Wu (Co-Curator).

2 Curatorial Team: Carlo Ratti (Chief Curator), Politecnico di Torino and South China University of Technology (Academic Curators).

Staging the "Chinese Dream"

In 2005, the first edition of the "Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture" took place in the - until then - disused Huaqiaocheng Industrial Area in Nanshan District. Paralleling an extensive urban transformation and intensive promotional and media campaigns, the Biennale's action in the area turned out to be crucial in transforming what was a disused site in a central district of the city into one of the most vibrant creative spots in Shenzhen. Since then, there have been eight editions of the event, through which the exhibition has gradually gained international visibility: the Shenzhen Biennale is listed today as one of the most renowned architectural events in the world (Valencia 2019a).

The city and the Biennale have also built an exclusive, mutual relationship. The event has become an important part of Shenzhen's urban realm: it has consolidated a relationship with the city over time, both as a critical 'lens' to observe the urban transformations in progress and as an opportunity to trigger new ones, proclaiming itself an "urban catalyst" (Zhang, 2014: 10). Contextually, the structure of the event has grown in ambition and complexity, seeking connections with Hong Kong's cultural *milieu* and becoming a "Bi-City" Biennale in 2007[3] (Wang, Chung and Hong Kong Institute of Architects, 2010).

The creation of the Shenzhen Biennale marked an important moment of self-celebration for a megalopolis conventionally labelled as a "city without history" (Sala, 2016), that has undergone a metamorphosis from 'manufacturing hub' to 'world city' (Vlassenrood, 2016). The birth of the Special Economic Zone in 1979 - and Shenzhen Municipality in 1980 - are the mouthpieces of the "Reforms and Opening Up" period inaugurated by the then Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping (O'Donnell, Wong and Bach 2017; Chen 2017; Du 2019, Hu 2020).

Over the last four decades, the city has undergone intense and rapid urban development. What was conventionally - and instrumentally - considered as an agglomeration of rural and fishing villages, is now referred to as one of mainland China's most progressive cities, an outpost of economic reform capable of surpassing the neighbouring Hong Kong (Du 2019). From the original centre of Luohu, the city has developed at an unprecedented speed: the so-called "Shenzhen Speed" - which refers to the construction of Shenzhen's first skyscraper, the Guomao Building (O'Donnell 2017b) - epitomizes a frantic pace of accumulation which involves several aspects: the material production of the urban environment, the generation of economic well-being and the constant formulation of immaterial imaginaries (O'Donnell and Wan 2016, O'Donnell 2017a).

Among the many slogans characterizing Shenzhen's urban narrative, "Window of the World" soon emerged as one of the most representative: the Special Economic Zone itself was born as a threshold, the contact between the 'reformed' China and the increasingly globalized world (Bach 2017a). Shenzhen now represents a place to observe some of the essential urban transformations that have characterized the construction of its 'global' imagery - and the transformation of contemporary China as a whole (Hu 2020). The emerald landscape of the city - a paradigm of Chinese urban expansion - is not only physically embodied by iconic architecture or large-scale urban development sites (Sun and Xue 2019) - but is also *staged* for a domestic and international audience as the perpetuation of its pioneering role.

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3   Since 2007, the official name of the exhibition is "Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen)", UABB in short. Hong Kong houses a parallel exhibition titled "Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Hong Kong). See Chapter 2.

The creation of the Shenzhen Biennale fits into this narrative framework, representing a lens to observe the city and its transformations, a sounding board for Shenzhen's unprecedented urban development and its *mise en scène*. It mirrors - and prompts - Shenzhen's transition from "cultural desert" to "global knowledge city" (Zhang 2008; Hu 2020), enhanced by municipal governmental policies and the proclamation of the city as a UNESCO "City of Design" in 2008 (Bontje 2014). Since its inception, the Biennale has acted both as an urban promotional event and as a 'window' to observe the rapid urbanization of the city and Pearl River Delta Region as an object of study which embraces the most urgent issues of architecture and urban planning.

The event acts as a trans-scalar instrument and a "worlding practice" (Roy and Ong 2012), intended as one of the means deployed by emerging cities to re-articulate their positions in relation to global policies, practices and tropes - while maintaining inextricable links with a local dimension. On a global scale, it is instrumental to position the Asian megalopolis among the elite of world-class cities; on a national level, it represents a tool to reaffirm Shenzhen's pioneering role in becoming the new outpost of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Shenzhen Government 2021)[4]; on a regional level, it embraces attempts to include the city in the Greater Bay Area Strategy (Hong Kong Government 2019).

Besides being a trans-scalar cultural institution, the Biennale also represents a tool not only to investigate and stage, but to transform the city on a tangible local dimension. A growing number of urban sites have been displayed and transformed during the eight editions of the event, in an attempt to regenerate unused (or 'difficult') portions of Shenzhen's cityscape. It is possible to observe an entanglement between the institutional nature of the cultural platform, the tropes of the temporary event and the ambitions of injecting transformations to address urgent urban issues. This overlapping defines the Biennale as a multi-faceted object, intended both as an ephemeral discursive space to operate a theoretical reflection on urbanism and architecture, and an operative tool to inject aspirational, long-term physical transformations into the city.

The power of the ephemeral

The notion of 'transience' is inextricably enmeshed in the continuous changes and restructuring that has taken place in contemporary cities in recent decades, following the incremental fragmentation stemming from neo-liberal ideologies in post-modern society. Henneberry (2013, 7), for instance, identifies a "volatile and provisional" character of contemporary urban spaces which also have recurrent pathways. Post-industrial cities often represent the social, spatial and economic context of this transition: the voids left by the spatial reorganization of value chains and manufacturing processes have become a fertile *terrain vague* for brand-new urban transformation and manipulation plans. Technological advances and economic transitions have gradually brought about a rise in the availability of vacant urban land and buildings (Bishop and Williams, 2012): the reconfiguration of the way we work, live and consume has also influenced paradigms in using public and private spaces, making them more "temporary, flexible and episodic" (Henneberry 2017, 3).

These forms of coexistence and diversity embedded in temporary uses of urban spaces nowadays are often instrumentally deployed to realign the biases embedded in the city's

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4   See Chapter 2.

economic and spatial restructuring. Extemporaneous uses and spatial practices, pop-ups and events have become familiar elements in contemporary urban spaces.

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2014, 7) describes an event as something extraordinary which holds the potential to change or deconstruct our perceptions of reality, "a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it". Events colonize, consume and produce social, physical, economic and political space, "challenging accepted definitions of culture" (Quinn 2005, 9) and gradually questioning the dichotomy between "high" and "low" arts as theorized by Adorno and Horkheimer (1979). They act as multi-faceted objects and position themselves in mechanisms of cultural production and consumption (Evans, 2003), with the realization of aestheticized urban landscapes as their most tangible result.

In this context, a preliminary research issue arises: what relationship do extemporaneous events and practices establish with urban space and what do they represent? Do they merely 'accompany' the current dynamics that characterize cities or can they represent elements of change as an integral part of urban mechanisms? Can they be considered a lens to observe and test possible paradigms in reading and interpreting contemporary cities? Which kind of perspectives do they open?

Culture, events and expediency

The entanglement of ephemeral events, artistic practices and urban space is not a new concept. Numerous scholars constantly explore the long-lasting historical relationship between society and ephemeral events, and their representational ambitions, economic significance and social meaning, pointing out different perspectives in consolidating civic identities (Hall 1992), power infrastructures and political consensus (Bonnemaison and Macy 2008). In recent decades, however, it has been possible to retrace a growing 'eventization' involving contemporary cities. As highlighted by Quinn (2005), the post-war period inaugurated a proliferation of events due to the restructuring of a common European cultural infrastructure. Since then, mega-exhibitions, biennials/triennials, 'Design Weeks', festivals and other ephemeral artistic practices have become stable ingredients in policymakers' urban agendas and pivotal points in urban regeneration and city marketing strategies (Hall 1992, Roche 1994, Richards and Palmer 2010, Moeran and Pedersen 2011, Tang 2011, Giorgi, Sassatelli and Delanty 2011). Their presence needs to be framed within the "conjuncture between economical changes, the rise of globalization and economic competition as tactics for entrepreneurial display" (Quinn 2005, 13) which increase the "pressure on cities to assert their global presence and ambitions by means of vibrant visual images and branding campaigns" (Scott 2014 in Lin 2016, 43).

As Roche (1994, in Quinn 2005, 12) observes, today "festivals have taken on a new significance […] as entrepreneurial displays, as image creators capable of attracting significant flows of increasingly mobile capital, people and services". These kinds of events – flexible, brand-oriented, swinging between official planning and informal approaches – position themselves against the backdrop of neo-liberal processes of urban identity construction that are investing contemporary cities.

Rifkin (2000) has conceptualized this tendency as the emergence of a "cultural capitalism", which generates the "commodification of human culture itself". This economic trend has

gradually overtaken the production of material assets: since the second half of 20ᵗʰ century, the commodification and consumption of experiences, symbols, knowledge, lifestyles and information have represented the foundation for the creation of wealth creation, setting up a global "cultural marketplace".

From the production and consumption of intangible assets, patterns deriving from cultural capitalism have increasingly influenced the evolution of contemporary urban spaces. In the 'cultural' discourse around the city, the interlocking of experiences, creative activities, arts and economics has resulted in "new urban modes of production and governance in urban policies" where "the city becomes the *spatial* condition of artistic production" (Piraud and Pattaroni 2018, 181). Ward (1998, 4) has framed this 'entrepreneurial ethos' in a typical momentum of the growth of contemporary cities: while culture was not seen as a primary asset during the industrial era - – "culture was the 'icing on the cake'"- now it has become a growth engine – "today it has become part of the 'cake' itself".

The term "culture" is a powerful portmanteau in the hands of the stakeholders who hold the economic and political power to shape social and urban spaces. In this perspective, contemporary cities have experienced a shift towards characterization as 'creative' engines, using cultural and symbolic tools to re-boost their material capital. Art and cultural practices - by adding attractiveness to contemporary cities - now represent key elements of the 'creative' core business of the urban economy (Bianchini and Parkinson 1994; Florida 2002). They are the predominant characteristics of the 'self-culturalization of the city' (Reckwitz 2010), defining a *locus* characterized by the integration of art, capital and the so-called 'creative' practices. In a similar vein, Zukin (1995, 2) highlights the importance of culture in reshaping the symbolic, economic and physical dimensions of space: "culture is more and more the business of cities - the basis of their tourist attractions and their unique, competitive edge. The growth of cultural consumption (of art, food, fashion, music and tourism) and the industries that cater to it fuels the city's symbolic economy, its visible ability to produce both symbols and spaces".

The current expansion of cultural containers and events plays an essential role in promoting the symbolic and material capital of cities (Evans 2003). Within this frame, it is worth noting an increasingly instrumental use of culture, which Yùdice (2005, 10-11) identifies as "expediency": public statements advocate art and culture as "a resource for urban development […] for both sociopolitical and economic amelioration [and for] the creation of multicultural tolerance and civic participation through urban cultural development projects".

The Biennale and the city: architectures of spectacle

The Shenzhen Biennale is, first of all, an architectural exhibition. Biennials are a broad category, considered among the best-rehearsed forms of dissemination and display of disciplinary knowledge in the fields of architecture and art.

Generally studied and debated both as global phenomena and as high-budgeted tools of marketing strategies adopted by cities which strive to emerge in the neo-liberal system of the so-called 'creative economy', recurrent mega-exhibitions are now expanding along multiple trajectories (Jones 2010; Filipovic, van Hal and Øvstebø 2010; Martini and Martini 2011; Smith 2012; Papastergiadis and Martin 2013; Kompatsiaris 2017; Gardner and Green 2016; Jones

2017). Biennials, triennials and the like continuously configure themselves as ever-changing objects which try to adopt alternative tools to investigate, display and reshape the urban, involving both the global network of mega-exhibitions and the local context where they take place (Szacka 2018; Szacka 2019). In their ambitions, they aim to reinvent and redefine the role of the architect and the notion of an architectural 'event'.

Biennials today represent temporary places within the city where space is cyclically staged in its intangible and tangible forms. Architectural and urban projects - and the constant reconfiguration of 'design' notions - are the protagonists of the show, mirroring curators' and designers' ambitions. Full-scale installations and pavilions dominate the scene as experimental means to test the innovative potential of architecture in injecting changes into both theoretical and spatial aspects of the disciplinary domain, turning exhibitions into "productive" testbeds (Kossak 2012). Contextually, the space of the city houses the event, becoming a spectacular theatre for new modes of display and triggering multiple dimensions of visual and cultural consumption (Tang 2011). As pop-ups, architecture and extemporaneous events mushroom in contemporary urban spaces, times and modes of spectacle and consumption play an active role in reinforcing the material and immaterial re-imagining of the city[5].

Emerging exhibition formats - including the IABR - Rotterdam International Architecture Biennale, Manifesta, Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism[6] - attempt to engage new forms of governance and "in-depth discussions on the future of the city" (Pai 2017, 4): the entanglement of curatorial practices and urban space increasingly positions the city as a territory to 'curate' (Chaplin and Stara 2009).

The Shenzhen Biennale fits into this frame: it is a multi-faceted object - at the crossroad between the exhibition event, the critical platform and the popular festival - which tries to adopt new tools to investigate and display urban issues. The Biennale is an ephemeral three-month event which is rightfully part of the city's narrative system. Linked to the international circuit of major exhibitions and cultural events, it epitomizes Shenzhen's ambition to gain a position on the world map of creative cities. Self-labeled as the "the only biennial exhibition in the world that is based exclusively on the set themes of urbanism and architecture"[7], the Shenzhen Biennale has de-contextualized and re-contextualized the well-rehearsed trope of the West-centric biennale through a process of reinterpretation.

The event represents a powerful tool to tackle local issues by directly transforming the city: throughout its eight editions, the exhibition has evolved as an instrument capable of physically manipulating urban space and to directly questioning issues related to Shenzhen's development and spatial metamorphosis. In its actions, the Shenzhen Biennale embodies an aspirational status: it aims to actively 'build'- rather than simply 'display' - the relationship between architecture and the city: the city is both the object of research and the physical theatre of the exhibition - by

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5   Antoine Picon (2002, 27) conceptualizes the definition of "imaginary" as "a system of images and representations […] diffused among the members of a given society or culture [that] shapes [their] ideals. [This] social imagination […] embeds both the interpretation of the world and the project for its future transformation". Imaginaries are today an important lens through which observe and live the city space, involving tourism, city branding, art and architecture, and policy making (Lindner and Meissner 2019, 1): their construction, through the proliferation of images, is now strongly rooted in the notion of urban space (Çınar and Blender 2007).

6   See Chapter 1.

7   http://www.szhkbiennale.org.cn/En/About/. Accessed 16 March 2020.

which it is, in turn, transformed. Physical spaces manipulated by the Biennale stand as a result of the interlocking of a multitude of players - governmental bureaus, corporate sponsors, real estate developers, curators - which use the event to pursue different goals, setting up a network of interactions between the exhibition and its local reality.

The Biennale acts like a "device", embracing the notion promoted by Foucault (1977) of a "heterogeneous ensemble" which embodies the coexistence of multiple elements crossing different scales and manifesting themselves in space. Spaces and architectures generated through the exhibition are the materialisation of collective images and memories which embody different stances: they function as a *trait d'union* between the ephemeral dimension of the event and the material repercussions of its storytelling. Its carnivalesque and festal apparatuses represent an idealised framework to test radical urban visions and new modes of occupation of urban space (Fava 2015): the city is thus transformed and 'consumed' both as a cultural product and as a commodity, extended to the manipulation and commercialization of space triggered by the event's narrative infrastructure.

Research questions

The Shenzhen Biennale represents a case-study for investigating the intersection between temporary events and urban space at a time when ephemeral projects and events are gaining growing importance, questioning the mainstream conception of planning as a permanent and fixed feature of contemporary cities.

The research aims to unpack the agency acquired by the Shenzhen Biennale throughout its eight editions, as a 'worlding' practice and as an urban assemblage: it is both a trans-scalar instrument and a tool of urban transformation in conveying a spectacular vision of the city.

In transforming spaces, the Biennale device has progressively built a parallel city, engaging in a dialectical relationship between the staging of an idealized 'doppelgänger' - representing the "Chinese dream"- and the real city. What is the relationship that the Biennale has progressively built within the Shenzhen's cityscape, crossing these two dimensions? How does the Shenzhen "Biennale" work, and what actions has it deployed in reshaping the symbolic and material spaces of the city? What frictions emerge between the narration of the event and its spatial outcomes - when the exhibition leaves the floor to the 'real' city again?

A broader reflection is possible through the observation of the case study. Beyond the spatial and temporal compression embedded in the spectacularization of the exhibition space, what is the role of a biennial of contemporary architecture and urban planning? What kind of perspectives do contemporary biennials - and ephemeral events in general - open in understanding and transforming the city, also considering their dissemination of the well-rehearsed economic, social and political environment of the Global North?
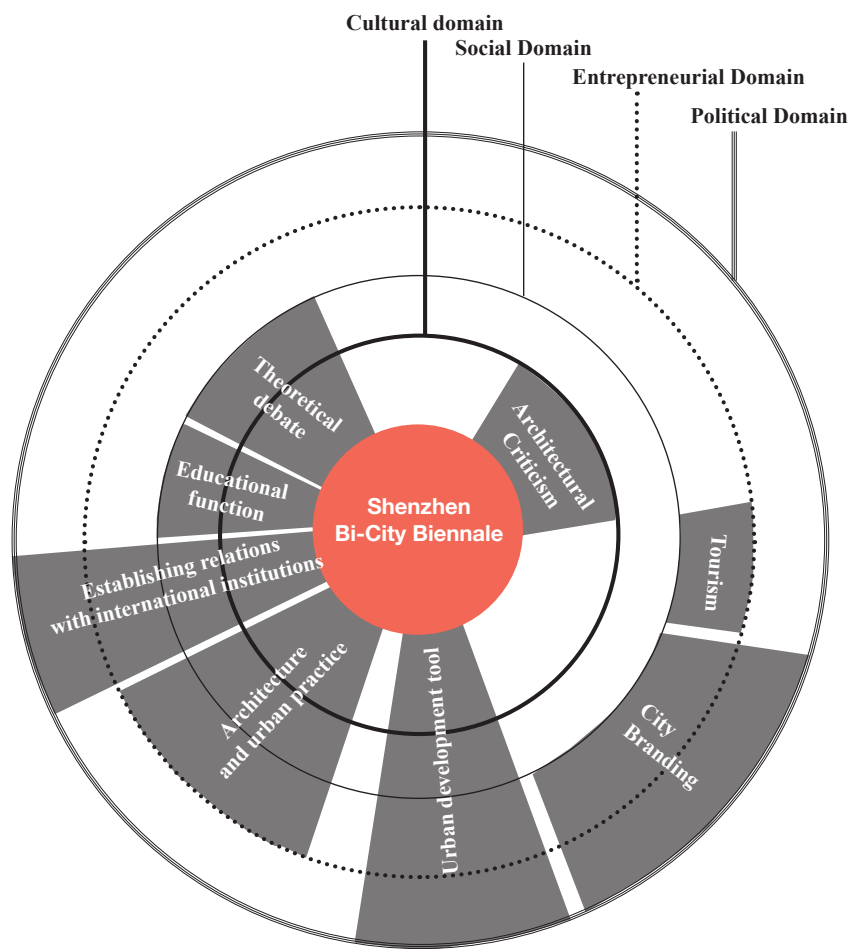
Figure 0.1_Diagram showing the exploration of the research object.

Decoding the Biennale: a methodological challenge

Molotch and Ponzini (2019) highlight the role of "urban spectacles"[8] in representing, strengthening - and even establishing - spatial, social and power relationships internationally.

In this perspective, biennials and cultural urban events position themselves as hybrid manifestations investing the city space and entailing manifold relations. The Shenzhen Biennale epitomizes this attitude through the interlocking of different elements: the organization of a cultural platform, the setting up of a spatial configuration, the realization of site-specific works, the production and global circulation of visual documentation, and urban branding strategies.

Understanding how this event works - and what kind of agency it has within the urban fabric - represents a methodological challenge. To better observe such dynamics of entanglement and mobility, it is useful to adopt the notion of "assemblage" to untangle the object's complexity.

The concept of "assemblage" has been adapted from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and from Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory (ANT), which describes the relationships between humans and non-humans. It represents an alliance of various heterogeneous elements

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8   Ponzini (2019, 81) refer to "urban spectacles" as the pervasiveness of physycal artefacts (e.g., skyscrapers, branded trnasformation plans) in nurturing symbolic, political and economical powers in advantaging "a particular group of actors in the global urban competition".

which questions the *a priori* reduction of sociality/spatiality to any fixed form in terms of processes or relations (De Landa 2006, De Landa 2010, McFarlane 2009, McFarlane 2011a, McFarlane 2011b, McFarlane 2011c, Anderson and McFarlane 2011). In his work *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, De Landa (2006) draws attention to the way thinking in terms of assemblage revolves around the notions of "relations" and "heterogeneity": focusing on differences and multiplicities outlines a "space of possibilities" where assemblages are continuously in the process of emerging and "becoming", requiring a multi-scalar explanation.

Such theories embody a close relationship with space. Some scholars (Dovey 2010, Angelo 2011) mention the contribution of assemblage thinking in observing the interlocking of sociality and spatiality within contemporary cities and urban life. Being "unfinished, cultural/physical, constitutive, socio-material, subjective/objective and tricky", urban areas and cities are ideal models for testing assemblage thinking (Tonkiss, 2011), addressing the city as a "multiplicity" rather than a "whole" and urbanism not as a "resultant formation", but as a process of construction (Farías 2011). In this perspective, "becoming" is the process of unfolding the complexity of the event in relation to urban space.

Within the research framework, assemblage thinking has been adopted as a theoretical and methodological lens to grasp the complexity of the urban issues represented by the Biennale. Due to its peculiar forms and manifestation in urban space, the research considers the event an urban assemblage, involving multi-scalar and multi-directional relations, requiring detailed description. The Shenzhen Biennale represents the overlapping of spatial narratives and practices, policy mobilization and the involvement of a vast array of players: the creation of comprehensive urban imageries - together with the consumption, spectacularization and manipulation of urban space - forms a dynamic system that revolves around the event.

The multitude of narrations, players and material elements involved in the Biennale and the fragmentary and ephemeral character of the sources available, identify the event as a "theoretical puzzler" (Molotch and Ponzini 2019). To untangle and decode the agency of the object, the research has adopted the physical apparatus set up by the event - its most tangible clue - as the material witness from which to begin investigating. As Molotch and Ponzini (2019, 10) point out, "large or small, legacy provides us, in effect, with method [:] we deconstruct [...] from the physical structures to better understand the social, political and cultural realms that gave rise to them". By taking material traces as spatial narratives, it is possible to "learn" how the event triggers multiple dimensions of urban spectacle.

The research aims at to build a detailed description of the Biennale as a complex object, observing the event as a lens to answer the questions posed by the research. Through the *ex-post* reading of the Biennale's legacy - and observing the layered entanglement between narration, spectacularization and transformation set up by the event and its players - the research aims to investigate the exhibition's agency in establishing a complex relational network within Shenzhen's urban space. An in-depth reading of this specific case study as a stepping stone, moreover, establishes a broader framework for understanding the role of biennials - and urban events in general - in contemporary times.

Across sources

The Shenzhen Biennale is a relatively recent event, which international academic literature has not yet explored through the 'assemblage' lens - and in the multi-faceted relationship that it has established between different players and urban spaces. The survey methodology used to 'unpack' the 'Biennale device' - its agency, its disposition and the tensions brought about by the overlapping of intangible and material narrations - has been constructed through access to and the recombination of a variety of sources and materials.

Existing academic research on biennials, curatorial practices, ephemeral events, and temporary urbanism has framed the work's theoretical positioning: the paradigm shift undertaken by a set of international contemporary architecture biennials aimed at setting up disciplinary platforms and physically transforming urban spaces. Contextually, academic literature, papers and articles on the evolution of contemporary Chinese cities, Shenzhen's historical metamorphosis and urban expansion have supported the reconstruction of the Shenzhen Biennale's positioning in the local urban agendas and policies.

Shenzhen Biennale Exhibition catalogues represented a primary source for the research. The Shenzhen Biennale catalogues have been an essential source for reconstructing the dominant and 'idealized' narration linked to the event intended as a critical platform through a constant thread - that of official publications - during the eight editions. Through the critical analysis of the catalogues, it was possible to observe the succession - and the evolution - of the leading public and private players linked to the event, the exhibition themes, the curatorial intentions, and its spatial diffusion in the city.

Archival materials from the Shenzhen Biennale represented another primary source. Press releases and statements - mainly issued by governmental officers in charge of the event's promotion - provided another side of the 'idealized' narrative of the event: a contingent narrative, in which the political forces of Shenzhen use the Biennale to legitimize the trans-scalar ambitions of the event and its transformative capacity on an urban scale as an 'urban catalyst'.

Pictures from the Shenzhen Biennale archives represented another side of the 'official' voices used to promote the Biennale, creating fragments of 'ideal' space within the city. Photography is a space of representation: the Biennale's visual documentation acts as a means of creating memories and perpetuating the imagery of the 'ideal city' - generated, stratified and renewed at each edition of the event.

Architectural projects and real estate development plans are another primary source for understanding the exhibition's aspirational spatial agency. It is possible to observe how designers and real estate developers use the Biennale - and its spatial legacy - to pursue different goals.

Webzines, online forums and articles have helped reconstruct the media context around the event. Critical articles, reviews and forums on the Biennale represent a layered arena in which it is possible to observe the construction of 'counter narratives' as alternatives to the idealized and crystallized vision that the catalogues and official press releases convey.

Interviews with different players tied to the event and representing different stances constitute another primary source in support of the research's reconstruction. In the words of those interviewed, it is possible to grasp the coexistence of different positions that reinforce or

move away from the event's dominant narrative.

Shenzhen Biennial Organizing Committee:

Huang Weiwen - Shenzhen Center for Design, Former Director; Shenzhen Center for Public Art, Former Director; Shenzhen Office of Shenzhen-Hong Kong Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee, Former Director; 2017 Shenzhen Biennale Shangwei Sub-Venue, Curator; 2019 Shenzhen Biennale Ban Xue Gang Hi-Tech Zone Sub-Venue, Curator. Interviewed on 5 November 2018.

Zhang Yuxing - Shenzhen Biennale Academic Committee President. Interviewed on 14 August 2019.

Liu Lei - 2013 Shenzhen Biennale, Co-curator; Shenzhen Center for Design, Director; Shenzhen Office of Shenzhen-Hong Kong Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee, Vice-Chairman. Interviewed on 10 December 2018 and 20 May 2019.

Caizi Xiao - Shenzhen Office of Shenzhen-Hong Kong Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee, Brand Manager. Interviewed on 27 November 2018.

Shenzhen Biennale Curators and Designers

Doreen Heng Liu - 2015 Shenzhen Biennale, Co-curator; 2017 Shenzhen Biennale Dameisha Sub-Venue, Curator; NODE Architecture & Urbanism, Principal and Founder. Interviewed on 16 October 2018.

Liu Xiaodu - 2017 Shenzhen Biennale, Curator; Principal and Founder of UTBANUS architectural practice. Interviewed on 24 May 2019.

Wendy Wu - 2017 Biennale Assistant Curator; Head of URBANUS Program of Research and Design. Interviewed on 28 October 2018 and 24 May 2019.

Ole Bouman - 2013 Biennale Creative Director; Shekou Design Society, former Director. Interviewed on 3 November 2018.

He Xianjing - 2013 Biennale, Value Factory Master Plan Coordinator; O-Office Architects, Principal and Founder. Interviewed on 15 October 2018.

Cheng Zhetao - 2013 Biennale, Value Factory Master Plan Architect. Principal and Founder of FangCheng Design. Interviewed on 3 December 2018 and 17 April 2019.

Yujun Yun - 2017 Biennale, Guangming Sub-Venue Curator; 2019 Biennale, Guangming Cloud Valley Curator. Interviewed on 13 May 2019.

Shi Jian - Beijing-based architectural critic, scholar and curator; partner of Shenzhen Youfang Space Culture Development Co., Ltd. Interviewed on 13 December 2018.

Direct spatial observation of the sites to understand the spatial narratives linked to the event. Photography acts as a means of narration and documentation. Nevertheless, while the Biennale's official archival pictures offer a crystallized vision of the event and its 'fragments' of the city, the visual documentation of the Biennale's legacy - showing its hybridization and evolution during different post-event phases - underlines the friction between aspirational ambitions of the event and their spatial repercussions, functioning as 'counter-narratives' to question the dominant ones.

Approach and structure of the work

The work is structured in three parts and seven chapters. The research combines the chronological narration of the various editions of the Biennale, the thematic analysis of the event's contents and curatorial ambition, and the observation of the exhibition's spatial agency - focusing on the sites that the event has manipulated through time.

Part One, "Framing the Object", positions the research's theoretical context and presents the case study of the Shenzhen Biennale.

Chapter 1 frames contemporary architecture biennials as temporary cultural events that try to adopt new investigation tools and displays to represent and observe complex urban issues, considering both global and local networks. The section focuses on the hybridisation of international models in the Asian context, starting from a global overview. Their evolution blurs the boundaries of the biennial as a globalised and monolithic cultural institution, showing how interpretative paradigms typical of the geography and economy of the Global North have been manipulated through diverse, multifaceted, socio-economical contexts: within this framework, Asian cities - and their shift towards 'creative' policies - position themselves not as subaltern players, but rather as autonomous contexts of experimentation.

Chapter 2 positions the Shenzhen Biennale case study as the reinterpretation of a global format within a precise geopolitical context. The exhibition is an ephemeral three-month event linked to the international circuit of major exhibitions and cultural events and represents Shenzhen's ambition to be a 'worlding' creative city. The Biennale instrumentally uses spectacle and 'festivalization' to affirm the city on four interconnected levels: global, national, regional and urban.

The exhibition deploys 'culture' - and its spatial outcomes - as a means to position Shenzhen on the global 'map' of creative cities, not only through the transfer of a model but as a 'situated' practice. The Biennale aims to address 'local' issues affecting the urban fabric of Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta: throughout its editions, the exhibition has evolved as a self-defined 'urban catalyst', an instrument that intervenes directly on the city's space through its physical transformation - or 'reactivation'.

Part Two, "Through the Object", represents the core of the research, tackling material and immaterial aspects of the Shenzhen Biennale.

Chapter 3 is the methodological kernel of the research and positions the Shenzhen Biennale as an articulated urban device. Spatial fragments transformed by the event stand as a result of the interaction between the event and the city, outlining an expanded network of players.

The evolution of these spaces represents a lens through which to read multiple declensions of the relational complexity between the exhibition's spectacular *locus* and the real city. Crossing narration and transformation, an *ex-post* reading of the Biennale's legacy allows us to retrace the history of spaces, their manipulation and their evolution in order to outline the network of relationships that this particular form of exhibition has established with the city. The fragmented transformations injected by the Biennale show both overlaps and deviations between the official narrative and tangible outcomes, defining the exhibition as a spatial 'assemblage'.

Chapter 4, **Chapter 5** and **Chapter 6** delve into the exhibition's spatial narratives through the relationship with Shenzhen's urban space. Three different interpretations of the spectacularization of urban space are detected, corresponding to three different typologies

of Shenzhen's distinctive urban fabrics: post-industrial sites, urban villages and the Central Business District. These spatial narratives explore the agency of the various editions of the exhibition, questioning its transformative capacity. The exploration of the event's spatial legacy leads to the identification of frictions and tensions brought about by the contact between the Biennale and Shenzhen's socio-spatial fabric. It aims to show how the term 'catalyst', commonly associated with the event defines a vector that crosses diverse dimensions.

Chapter 4 questions the relationship between the Biennale and post-industrial spaces in the city: by entering the global scenario of biennials, the event displays and uses spaces to re-enact the recent historical memory of the city.

The chapter describes the event's interventions in the three post-industrial sites that hosted the 2007, 2009, 2013 and 2015 editions - and the subsequent transformations that the spaces went through - trying to highlight the gap between curatorial/design intentions, programmatic statements of public players and the interests of private developers.

Chapter 5 describes the spatial interventions of the 2017 Biennale in the urban villages of Nantou Old Town and Dameisha. The event intervenes in Shenzhen's most sensitive areas, urban villages, as representative locations of the informal cultural and spatial heritage in the city. The Biennale exhibited and spectacularized the often problematic relationship between a megalopolis shaped by big transformation plans and its inner areas. Another urban imaginary, a 'global' city which conveys value to its 'local' diversity and its physical, intangible and cultural legacy, casting a critical eye on sensitive urban and social issues, emerges. The theatrical urban carnival displayed by the 2017 Biennale embodies the coexistence of different tensions between spectacle, the aestheticization of the informal city, transformation strategies operated by real estate developers and the attempts made by designers and curators to offer new perspectives of those areas that have been commonly defined as "cancer of the city" (O'Donnell and Wan 2016) - and which are now subjected to massive transformation plans.

Chapter 6 tackles a third type of urban space which strongly characterises Shenzhen's recent urbanization - and where the Biennale has injected new forms of urban spectacle into the "generic city" (Koolhaas 1995). The chapter focuses on the intervention strategies of the event in the Futian Central Business District, one of the most representative areas of the city, embodying a strong symbolic - and political - value and outlining an ambivalent relationship between the aspirational critical gaze of the exhibition and the institutional powers governing the city.

Part Three, "Beyond the Object", is an *ex-post* consideration on the Shenzhen Biennale, questioning its agency and positioning it as a reference to promote a broader reflection on the relationship between ephemeral, spatial, artistic practices and the city.

Chapter 7 presents a final reflection on the Shenzhen Biennale as a trans-scalar urban assemblage where the re-packing of the different spatial narratives presents opportunities and tensions. A broader perspective looks at architecture biennials as a tool, a layered contestation of space, economics, art and politics, on their role as active critical platforms and on their limits and potential to interpret and transform urban reality out of the paradigms of the 'Global North'. The chapter focuses on a generalisation of the global phenomenon, reflecting on the notion of 'urban curation' within the framework of biennials and their relationship with urban transformation.

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PART ONE

Framing the Object

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Chapter 1

The Biennale Spectacle

This chapter represents the theoretical framework of the research, sketching some of the most significant steps that have led to emerging forms of contemporary biennial exhibitions. It observes the changing relationship that recurrent exhibitions have matured with the city over the last four decades - corresponding to the economic, technological, and social phases which have accompanied the diffusion of globalisation phenomena.

The section maps how the notion of 'curating' has changed both in theoretical and practical aspects. Curatorial practices interlock with emerging architecture exhibitions as loci swinging between 'ideal' and 'real' spaces, increasingly intertwining with the 'urban'.

Emerging biennials are multi-faceted entities that establish a close relationship with the city. They are also reconfiguring the notion of 'design', shifting from being an object on display to a set of actions to be experienced in 'full scale' within - and through - the exhibition.

The chapter underlines how the 'biennale' cultural model has been mobilised and hybridised out of its original, Western-centric context. Notably, over the last decades, Asian cities and their rapid urbanisation have entered the cosmopolitan creative economy o as emerging fields of experimentation. Creative policies characterising these contexts position themselves not as the 'transfer' of existing and West-centered models but as the outcome of diverse processes: this attitude includes the exponential popping-up of biennials and events, which have gradually gained growing autonomy in testing new interaction patterns with the city.

1.1 Observing 'biennalisation' today

Cultural events *par excellence*, biennials[1] are generally observed and debated as a global phenomenon, as tools of marketing strategies adopted by cities striving to emerge in the neo-liberal system of 'knowledge economy' and "cultural capitalism" (Rifkin 2000; 2005;

2011). They position themselves as multi-faceted objects addressing a vast set of political ad economical ambitions: such "encyclopecic" exhibitions, as Jones (2017, 94) notes, aspire "to renew knowledge, to belong to a wider international community, to brand a city, and to bring a new world picture to visitors".

The emergence of this format coincides with the founding in Italy, in 1893, of the first "Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte" (later renamed "La Biennale di Venezia") by the then Mayor of Venice Riccardo Selvatico[2], who clearly stated in the inaugural discourse the newborn event's international ambitions to pursue a "political mission": the "'*unbiased development of the intellect'* and the '*fraternal association of all people*'" (Vogel 2010, 14)[3]. Since then, many biennials exhibitions have followed worldwide, giving origin to the replication that Marchart (2010) has labelled as "biennalization"[4] .

Scholars observe that the format has its conceptual and spatial roots in the establishment of the Universal Expositions as a new form of exhibitionary mode: the birth in 1851 of the first Great Exhibition in London "acted as a break point in [...] the narrative of museum history […] presenting an opportunity […] to merge with art and entertainment in a previously unimaginable new leisure space" (Cummings and Lewandowska 2000 in Evans 2003, 419)[5]. Since then, the "World's Fair" approach – and its subsequent evolution, with the popping-up of national pavilions, spectacular architectures and "festivalisation through [...] themed backgrounds" (Vogel 2010, 17) - has characterized the emerging of nineteenth-century expositions in many metropolitan venues[6]. Fairs gradually evolved into new forms among which biennials exhibitions are some of the most representative, considering both their physical impact - in 1895 the Venice Biennale will translate the spatial configuration of the World's Fair through the creation of National Pavilions (Vogel 2010) – and their representational ambitions. Namely, the desire of a ruling power to put itself 'on the map' and to consolidate the idea of the Nation-State (Vogel 2010; Martini and Martini 2011) gradually configured fairs as "politics by other means" (Jones 2017, 37).

It goes beyond the scope of this section to present an exhaustive historical account of biennials - their birth, diffusion and evolution have been widely debated by a vast array of

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2   Riccardo Selvatico was the Mayor of Venice from 1890 to 1895. Venice's municipal administration deliberated during the council meeting on April 19 to set up a biennial national art exhibition. On April 30, the 1st International Art Exhibition of Venice kicked off, gathering 224,000 visitors. For an exhaustive account of the Venice Biennale's founding, see, for example, Jones (2017). See also https://www.labiennale.org/it. Accessed 28 March 2021.

3   As Vogel (2010) states, the creation of the Venice Biennale embedded both a political intention of representation of the Nation-State and an entrepreneurial initiative.

4   The number of contemporary art and architecture biennials has grown exponentially over the last forty years. Marchart (2010) coined the notion of "biennalization" to describe the increasing proliferation and standardization of contemporary art exhibitions under the biennial format.

5   The origin of biennial exhibitions depends on the political, and economic context where they took place. Vogel (2010, 17) observes the imbrication of economic and political factors that -against the background of the Enlightenment and the consolidation of the Nation-States- brought to the coexistence, in 19th Century, of three different but closely interconnected kind of events "to strengthen national identity in the context of international competition". These "mega-events" are still taking place today as representative of the contemporary neo-liberal global context: the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 (known as the first "World's Fair"), the creation of the Venice Biennale in 1893 and the re-enactment in 1896 of the ancient Olympic Games.

6   Some scholars (Mosquera 1992, Pastor Roces 2010) establish a close relationship between the biennial exhibition's format and the conceptual and spatial apparatus of the so-called "Great Exhibitions", European Universal Expositions and World's fairs. This link can be retraced both in the exhibitionary mode of the fair, in its conceptual and spatial reformulation of the notion of "display", and the tendency to centralization and of representation of the Nation-state.

academics, critics and historians worldwide[7]: rather, it will provide a brief overview of the phenomenon, delineating the main positions revolving around it. The research positioning aims at underlining how contemporary biennials are extemporaneous events that cyclically pop-up in the city every two years, positioning themselves as stable elements in the physical, economic and social fabrics of the city: they are among the leading actors holding an agency in redefining what Urry (2007, 137) has termed as the "spectacle-ization" of contemporary cityscapes, crossing the notions of permanence and ephemerality. The plurality of the phenomenon - notably during the last four decades - has gradually accompanied an evolution of the paradigms and actions that these events undertake in establishing a relationship with contemporary urban socio-spatial environments.

1.1.1 A pervasive phenomenon

Since the founding of the Biennale in Venice, the number of recurrent exhibitions has grown exponentially in the span of little more than a century: in March 2020, a basic search for the term 'art biennial' in the online search engine Google has brought to 19,700,000 results (0.65 seconds); while a search for the term 'architecture biennial' has brought to 16,200,000 results (0.59 seconds). The broadness of the phenomenon is striking and has generated international discussions. Some scholars (Vogel 2010; Papastergiadis and Martin 2013) locate the biennials' boom since 1989 as a "second phase" in the history of biennials, reflecting the end of the US-URSS cultural opposition and "politically influenced by globalization and culturally marked by postmodernity" (Vogel, 2010, 62).

Facilitated global connectivity brought about by advancement in communications and technologies, growing inter-city competitiveness, and the mounting interest in propelling cities' symbolic capital (Urry 2007; Kompatsiaris 2017; Papastergiadis and Martin 2011; Jones 2017) concurred to spread events and mega-exhibitions worldwide. As Tang (2011) points out, their geographical positioning and diffusion patterns directly mirror the post-Cold War geography of global capitalism. Due to the variety of the stances that they bring about and to the rhizomatic diffusion of the cultural system they belong to, biennials, triennials and the like are nowadays mushrooming [...] through a "progressive filling-up of the world – and by extension of the lives of the occupants of the world art system, and of cities more generally" (Osborne 2014, 17).

Over the last forty years, a growing bulk of researches, publications and platforms have revolved around the topic. According to academic literature (Filipovic, van Hal and Øvstebø 2010; Filipovic 2014; Vogel 2010; Sassatelli 2016) there are now an estimated 150 bi-triennial exhibitions disseminated in more than 50 countries. The debate around the phenomenon parallels such a cumulative trend: it is possible to perceive its relevance by observing it through a quantitative perspective, considering the impressive bulk of events happening nowadays in the world. Framing a precise account of biennials mushrooming today worldwide is also difficult: a 2018 report initiated by the online journal "Oncurating"[8] counts a Biennial Repository of over

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7   For a comprehensive overview of Biennials in the early Twentieth Century and in contemporary times, see for example Altshuler (2008), Davidson (2010) and Vogel (2010), Jones (2010; 2017), Tang (2011), Martini and Martini (2011), Papastergiadis and Martin (2011), Smith (2012), Gardner and Green (2016).

8   https://www.on-curating.org/issue-39.html#.XkfAV2hKhEY. Accessed 15 February 2020.
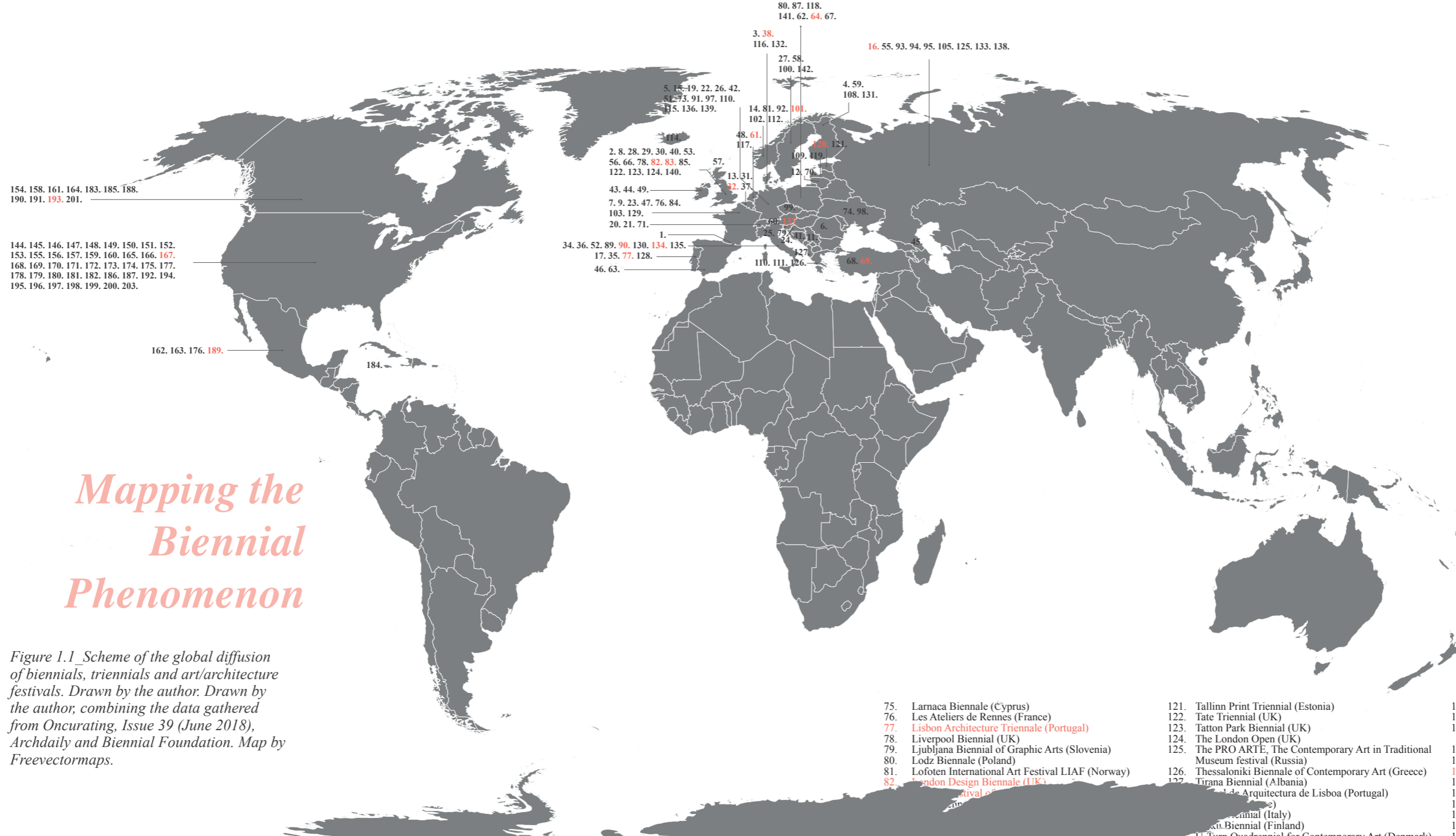
Mapping the Biennial Phenomenon

Figure 1.1_Scheme of the global diffusion of biennials, triennials and art/architecture festivals. Drawn by the author. Drawn by the author, combining the data gathered from Oncurating, Issue 39 (June 2018), Archdaily and Biennial Foundation. Map by Freevectormaps.

Directory of Biennials (Worldwide)

EUROPE

1. Andorra Land Art (Andorra)
2. Annuale (UK)
3. ARoS Triennial (Denmark)
4. ARS (Finland)
5. Ars Baltica Triennial of Photographic Art (Germany)
6. Art Encounters (Romania)
7. Arts: Le Havre (France)
8. Asia Triennale Manchester (UK)
9. Ateliers de Rennes (France)
10. Athens Biennial (Greece)
11. Balkan Architecture Biennale (Serbia)
12. Baltic Triennial of International Art (Lithuania)
13. Beaufort Triennial (Belgium)
14. Bergen Assembly (Norway)
15. Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art (Germany)
16. Biennale Architecture of St. Petersburg (Russia)
17. Bienal de Cerveira (Portugal)
18. Bien.le Brno (Czech Republic)
19. Biennale Cologne (Germany)
20. Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement (Switzerland)
21. Biennale de la céramique (Switzerland)
22. Biennale for International Light Art (Germany)
23. Biennale International de l'Image (France)
24. Biennale Quadrilateral (Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rijeka) (Croatia)
25. BIO Ljubjana (Slovenia)
26. Blickachsen Sculpture Biennale (Germany)
27. Bor.s International Sculpture Biennale (Sweden)
28. Brighton Photo Biennial (UK)
29. Bristol Biennial (UK)
30. British Ceremics Biennial (UK)
31. Bruges Triennial (Belgium)
32. Brussels Biennale of Modern Architecture (Belgium)
33. Bucharest Biennale (Romania)
34. Carrara International Sculpture Biennale (Italy)
35. Cerveira Bienal (Portugal)
36. Chianciano Biennale (Italy)
37. Contour. Biennial of Moving Image (Belgium)
38. Copenhagen Architecture Festival (Denmark)
39. Copenhagen Ultracontemporary Biennale (Denmark)
40. Coventry Biennale (UK)
41. D-0 ARK Biennial (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
42. documenta (Germany)
43. Dublin Biennial 2014 (Ireland)
44. Dublin Contemporary (Ireland)
45. Emergency Biennale (Chechnya)
46. Encuentro Bienal Arte Lanzarote (Spain)
47. Estuaire biennale in Nantes and Saint-Nazaire (France)
48. Europese Grafiekbiennale (Netherlands)
49. EVA International (Ireland)
50. Experimental Architecture Biennale Prague (Czech Republic)
51. Fellbach Triennial of Small-scale Sculpture (Germany)
52. Florence Biennale (Italy)
53. Folkestone Triennial (UK)
54. FORMAT Festival Biennale of Contemporary Photograph (UK)
55. Garage Triennale (Russia)
56. Geumgang Nature Art Biennale (UK)
57. Glasgow International (Scotland)
58. G.teborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art (Sweden)
59. Helsinki Photography Biennial (Finland)
60. Innsbruck International – Biennial of the Arts (Austria)
61. International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (The Netherlands)
62. International Biennale of Graphic Art Ł.dź (Poland)
63. International Biennale of Landscape Architecture Barcelon (Spain)
64. International Biennale of Architecture Krakow (Poland)
65. International Experimental Engraving Biennial, Bucharest (Romania)
66. International Print Biennale (UK)
67. International Print Triennial Society in Cracow (Poland)
68. Istanbul Biennial (Turkey)
69. Istanbul Design Biennial (Turkey)
70. Kaunas Biennial (Lithuania)
71. Kl.ntal Triennale (Switzerland)
72. K.lnSkulptur (Germany)
73. KunstFilmBiennale (Germany)
74. Kyiv Biennale (Ukraine)
75. Larnaca Biennale (Cyprus)
76. Les Ateliers de Rennes (France)
77. Lisbon Architecture Triennale (Portugal)
78. Liverpool Biennial (UK)
79. Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts (Slovenia)
80. Lodz Biennale (Poland)
81. Lofoten International Art Festival LIAF (Norway)
82. London Design Biennale (UK)
83. London Festival of (UK?)
87. Mediations Biennale (Poland)
88. Mediterranean Biennale (Various)
89. Milan Design Week (Italy)
90. Milan Triennial / La Triennale di Milano (Italy)
91. MKH Biennale (Germany)
92. Momentum (Norway)
93. Moscow Biennale (Russia)
94. Moscow Architecture Biennale (Russia)
95. Moscow International Biennale for Young Art (Russia)
96. Mykonos Biennale (Greece)
97. Oberschwaben Triennale (Germany)
98. Odessa Biennale (Ukraine)
99. OFF Biennale Budapest (Hungary)
100. OpenART (Sweden)
101. Oslo Architecture Triennale (Norway)
102. Oslo Biennial / Oslo Pilot (Norway)
103. Paris Biennale (France)
104. Periferic (Romania)
105. PHOTOBIENNALE MOSCOW (Russia)
106. Pontevedra Art Biennial (Spain)
107. Prague Biennale (Czech Republic)
108. Rauma Biennale Balticum (Finland)
109. RIBOCA – Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art (Latvia)
110. Ruhrtriennale (Germany)
111. Santorini Biennale (Greece)
112. Screen City Biennial (Norway)
113. Sculpture Quadrennial Riga (Latvia)
114. Sequences (Iceland)
115. Skulptur Projekte Münster (Germany)
116. Socle du Monde Biennale (Denmark)
117. Sonsbeek (Netherlands)
118. SURVIVAL (Poland)
119. Survival Kit (Latvia)
120. Tallinn Architecture Biennale (Estonia)
121. Tallinn Print Triennial (Estonia)
122. Tate Triennial (UK)
123. Tatton Park Biennial (UK)
124. The London Open (UK)
125. The PRO ARTE, The Contemporary Art in Traditional Museum festival (Russia)
126. Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art (Greece)
127. Tirana Biennial (Albania)
... Bienal de Arquitectura de Lisboa (Portugal)
... Triennial (Italy)
... Art Biennial (Finland)
... U-Turn Quadrennial for Contemporary Art (Denmark)
133. Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art (Russia)
134. Venice Architecture Biennale (Italy)
135. Venice Biennale (Italy)
136. Videonale Festival for Contemporary Video Art (Germany)
137. Vienna Biennale (Austria)
138. Vladivostok Biennale of Visual Arts (Russia)
139. Werkleitz Biennale (Germany)
140. Whitstable Biennale (UK)
141. WRO Media Art Biennale (Poland)
142. X-Border Art Biennial (Sweden)
143. Young Artists Biennial (Romania)

NORTH AMERICA

144. Adelphi University Outdoor Sculpture Biennial (USA)
145. Alabama Biennial (USA)
146. Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art (USA)
147. Americas Biennial (USA)
148. Amherst Biennial (USA)
149. Appalachian State University Art Biennial (USA)
150. Arizona Biennial (USA)
151. Arrowhead Biennial Exhibition (USA)
152. Atlanta Biennial (USA)
153. BAM BIENNIAL (USA)
154. Biennale Internationale D'estampe conteporaine de Trois-Rivi.res (Canada)
155. BIENNIAL at the Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Newport (USA)
156. News (USA)
157. Biennial International Footprint Exhibition (USA)
158. Biennial International Miniature Print Exhibition (Canada)
159. Biennial of Hawai'i Artists (USA)
160. Biennial of the Americas (USA)
161. Bonavista Biennale (Canada)
162. Border Art Biennial (Mexico)
163. Bienal Monterrey FEMSA (Mexico)
164. CAFKA – Contemporary Art Forum Kitchener and Area (Canada)
165. California-Pacific Triennial (USA)
166. Carnegie International (USA)
167. Chicago Architecture Biennial (USA)
168. Contemporary Iroquois Art Biennial (USA)
169. Dallas Biennial (USA)
170. deCordova Biennial (USA)
171. Desert X (USA)
172. Evanston and Vicinity Biennial (USA)
173. Feed: A 1708 Gallery Biennial (USA)
174. Fort Wayne Museum of Art's Contemporary Realism Biennial (USA)
175. FRONT International (USA)
176. Frontiers Biennial (Mexico)
177. Great Rivers Biennial (USA)
178. Greater New York (USA)
179. Harlem Biennale (USA)
180. Hollywood All-Media Juried Biennial (USA)
181. Honolulu Biennial (USA)
182. IDEAS CITY Festival (USA)
183. International Digital Arts Biennial (Canada)
184. Jamaica Biennial (Jamaica)
185. LIVE International Performance Art Biennale (Canada)
186. Long Island Biennial (USA)
187. Made in L.A. (USA)
188. Manif d'art – The Quebec City Biennial (Canada)
189. Mextròpoli (Mexico)
190. MOMENTA - Biennale de l'image (Canada)
191. Montr.al Biennale (Canada)
192. New Museum Triennial (USA)
193. Ottawa Architecture Week (Canada)
194. Pacific States Biennial (USA)
195. People's Biennial (USA)
196. Performa (USA)
197. Pittsburgh Biennial (USA)
198. Prospect New Orleans (USA)
199. Site Santa Fe International Biennial (USA)
200. Texas Biennial (USA)
201. Vancouver Biennale (Canada)
202. Whitney Biennial (USA)
203. ZERO1 Biénnial (USA)

Mapping the Biennial Phenomenon

Figure 1.2_Diagram of the global diffusion of biennials, triennials and art/architecture festivals. Diagram showing the global quantitative proliferation of artistic/architectural recurrent exhibitions from the 1950s onward. Drawn by the author, combining the data gathered from Oncurating, Issue 39 (June 2018), Archdaily and Biennial Foundation. Map by Freevectormaps.

Proliferation (cumulative) Worldwide (1895–2018)
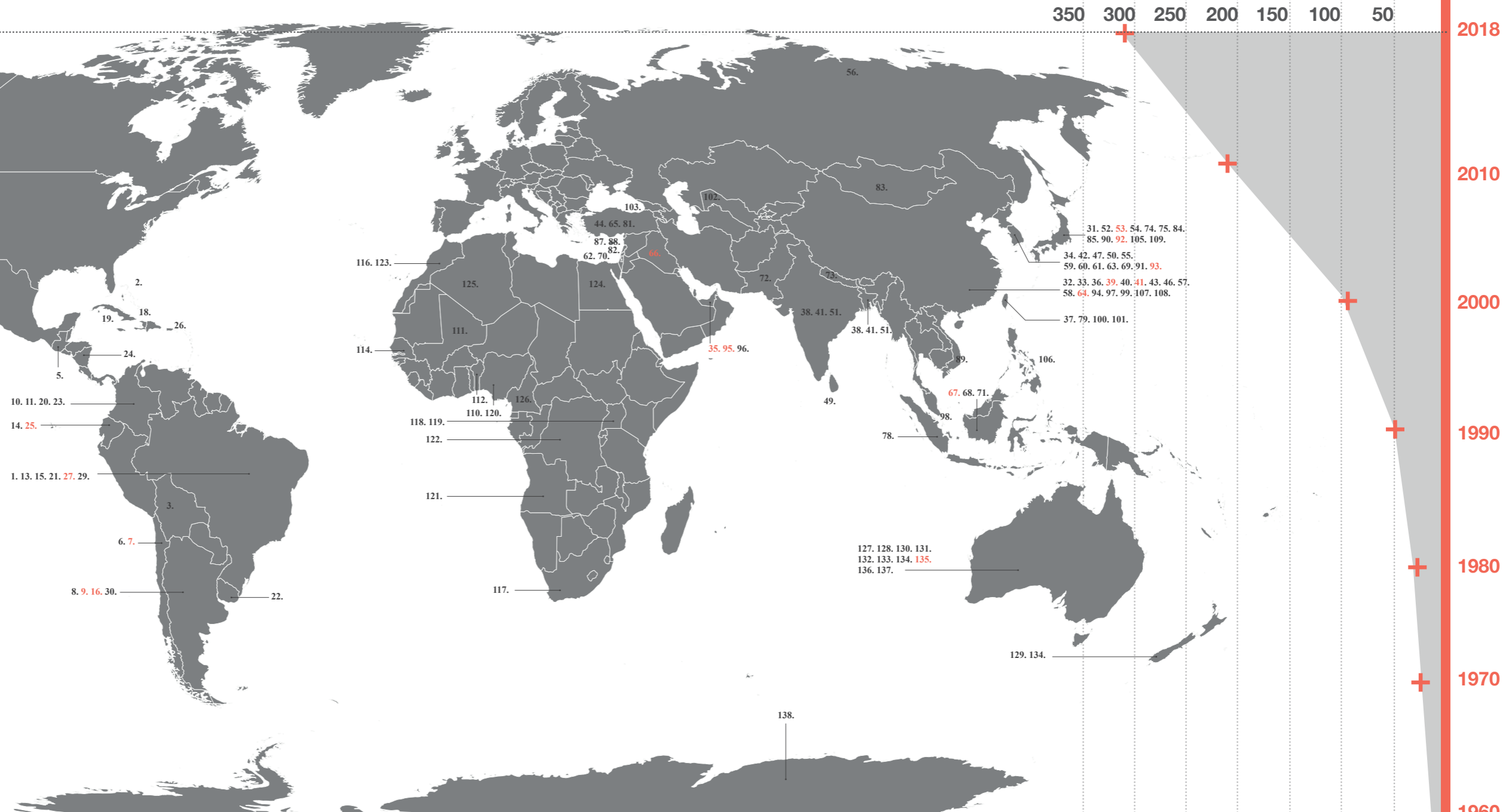
CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA
1. Bahia Biennale (Brazil)
2. Bermuda Biennial (Bermuda)
3. BICeB. | Bienal del Cartel Bolivia (Bolivia)
4. Bienal Centroamericana (Various)
5. Bienal de Arte Paiz (Guatemala)
6. Bienal de Artes Mediales (Chile)
7. Bienal de Chile Valparaiso (Chile)
8. Bienal del Fin del Mundo (Argentina)
9. Bienal Internacional de Arquitectura Buenos Aires (Argentina)
10. BIENAL INTERNACIONAL MULI DE MURALISMO Y ARTE P.BLICO (Colombia)
11. Cartagena de Indias Biennial (Colombia)
12. Central American Isthmus Biennial (BAVIC) (Various)
13. Contemporary Art Festival Sesc_Videobrasil (Brazil)
14. Cuenca International Biennial (Ecuador)
15. Curitiba Bienal (Brazil)
16. End of the World Biennial (Argentina)
17. Frestas: Art Triennial (Brazil)
18. Ghetto Biennale (Haiti)
19. Havana Biennial (Cuba)
20. MDE Medellin Internation Art Encounter (Colombia)
21. Mercosul Biennial (Brazil)
22. Montevideo Bienal (Uruguay)
23. Mural and Public Art Biennial (Colombia)
24. Nicaragua Biennial (Nicaragua)
25. Pan-American Architecture Bienal Quito (Ecuador)
26. San Juan Poly/Graphic Triennial (Puerto Rico)
27. Sao Paulo Biennial (Brazil)
28. SIART (Bolivia)
29. TRIO Biennial (Brasil)
30. UNASUR Contemporary Art International Biennial (Argentina)

ASIA
31. Aichi Triennale (Japan)
32. Animamix Biennial (China)
33. Anren Biennale (China)
34. Anyang Public Art Project (Korea)
35. Architecture Biennale Dubai (United Arab Emirates)
36. Art Wuzhen (China)
37. Asian Art Biennial (Taiwan)
38. Asian Art Biennale (Bangladesh)
39. Beijing Design Week (China)
40. Beijing International Art Biennale (China)
41. Bi City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture (UABB) Shenzhen Hong Kong (China)
42. Busan Biennale (South Korea)
43. CAFAM Biennale (China)
44. Canakkale Biennial (Turkey)
45. Changwon Sculpture Biennale (South Korea)
46. Chengdu Biennale (China)
47. Cheongju International Craft Biennale (South Korea)
48. Chobi Mela (Bangladesh)
49. Colombo Art Biennale (Sri Lanka)
50. Daegu Photo Biennale (South Korea)
51. Dhaka Art Summit (Bangladesh)
52. Dojima River Biennale (Japan)
53. Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial (Japan)
54. Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale (Japan)
55. Gangwon International Biennale (South Korea)
56. Graphic Art Biennial, Dry Point (Siberia)
57. Guangzhou Airport Biennale (China)
58. Guangzhou Triennale (China)
59. Gwangju Biennale (South Korea)
60. Gwangju Design Biennale (South Korea)
61. Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale (South Korea)
62. Herzliya Biennial (Israel)
63. Incheon Women Artists' Biennale (South Korea)
64. International Bamboo Architecture Biennale Baoxi (China)
65. International Sinop Biennial (Turkey)
66. Iran National Biennale of Architecture, Urban Planning and Interior Design Tehran (Iran)
67. Jakarta Architecture Triennale (Indonesia)
68. Jakarta Biennale (Indonesia)
69. Jeju Biennale (South Korea)
70. Jerusalem Biennale (Israel)
71. Jogja Biennale (Indonesia)
72. Karachi Biennale (Pakistan)
73. Kathmandu Triennale (Nepal)
74. Kenpoku Art (Japan)
75. KOBE Biennale (Japan)
76. Kochi-Muziris Biennale (India)
77. Kuala Lumpur Architecture Festival (Malaysia)
78. Kuala Lumpur Biennale (Malaysia)
79. Kuandu Biennale (Taiwan)
80. Lahore Biennale (Pakistan)
81. Mardin Biennial (Turkey)
82. Meeting Points (Lebanon)
83. Mongolia 360Aâ Land Art Biennial (Mongolia)
84. Okayama Art Summit (Japan)
85. Oku-Noto Triennale (Japan)
86. Pune Biennale (India)
87. Qalandiya International (Palestine)
88. Riwaq Biennale (Palestine)
89. Saigon Open City (Vietnam)
90. Sapporo International Art Festival (Japan)
91. SeMa Biennale – Mediacity Seoul (South Korea)
92. Setouchi International Art Festival (Japan)
93. Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism (South Korea)
94. Shanghai Biennale (China)
95. Sharjah Architecture Triennale (United Arab Emirates)
96. Sharjah Biennial (United Arab Emirates)
97. Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale (China)
98. Singapore Biennale (Singapore)
99. Suzhou Documents (China)
100. Taipei Biennial (Taiwan)
101. Taiwan Biennial (Taiwan)
102. Tashkent International Biennale of Contemporary Art (Uzbekistan)
103. Tbilisi Triennial (Georgia)
104. Triennale–India (India)
105. UBE Biennale (Japan)
106. VIVA Excon (Philippines)
107. Western China International Art Biennale (China)
108. Yinchuan Biennale (China)
109. Yokohama International Triennial of Contemporary Art (Japan)

AFRICA
110. AFiRIperFOMA Biennial (Nigeria)
111. Bamako Enounters, Biennale of African Photography (Mali)
112. Benin Regard Biennale (Benin)
113. Alexandria Biennale (Various)
114. Dak'Art: African Contemporary Art Biennale (Senegal)
115. East Africa Art Biennale (East Africa)
116. International Biennial of Casablanca (Morocco)
117. Johannesburg Biennale (South Africa)
118. Kampala Art Biennale (Uganda)
119. KLA ART (Uganda)
120. Lagos Biennial (Nigeria)
121. Luanda Triennale (Angola)
122. Lubumbashi Biennale (Congo)
123. Marrakech Biennale (Moroceo)
124. OFF Biennale Cairo (Egypt)
125. Oran Biennale (Algeria)
126. SUD; Salon Urbain de Douala (Cameroon)

AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND
127. Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art (Australia)
128. Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (Australia)
129. Auckland Triennial (New Zealand)
130. Ballarat International Foto Biennale (Australia)
131. Experimenta International Biennial of Media Art (Australia)
132. NGV Triennial (Australia)
133. Public Art Melbourne Lab (Australia)
134. SCAPE Public Art (New Zealand)
135. Sydney Architecture Festival (Australia)
136. Sydney Biennale (Australia)
137. TarraWarra Biennial (Australia)

ANCTARTICA
138. Antarctic Biennale (Antarctica)

44

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320 events, while the web platform "Biennal Foundation" counts 230 -ennials exhibitions[9]. Their number is always in progress, needing constant updates. The frantic pace of the debate can hardly be managed solely by – yet extensive - academic publications: over the last decade, online platforms, webzines and bulletins have become the most popular media managing the diffusion, sponsoring and communication for (and on) events of this kind[10].

1.1.2 Complexities and contradictions: commodification and representations

Beside pervasiveness, the debate around the phenomenon mainly runs on diverse yet interconnected lines. The spread of "Biennalization" is widely associated to the capacity of neoliberal, globalised 'creative' industry system to standardise, dominate and instrumentalise culture's alleged autonomy to the stances of political and economic interests (Stallabrass 2004; de Duve 2007; O'Neill and Wilson 2010). The ambitions to celebrate the Nation-State power have evolved in the framework of global inter-city rivalry: hosting a biennial today is indeed one paramount criterion for a city's status being a major city, a means of "putting it on the map" (Osborne 2014, 17). The role of biennials and events is widely acknowledged in epitomizing marketing ambitions of cities (Richards and Palmer, 2010; Sassatelli 2011) by enhancing their international appeal, aspiring to "stage the city as freshly renewing" (Jones, 2017, 92)[11]. Despite their repetition - which follows well-rehearsed tropes of globalised cultural agendas (Tang 2011, Markin, 2016) - they capitalize on the uniqueness of their promise: to represent and "hard brand" the host city (Evans, 2003), triggering tourism and salvific urban development strategies.

Bi-triennials and the like are also representative of the commodification of cultural experiences in contemporary neo-liberal contexts. They can be related to the earlier forms of entertainment and collective consumption represented by the World's Fairs, which started to gain relevance in 19th century. The critique related to this peculiar experience of culture can be traced back in the skepticism surrounding the Fairs: for thinkers in the early 20th century, their seductive framework caused philosophical concern. Walter Benjamin (1939) - in a dialogue with Adorno on capitalism's potential in creating imaginary worlds and influenced by Marxian critique on commodity fetishism (Berdet 2013) - developed the idea of "phantasmagoria" related to the World's Fair as an allegory of modernity and bourgeois society in 19th century. Commodity culture functioned as "a projection [...] of the economy" representing "the centrality, the constitutive force, of the image within modernity" (Prakash 2010, 10). Space - and its symbolic value - acquired a relevant role in this framework dominated by the seductive power of images and commodities. Phantasmagoria manifested itself in space, creating a locus which was purposefully secluded from (and concealed) reality, displaying to the masses an idealised and flawless version of the real world (Berdet 2013). In Benjamin's vision (1939) the World's Fair exhibitionary apparatus embodied such an ideal space's disposition to host the "phantasmagoria" of mass culture, a fantastic world epitomizing the most spectacular form of

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9   http://www.biennialfoundation.org/home/biennial-map/. Accessed 31 August 2018.

10   *e-flux* international bulletin, together with e-flux Journal, constantly promotes established and new art and architecture bi-triennials events. https://www.e-flux.com/. Accessed 15 February 2020.

11   Jones (2017) underlines how this ambition was already embedded in the birth of the paradigm of Venice Biennale.

economic and cultural competition: he argued that "World Exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted"[12].

Contemporary biennials and mega-exhibitions seem to have inherited this legacy as a direct manifestation of "the spectacularization of art and culture through the [...] diffusion and reproduction of excess" (Enwezor 2008, 171). Such an attitude has a substantial impact on how urban environments are perceived and affected through events in the creative turn investing contemporary cities, which can be related to the later theories expressed by Guy Debord (1967) in *La Société du Spectacle*. In 1967, observing the progressive commodification of contemporary society and considering the interlocking of urbanism and capitalism, Debord (1967, 13) theorized the existence of a society dominated by the forces of spectacle: the production of goods, artifacts and spaces culminates in the show as a "monopole de l'apparence" generating places of visual deception, tangible emanation of a world governed by capital "à un tel degré d'accumulation qu'il devient *image*" (Debord 1967, 34). The subsequent *Commentaires sur la societé du spectacle* (1988) marked a step further in his thoughts, theorizing the "spectaculaire integré" ("integrated spectacle") as a pervasive phenomenon, the synthesis and exacerbation of the two earlier forms of "diffused" and "concentrated" spectacular power. The integrated spectacle expands the diffuse form (commodification of culture) while intensifying the falsification and the secrecy of the concentrated form (characterizing authoritarian regimes) to the point that "l'événement contemporain [...] s'éloigne [..] dans une distance fabuleuse" (Debord 1988, VII). In this sense, biennials and the like are a symptom of the progressive "spectacularization" of the city through the production of alternative spaces and collective images: Debord was conscious of these issues, identifying the potential of contemporary urban strategies in moulding public spaces (and cityscapes at large) as a "simple consumerist decoration" (Gallicchio 2018, 5). Such tendency epitomizes contemporaneity, which critic and curator Hou Hanru (2013b, in De Kloet and Scheen 2013, 5) defines "the time of urban spectacle". The urban spectacular has become an instrument capable of re-shaping reality and driving consensus: celebratory ephemeral manifestations, in their relation with exceptionality and the carnivalesque, provide "heterotopic spaces in which one can usually see the dissolution of social predetermination and a diversity that is not normally achieved in the everyday city" (Mehrotra and Vera 2016, 23).

The network of relations that biennials set up is often interpreted as contradictory. These ephemeral practices entail the coexistence of different systems, positioning themselves as a complex imbrication of stances. The entanglement between temporariness, patterns of consumption embedded in the knowledge economy system, the interlocking of power relationships and the social role of architecture become pivotal. These practices represent *loci* to test aspirational statuses and images of the "yet-to-be" city in an "out of the ordinary" status (Fava 2015), mobilising people's participation in living and imagining urban spaces, responding to the same time to the willingness of evasion that carachterizes contemporary "liquid" societies (Bauman 2000).

Today's sheer critique investing biennials mainly focuses on their adherence to marketing strategies in urban branding and tourism, instrumentally using the event as an occasion to

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12   Mourenza Urbina, Daniel. Arcades, Phantasmagorias, Panoramas, Films: Walter Benjamin and Early Cinema. *Cine y cultura crítica. Análisis sobre cine y estudios culturales*. 18 March 2010. Available at https://cineyculturacritica.wordpress.com/2010/05/18/arcades-phantasmagorias-panoramas-films-walter-benjamin-and-early-cinema/. Accessed on 17 March 2019.

lure visitors to the city and trigger new - commodified - modes of experiencing urban space. According to Tang (2011, 78), biennials colonize important and multiple venues scattered across a city "so that one sees as much of the city as one does of art". Narration is strongly instrumental to the physical manipulation of space - and the reach for political consensus and economic advantages. Through the occupation - and realization - of large exhibition venues and full-scale installations, each biennial represents a unique event which attracts both visitors and representatives of the cosmopolitan cultural circuit, becoming a trigger for tourism and leisure. Cityscapes become aspirational, real-scale test-beds for spatial, economic and alleged social practices under the banners of knowledge, creativity and culture: biennials and mega-exhibitions mushroom everywhere, as well as related transformation projects. Such approaches often interact with economic processes in propelling urban regeneration and revitalization strategies (Hall 1992; Mommaas 2002) as their primary objectives.

1.1.3 Looking for autonomy, loosing boundaries

Those who most strenuously defend the role of biennial exhibitions, borrowing from de Duve (2007, 681), argue that their proliferation "open up new spaces of resistance, diversity and reflection potentially leading to a more democratic redistribution of cultural power". In this perspective, while academic debates on art biennials are currently well established, architecture biennials as peculiar forms of temporary events often still lack an extended, in-depth exploration.

The so-called "post-modern phase" (Papastergiadis and Martin 2013) has marked a paradigmatic shift for biennials exhibitions considering both their number and variety. Initially merged with art exhibitions and lacking for a long time a specific discursive space, architecture biennials began to gain autonomy in the framework of the Venice Biennale through three fundamental moments. From 1975 to 1978, Italian architect Vittorio Gregotti curated a series of architecture exhibitions as an extension of the Visual Arts Sector. In 1979, the temporary pavillion "Teatro del Mondo" designed by Aldo Rossi marked the entanglement between the Biennale and the city's physical space out of the institutional venue of the Giardini, acting "both as experiment and signal, making the beginning of an era moving towards the architecture as event" (Szacka 2019, 19). The full autonomy of the Architecture sector came then with Paolo Portoghesi, who curated, in 1980, the first International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale. Paolo Portoghesi's exhibition "The Presence of the Past" displayed the "Strada Novissima" - a full-scale installation presenting the diverse interpretations of the Postmodern given by various international architects. The exhibition directly interacted with the public offering a tactile experience of both architecture and the exhibition venue, the Corderie dell'Arsenale - which for the first time opened to the public[13].

Since then, architecture biennials have grown in number, expanding their scopes (Szacka 2019): curatorial statements and modes of display have gradually redefined these exhibitions both in their ontological and epistemological framework (Papastergiadis and Martin 2013, Pestellini Laparelli 2018). It is possible to observe a tendency to cross and to intertwine two different yet complementary dimensions: the discursive and theoretical 'space of ideas' flows with a speculative tension into to 'real space'. Along this interpenetration, such exhibitionary events acts as a conceptual, spatial and operative threshold with the ambition to engage what

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13   https://www.labiennale.org/it/storia-della-biennale-architettura. Accessed 28 April 2020.

McGuigan (2013) refers to as a global "cultural public sphere".

Against the backdrop of global forces, the fluidity of debate brought about by architecture biennials mirrors the imbrication of multiple stances. On the one hand, the above-mentioned shift towards the creative economy has gradually configured exhibitions as prominent events as a means for cities to gain prominent positions in the global map of cultural centres (Evans 2003). On the other hand, the global turn in urban studies has allowed for a trans-scalar understanding of the notion of architecture as an articulated discipline crossing different domains: increasing attention is given to the intertwining between architecture and urban contexts intended as economical, political and social grounds.

This latter stance has widely influenced international debates, which aim at expanding curatorial practices beyond the serial reproduction of a secluded "white cube" approach to exhibitions, triggering instead a spatial and "critical interface between local citizens and global processes" (Papastergiadis and Martin 2013, 47). The boundary between the conceptual space of curatorial statements and the exhibition's expanded physical space has become increasingly blurred. The exhibition-event becomes a physical object pervading the city, with repercussions outside the gallery space: in this framework, curatorial programmes (and ambitions) remould themselves accordingly. It is possible to observe a tendency, undertaken by some architecture biennials, in finding their prominent feature in participation and interaction with the public and space: not only the display of architectural objects is at stake, but also - and mainly - a deeper engagement of the role of architecture and of cultural institutions in creating dynamic institutions within social and spatial realms. Contents and narrations of architecture biennials respond to the needs of representation linked to the market. At the same time, they aspire to constitute a response to social issues, where architecture (both in its display and in its physical presence in the form of site-specific interventions and installations) becomes an 'active' tool. Szacka (2018; 2019) observes the evolution of the role of these large-scale exhibitions, underlining their use of "architecture, design, and more broadly the urban environment to tackle societal topics [...]. They follow and record economic crises, city crises, migration crises, and they speak of phenomena closely related to the world situation rather than just architecture *per se*" (Szacka 2019, 16), configuring themselves as hybrid territories where to redefine the debate about architecture's spatial and social role.

In this perspective, the "boundary between everyday life, intellectual reflection and art as a cultural category is thus blurred and cut off" (Hanru 2013b in Wang 2018, 261). This allows for the mobilisation in the architectural domain of the notion of "institutional critique" conceptualised by Nicholas Bourriaud (Raunig and Ray 2009): biennials have transformative ambitions, living an aspirational status; they aim at reinventing themselves no longer as a place to display but rather to "generate" new things (Szacka 2019, 17).

In this framework, these events embody what architecture historian Florian Kossak (2012) refers to as "productive exhibitions". Kossak (2012, 213) conceptualises these exhibitions as characterised by a highly experimental gaze, that makes the ephemeral event comparable to a "laboratory". The production of space "within and through exhibitions", according to Kossak, "is paramount [...] for the future relevance not only of exhibition-making and the exhibitionary complex, but for the future of architecture as an intellectual, artistic and social discipline itself". Their experimental attitude becomes an integral part of architectural practice, expanding it, potentially injecting new layers in the project of architecture, addressing socio-political and

Figure 1.3_The "Teatro del Mondo" installation conceived by Italian architect Aldo Rossi for the Venice Architecture Biennale in 1980, © Archivio Domus.

Figure 1.4_The "Strada Novissima" section curated by Italian architect and critic Paolo Portoghesi for the Venice Architecture Biennale in 1980. © La Biennale di Venezia.

economic spheres. While a vast array of critique often underlies the "ossification of the large-scale mega-exhibition" as a "lowering of its subversive potential" (Smith 2012, 97), some of them are living thus an aspirational status: from being pure showcases of display, they have become active platforms, with a potential role both as a discursive locus in triggering debates, urban imaginations, and knowledge; and as spatial devices in operating real transformations.

1.1.4 Outside the white cube: the city as a territory to 'curate'?

Some alternative forms of research and display has emerged. Biennials' evolving identity and role undertake continuous re-configurations - swinging between the space of ideas and reality, between intellectual discourse and activism - embedding multiple stances. In a time of hyper-connectivity, words like "network", "system" and "platform", referring to a rhizomatic conception of contemporary society and reflecting "the neo-liberal emphasis on flexibility, deregulation, and global flows"[14] (Bey 2003 in Markin 2016, 293), populate today curatorial statements and official narrations.

This framework reflects a paradigm shift involving the notion of 'curation' both as an intellectual and spatial practice. Curatorial approaches progressively move from museums and art institutions' fixity and site-specificity towards more hybrid display and interpretation processes. 'Curating' has become a loosely defined activity crossing a multiplicity of disciplinary fields. In this framework, the curator as figure is changing accordingly. Green and Gardner (2016, 19) retrace the rise of the professional curator (or, as they name it, the "Star-Curator") as an autonomous role in 1972 when Swiss curator Herald Szeemann staged the exhibition *documenta 5* in Kassel. Since then, this figure gradually emerged as an autonomous character in the world of art exhibition-making. As Szacka (2019) underlines, in the domain of architecture exhibitions, it gained ground later and evolved in a hybrid form: while architectural biennials have been curated mostly by critics and historians, since early 2010s well-known designers and practitioners have gained ground in setting the conceptual - and spatial - framework of these exhibitions[15]. The interlocking between the reconfiguration of biennials as theoretical grounds and the shifting role of architecture professionals in curatorial practices has progressively consolidated the relationship between architecture as discipline and its aspirational - aesthetic, social and political - role within both exhibitionary and urban realms.

In the 2015 essay *Ways of Curating*, Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist (2015, 128) underlines the close relationship that a biennial can establish with the urban realm, as a "reciprocal contact zone mediating between museum and city [...] inventing new exhibition formats". Some of them (e.g. the Venice Biennale, the Sao Paulo Biennale and the Milan Triennale) has maintained a relatively stable relationship with their venues' space[16]; yet, for some other -ennials formats, the

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14   Spencer (2012) establishes a link between the theories of Latour and the postulates which sustain neoliberal ideologies in contemporary society.

15   In 2010, Kazuyo Sejima from the Tokyo-based architectural firm SANAA was appointed curator of the Venice Biennale. Her curatorial work pioneered the setting-up of large-scale spatial installations (Szacka 2019).

16   The Venice Biennale is housed in two permanent venues, the "Giardini della Biennale" and the "Arsenale" (nevertheless, as the international influence in the exhibition acquired relevance, more and more 'temporary' venues have grown in number, occupying historical buildings in the city); since 1957 the Sao Paulo Biennale has its headquarters in the Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion, designed by Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer; the Palazzo dell'Arte - located in the Sempione Park - houses the Triennale di Milano since 1933.

city at large has gradually become the testing ground to set an articulated relationship between the notions of "planning" and "displaying", where the exhibition acts as "a catalyst for different types of creative inputs in the city" and a "form of urbanism" in itself (Obrist 2015, 128-129).

The contemporary curator acts in the city "like an artist-at-large, representing the world through the widest variety of media, locations and intentions and adopting techniques (packaging, branding, promoting, displaying) enmeshed in the post-modern geographies of consumption" (Chaplin and Stara 2009, 1). Today, Biennials are trying to deal with a peculiar situation where "many contemporary aesthetic practices no longer correspond to the conditions for which the white cube was built" (Filipovic 2014, 48). In the constant imbrication of cultural production/consumption phenomena and spatial transformations, the city - intended as a complex system of fixed cultural and institutional infrastructures, episodic exchanges in artistic practices and display of spaces - is becoming more and more an object to 'curate', to interpret and to transform (Gurney 2015). A new perspective is "re-setting [...] the tension between curating-as-display-making (the exhibitionary) and curating-as-expanded-practice (the curatorial)" (O'Neill and Wilson 2015,7) in a productive twist: such an attitude is mirrored in the way of conceiving the notion of urban both as a field of research and as a locus for spatial interventions and display.

1.1.5 Re-configuring a theoretical and practical ground

In this framework, biennials are re-configuring both their theoretical and practical foundations as hybrid and experimental forms through conceptual and spatial moves, crossing exhibition making and urban strategies. A principle of 'extraterritoriality' reflects the expansion of exhibitionary boundaries recently adopted by many contemporary biennials worldwide - which should be framed in the tension to bridge the exhibitions' local stances and spaces with the rush towards globalisation. This tendency often parallels the creation of spectacular, real-scale spatial interventions that directly influence the surrounding cityscape: the following examples will explore some tendencies undertaken by emerging biennials in intersecting exhibitionary spaces and the social/political realms of the city.

The willingness to set up an expanded spatial and social agenda also emerges. The IABR-International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, initiated in 2001, directly focuses "on the future of the city" embodying an entanglement of scopes. As a "knowledge institute" and "cultural platform", the event aspires to "generate real world change, using the power of imagination and design as its main instrument"[17]. The construction of an "international setting" expresses the branding ambitions of IABR, while its articulation as an active platform bridging different disciplines "to carry out result-oriented research" embodies the ambitions of "adding value to policy [...] and decision making" and "influencing the social agenda". Also, the event's expected outcomes cross different domains: if the construction of knowledge is one of the main goals of IABR as a cultural institution, the production of "real" plans and projects states its ambitions in actually "making" the city[18].

Projected in urban space, curating aims thus at becoming an act of interpretation of the urban intended as a layered system - as Corboz (1983) defined, a "palimpsest" - and involving

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17   https://www.iabr.nl/en. Accessed 28 January 2020.

18   https://iabr.nl/en/over/thema-303. Accessed 17 February 2020.

1890

Venice Art Biennale
1895

BIO Ljubjana
1968

1970

International
Architecture Biennale
Sao Paulo
1973

Bienal de Chile
Valparaiso
1977

Pan-American Architecture
Bienal Quito
1978

1980

Venice Architecture
Biennale
1980

Bienal Internacional
de Arquitectura de
Buenos Aires
1985

Bienal de Chile
1987

1990

International Biennial of
Landscape Architecture
Barcelona
1999

Figure 1.5_Scheme of the temporal succession and proliferation of Architecture biennials, triennials and festival worldwide. Drawn by the author, combining the data gathered from Oncurating, Issue 39 (June 2018), Archdaily and Biennial Foundation.

2000

Biennale Architecture
of St. Petersburg
2000

Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale
2000

Oslo Architecture
Triennale
2000

International Architecture
Biennale Rotterdam
2001

Hong Kong-Shenzhen
Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture
2005

Vienna Biennale
2006

Sydney
Architecture Festival
2006

London
Festival of Architecture
2006

Lisbon Architecture
Triennale
2007

Moscow
Architecture Biennale
2008

Jakarta Architecture
Triennale
2009

Beijing Design Week
2009

2010

Setouchi International Art
Festival
2010

Kuala Lumpur
Architecture Festival
2011

Brussels Biennale
of Modern Architecture
2012

Istanbul Design
Biennale
2012

Balkan
Architecture Biennale
2013

Prague Experimental
Architecture Biennale
2013

Copenhaghen
Architecture Festival
2014

Mextròpoly Ciudad de
México
2014

Chicago
Architecture Biennale
2016

London
Design Biennale
2016

Iran National Biennale of
Architecture, Urban Planning
and Interior Design Tehran
2016

International Bamboo
Architecture Biennale Baoxi
2017

Seoul Biennale of
Architecture and
Urbanism
2017

Dubai Architecture
Biennale
2018

Sharjah Architecture
Triennale
2019

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artistic practices, institutions, society and cityscape. This declension of curating is a method of investigation on the city deployed in *Palermo Atlas* (Laparelli et al. 2018), a preliminary research and editorial project "to serve as a blueprint for the curatorial proposal" for the 2018 edition of *Manifesta* exhibition entitled *Manifesta 12 - The Planetary Garden: Cultivating Coexistence*. Initiated in Amsterdam 1996, *Manifesta*[19] defines itself as a "European Nomadic Biennale" choosing a different location for every edition. Although born as an art biennial, its statement of aims describes the event as "an interdisciplinary platform for social change, introducing holistic urban research and legacy-oriented programming"[20]. In *Manifesta 12*[21] - focused on the city of Palermo as an entanglement of spatial, social and historical elements - urban research represented a pre-condition to inject artistic practices in the city. Mapping the urban space set the event's intervention conditions, selecting some exhibition venues among the investigated locations. Laparelli (2018, 20-21) argues that, differently from the "abstract plateau" of Venice Biennale, "with Manifesta […] the model is reinvented every time [as] a sort of permanent laboratory about what a biennial can be", defining the event as "a nomadic form of governance".

1.1.6 Displaying and transforming space

The theoretical and practical reconfiguration of biennials' role in intersecting urban agendas is bound to a dialectic relationship between the event, its spatial configuration and its exhibitionary modes, creating "a tension between city and event, one almost subsuming the other" (Szacka 2019, 30). Architecture (and art, as well) is not intended as a secluded disciplinary domain: rather, it becomes increasingly interlocked with the economic, political, social and urban context. Contemporary biennials have developed the attitude to set up a thick coexistence of relationships which overcome the event's temporal and institutional frame. The exhibitionary space dissolves the boundary between architecture, art and everyday life establishing associations with the urban realm through "site-specific works, visual documentation, and urban branding operations" (Tang 2007, 256). In this framework, the space of the city does not represent a static stage for the events; rather, it participates as a dynamic entity in defining both urban spectacle and spatial transformations: as Smith (2012) underlines, "biennials have evolved into internally diverse displays that, recurrently, spread themselves out across the exhibition venues of their host city, occupying and transforming each site, while also connecting them, at least for their duration".

Biennials today put different spatial configurations into practice, bringing to light the tension between the aspiration to position themselves within global cultural circuits and the tension towards variation, mirroring the dialectic between "difference and repetition" postulated by Deleuze (1994). They might represent a trigger for productive tensions investing urban fabric, where the spatial and conceptual and spatial articulation "radiates throughout a city [...] in a joint effort to form a critical mass" (Obrist 2015, 129). Throughout their evolution, these spatial manifestations flock into squares, museum courtyards, rooftops and parks, reflecting

19   https://manifesta.org/biennials/about-the-biennials/. Accessed 17 February 2020.

20   http://m12.manifesta.org/agen-domino99-online-yg-mudah-menang/. Accessed 17 February 2020.

21   The edition was co-curated by architect Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli, partner of the Rotterdam-based architectural firm OMA, as "creative mediator".

their aspiring experimental attitude both in renegotiating curatorial practices and manipulating space: the event establishes permeable boundaries with the city, influencing it in turn. What contemporary biennials aim at reaching, thus, is a transition from a linear relationship to a dynamic one, an exchange where architecture become a real-scale representation of urban and societal themes through the exhibitionary extemporaneous setting: both the relational space of experience and the theoretical space of inquiry are merged in the physical and spatial relationship happening between the biennial and the city. The 11th edition of art exhibition *documenta*[22] has been a pioneer in this attitude. Curated by Oknui Enwezor in 2002, the event was held in Kassel and four different venues around the world[23]: "extraterritoriality" has been advocated by Enwezor "by moving outside the domain of the gallery space to that of the discursive [and] by expanding the locus of the disciplinary models that constitute and define the project's intellectual and cultural interest" (Enwezor 2002 in Gardner and Green 2016, 191).

Again, the IABR Rotterdam represents a case where the real space of the city becomes not only the theatre of a spectacle apparatus, but also the object of a long-term spatial transformation project engaging a diverse set of urban actors. The 5th edition *Making City*[24] brought to the realisation of Luchtsingel pedestrian 390 metre-long footbridge and the revitalisation of different neglected spaces of the disused Schieblock building in Rotterdam Central District (2012-2015) by Dutch architectural collective Zones Urbaines Sensibles (Elma van Boxel and Kristian Koreman), setting up an urban infrastructural connection system. The intervention followed an incremental participatory process, epitomizing the event's ambitions in overcoming its own limited temporal framework (Van Boxel and Koreman 2018). The intervention was initially conceived to revitalise a portion of the Central District, a post-war business area with a significant number of vacant buildings and neglected spaces between Rotterdam Central Station and the Pompenburg neighbourhood. The urban intervention has exploited the IABR's ephemeral event in a long-term frame to link Rotterdam North with the city centre through an urban connector - a public space and a "social condenser" - to regenerate the connectivity in the area and create a "catalyst for economic growth" (Van Boxel and Koreman, 2018). IABR cultural institution has progressively propelled its role as a think tank, transforming the ephemeral character of the intervention in a "permanent temporality" (Van Boxel and Koreman 2018) - the outcome of a participated urban process in the Rotterdam Central District test-site[25]. Over the following seven editions, this transformative and incremental approach - together with the principle of extraterritoriality which involved different parallel cities[26] - has gradually

22   *documenta* is a contemporary art exhibition happening every five years in the German municipality of Kassel. Founded by artist and curator Arnold Bode in 1955 as part of the *Bundesgartenschau* (Federal Horticultural Show), the exhibition was born as "as an attempt to bring Germany up to speed with modern art, both banishing and repressing the cultural darkness of Nazism". https://www.documenta.de/en/about#. Accessed 4 April 2020.

23   Although the the Neue Galerie was the traditional venue for the exhibition, *Documenta11* occupied different locations: the Museum Fredericianum, the Orangerie, the Binding Brauerei, Kulturbahnhof and other smaller temporary venues, including the city's outskitrt (Green and Gardner 2016)

24   Curated by Asu Aksoy, George Brugmans, Joachim Declerck, Fernando de Mello Franco, Henk Ovink and ZUS. https://iabr.nl/en/editie/over-5e-iabr. Accessed 17 February 2020.

25   Since its launch, IABR model evolved and expanded in time: "IABR 2018+2020 - The Missing Link", focused on on the Delta of the Low Countries with at its centre the theme "Energy transition as a spatial and social challenge", will span four years to contribute to the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (IABR, 2018). The process of research by design encompasses a work biennial in 2018 (finished in July 2018) and a result-oriented biennial in 2020. See https://iabr.nl/en. Accessed 17 February 2020.

26   https://iabr.nl/en/editie/making-city-in-kaart. Accessed 16 March 2020.
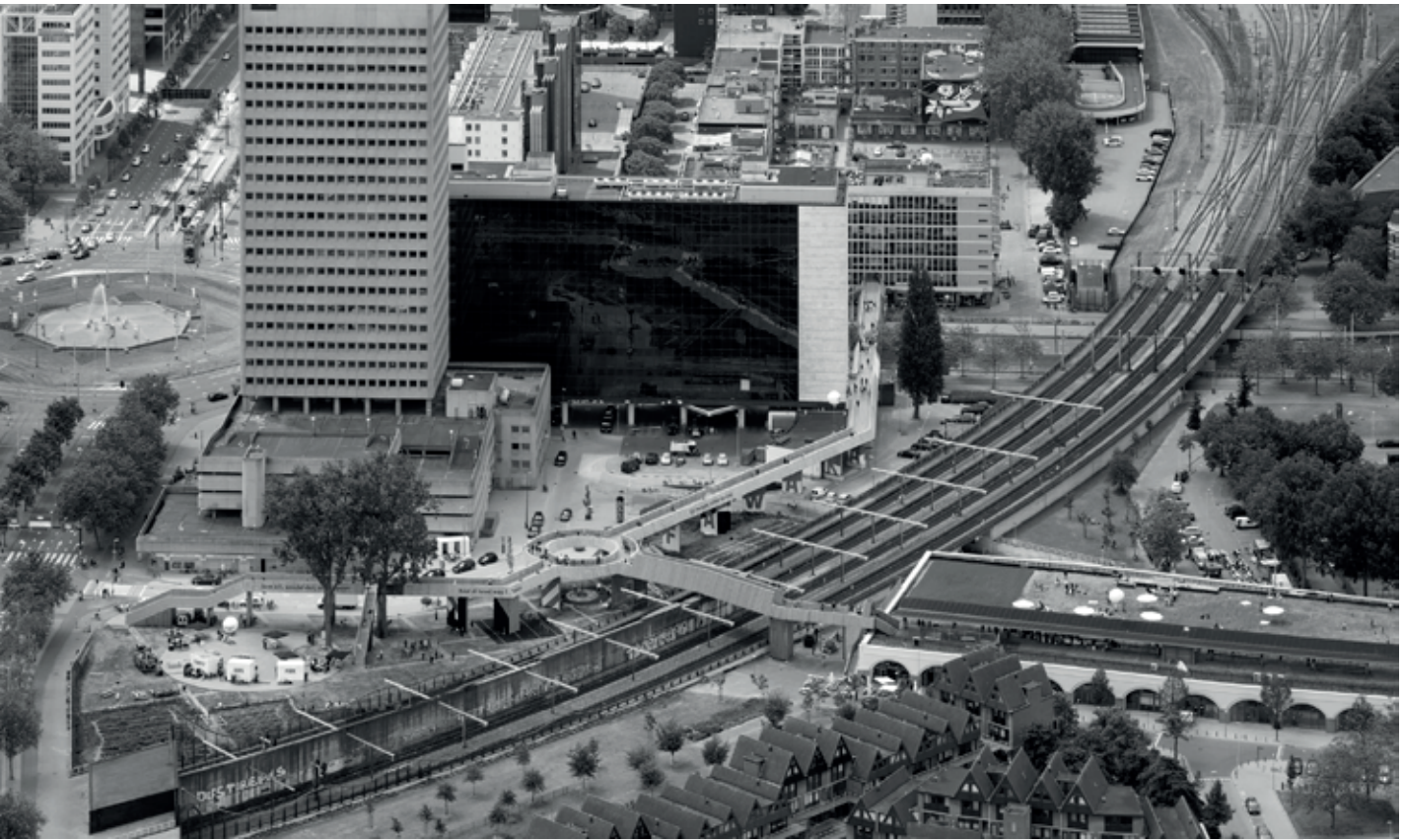
Figure 1.6_The Luchtsingel, Rotterdam. Aerial view of the project in Rotterdam Central District by ZUS - Zones Urbaines Sensibles. © ZUS - Zones Urbaines Sensibles.

Figure 1.7_The Luchtsingel, Rotterdam. Detail of the project by ZUS - Zones Urbaines Sensibles. © ZUS - Zones Urbaines Sensibles.

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Figure 1.8_Manifesta 12, Palermo 2018: overview of the performance "Tutto" by Matilde Cassani in Piazza dei Quattro Canti. Picture by Delfino Sisto Legnani e Marco Cappelletti. © Matilde Cassani.

Figure 1.9_Manifesta 12, excerpt from "Palermo Atlas" conceived by OMA - Office for Metropolitan Architecture.. © OMA - Office for Metropolitan Architecture.

Manifesta
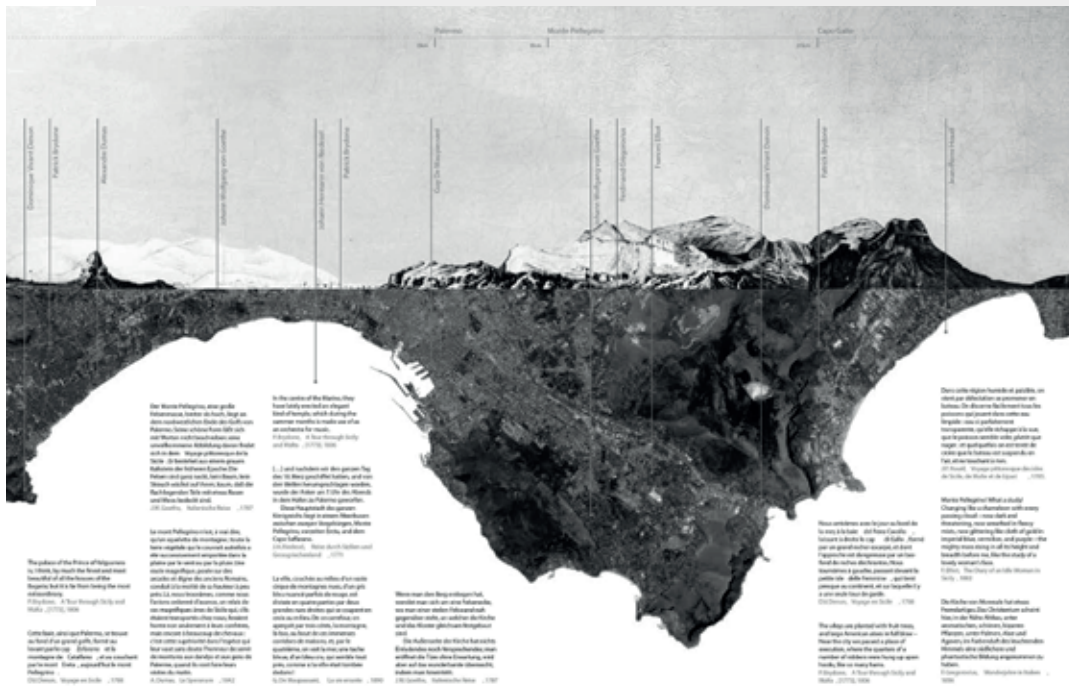
emerged through the spread of the exhibition in multiple "Test-Sites" and "Urban Ateliers", corresponding to real urban projects where curators, practitioners and different stakeholders are engaged in conceiving and testing concrete solutions to critical urban, social and environmental issues[27].

Moving back to *Manifesta* again, the exhibition regularly pops up in different cities "to provoke an alternative aesthetic vision to the local, but also to provide heterotopic sites of emergent cultural production" (Papastergiadis and Martin in Giorgi, Sassatelli and Delanty 2011, 49). In the 12th edition, the tension towards an in-depth observation to the city aimed at setting the basis for future transformations: the city of Palermo acts both as conceptual/spatial testing ground and as a "project", a field of knowledge "in the context of global phenomena" (Pestellini Laparelli 2018, 21).

Although far from being exhaustive in describing the international scenario, these aspirational and alternative ways of understanding and transforming urban fabric aim at questioning mainstream contemporary urbanism's analytical tools and their direct translation into design practice. In an optimistic perspective, observing the city as a territory to curate might potentially "disclose new possibilities for exploring the urban fabric and the urban condition as a whole" (Chaplin and Stara 2009, 4): temporary events and practices, with their spatial imprint, might trigger an "interplay between larger, slower modes of ordering [...] and the more immediate, contingent occupation of these high-level orders, to create places of exchange" (Holbrook 2015, 28).

1.1.7 Opening questions

Some critics acknowledge the "potential for change" that temporary events might propel (Madanipour 2017). Bishop (2015, 136) points out how temporary interventions in the city, if "properly applied", can be "a forum for experimentation, for subversion, for prototyping".

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27   Since its foundation the IABR has launched four "Test Sites": three during the 5th edition Making City and one in the 7th edition The Missing Link. Making City featured three "test-sites" (Rotterdam, Sao Paulo and Istanbul) have been launched to represent the event's ambitions in engaging "temporary alliances between local governments and designers, urbanists, engineers, entrepreneurs and developers". In Sao Paulo, the IABR engage the municipality in developing "approaches and concrete project plans for the favela Paraisópolis"; In Istanbul, the municipality of Arnavutköy was involved in a "Strategic Vision and Action Plan" connecting private and public stakeholders to combine water management and urban design. https://iabr.nl/en/projectatelier/test-sites. Accessed 4 April 2020.

The 2018 edition Missing Link - a 'bi-city' exhibition involving the cities of Rotterdam and Brussels - launched the M4H+ (Merwe-Vierhavens district) Test-Site, co-curated by Rianne Makkink and Jurgen Bey (Studio Makkink & Bey). Involving the Municipality of Rotterdam, Urban Development & Resilient Rotterdam, and Port of Rotterdam Authority, the Test-Site would ideally explore new perspectives of transformation of the port district into a "breeding ground for the circular manufacturing industry". https://iabr.nl/en/projectatelier/testsite_m4h. Accessed 4 April 2020.

Over the years, the IABR has launched a broad set set of "Urban Ateliers" combining thinking and design, ideally linking "the manifestation to long-running research and development projects" through the involvement of public and private stakeholders: Sao Paulo 1: Paraisòpolis (2008-2010); Sao Paulo 1: Cabuçu De Cima (2010-2012); Istanbul 1: Arnavutkoy (2010-2013); Istanbul 1: Beykoz (2012-2014); Brabandstad (2012-2014); Texel: Planet Texel (2012-2014); Rotterdam 1: The Urban Metabolism (2012-2014); Sao Paulo 3 (2014-2015); Albania (2014-2016); Brussels: The Productive Metropolis (2015-2017); An Energetic Odissey (2015-2015); Rotterdam 2: The Productive City (2014-2016); Groningen: The Nordic City (2015-2016); Utrecht: The Healthy City (2015-2016); Rotterdam 3: Energy Transition as a Lever for Inclusive City Making (2017-2021); East–Flemish Region: Population Growth As Leverage For Sustainable Spatial Development (2017-2020); Dordrecht: Water Safety As Leverage For Sustainable Urban Development (2019-2020); Drought In The Delta (2019-2020). https://iabr.nl/en/projectatelier/all_ateliers. Accessed 4 April 2020.

Such processes and events may even "democratize spaces", not "entirely absorbed by the expansive phase of late capitalism, but actually enhanced by the increase in resources and the venues in which it now circulates" (Papastergiadis and Martin 2011, 49). Nevertheless, the threshold defined by the term "properly" seems blurred. According to Dovey (2014, 262), it can be challenging to distinguish creative temporary urbanism from a "camouflaged marketing campaign": temporary practices often seem to "indicate, rather than a utopian future, further dispossession and accumulation of wealth in the hands of a privileged few" (Ferreri 2015, 187). Running along a more radical line, Neil Brenner (2016) underlines the necessity to scrutinize the alleged salvific effect often attributed to acupunctural appropriations of urban space in resolving the wicked problems involving the urban.

Curator and critic Simon Sheikh (2010, 78), yet, retraces potential in biennials. On the one hand, they play an active role in city branding campaigns' hegemonic system and - symbolic and real - capital accumulation processes. On the other, they might represent counter-hegemonic places able to maintain "several contradictory representations within a single space, representing both spaces of capital and "heterotopic public platforms of hope", as sites of potential resistance. This coexistence of potentially contradictory stances opens some questions. Do these 'spectacular interruptions', intended as temporary exceptions in urban flux, have a real agency to inject significant changes in cityscapes - allowing to question the "totalizing visions of architecture and urban planning" (Jordan and Lindner 2016, 4)? Or, rather, do they actually reinforce the very conditions they seek to resist?

Which future scenarios will the evolution of contemporary biennials open? Where does the nexus lie between their alleged counter-hegemonic attitude and their well-rehearsed role in triggering cultural commodification and urban spectacles? Is their ambition in transforming spaces a purely self-referential attitude - as Jeremy Till (2009, 246) underscores, insisting on the role of biennial exhibitions in fuelling "architecture's self-aggrandisement" and defining them as phantasmagoric spaces, "a bubble of false hope, in which the visual noise blocks out any evidence of dirty realism beyond" - or does it have a potential to effectively act on reality? If one observes the multi-faceted network of intersections a biennial establishes with urban realms - as Jones (2017, 3) puts it "intersections of state power, municipal ambitions, artistic intention, curatorial tactics, and public desires for[...] globalism" - the question about the real agency of a biennial (and of an architecture biennial) today emerges. If it might be a truism that biennials, mega-exhibitions and temporary practices represent well-rehearsed globalised forms, at the same time they are a complex interlocking of multiple stances calling for an in-depth description to be understood: how to adopt a situated gaze in observing them as a lens to read, learn - and transform - contemporary cities?

These issues appear even sharper when one observes how different contexts - outside of the so-called 'Global North' - mobilize these practices. The imbrication of diverse local stances (urban policies, spatial imprints, artefacts, set of actors involved) shows the complexity and multi-directionality of these events as acts of mobilisation and re-appropriation in different contexts worldwide. How does the "transnational occurs" - as Molotch and Ponzini (2019, 12) underscore -when practices, ideas and solutions get tested at the urban level in different contexts through the (re)assembling of elements with multiple origins?

1.2 Beyond the Global North: a comparative framework

1.2.1 A 'globalized' notion of culture?

In *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*, Jennifer Robinson (2006 in Lindner and Meissner 2019, 1) points out how current concepts of the "global city" and "modern city" are predominantly based on a tradition relying on Western urban thought and design. This hegemonic vision has brought to hierarchies of cities according to their development levels; at the same time, it marginalizes a vast array of potential alternative visions, understandings, and practices involving the urban. Although globalization is commonly considered a centralizing phenomenon, it is possible to detect multiple characterizations that allow for a de-centralization and a diversification on current concepts of (and epistemological perspectives on) the city.

Cultural events and ephemeral practices mushrooming in contemporary urban spaces worldwide epitomize these assumptions, showing how geographic areas that are not framed within the overarching notion of Global North can develop peculiar features in mobilizing - and adopting - what is considered a stereotyped cultural phenomenon. Global art exhibitions, mega-events and the like seem to play a major role in this framework, by reformulating their identities through a multiplicity of art histories, artistic practices, and aesthetic forms (Appadurai 1996). This assumption can be observed and tested in the worldwide proliferation of biennials: their diffusion epitomizes the efforts that what have been considered as global peripheries make to attain strategic positioning in the contemporary art world (Enwezor 2008; Nadarajan 2006; Tang 2011). Such an attitude delineates a changing context, showing how paradigms typical of the western geographical, social, political and economical scenarios have been mobilized and hybridized in (and by) different multi-faceted contexts. Many scholars advocates for an attempt to overcome this alleged dichotomy. Philosopher Homi K. Bhabha (1994), for instance, underlines that the notion of modernity appears to be no longer associated with the West: attempts at mapping international cultures, historical discontinuities, and global differences have led to re-think globalization as a cultural phenomenon not restricted to a single definition, but allowing instead for multiple representations. Similarly, for Hall (2001 in Markin 2016, 298), modernity can be considered "a plural phenomenon whose artistic expressions increasingly relativize its association with the West, while being constantly transformed by multiple histories, representations, and canons that translate modernism into local contexts, practices, and forms". In this perspective, Asian cities are not subaltern actors, but rather autonomous contexts of experimentation and renegotiation of trans-local approaches where ideas, policies and practices move (Wang, Oakes and Yang 2016).

1.2.2 Re-positioning the Asian

Defining the features characterizing Asian contexts, or "Asian-ness", is often a difficult operation (Hee et al. 2012). The unprecedented urban expansion and the subsequent population growth that many countries have undertaken in their shift to the global economy has brought to life Asian cities as prominent actors in the global scenario. In light of these changes, it is

possible to define a certain compactness which characterises Asian cities' strive to become part of this map. Nevertheless, the definition of an Asian context has no clear boundaries and is often delineated by changing powers and relational ambitions (Bunnell 2018). This dialectic often happens through urban nodes as engines of growth, showing how urbanization mechanisms work through "negotiated outcomes" and the progressive establishment of a series of practices through "plurality, diversity, speed and intensity of development" (Hee et al. 2012, xvii-xix).

It seems acknowledged that the forces of global inclusion in the creative sector -facilitated by new technologies' possibilities, transnational travels, and migrations - fostered an expansion in the diffusion of cultural events and international mega-exhibitions, often criticized for their homogenization. Some authors (Bydler 2004; Wang 2008, Clark 2010), yet, underline the active role that several Asian countries have gradually undertaken in experimenting and affirming different approaches to re-negotiate the commonly shared relationship centre/periphery, engaging a "transnational way that transcended the national/international dichotomy" (Bydler 2004 in Wang 2008). In this perspective, Asia seems to have reconfigured itself "no longer […] only as a geographic notion, but as a symbol of new convictions, efforts and possibilities" (Hanru 2013a, 94).

These assumptions need be framed in the profound transformations that have involved Asian centres during the last decades, when a growing number of urban areas joined the international map of "A++ global cities" (Green and Gardner 2014, 23). Such urban centres have increasingly embraced the creative turn that has characterised international economic spheres elsewhere: this trend is epitomised by the growing impact of art practices, cultural and creative industries and events whose spatial, economic and social imprints constellate Asian urban spaces. Wang, Oakes and Yang (2016) frame the increasing tension towards culture and creativity as one of the instruments serving Asian cities' ambitions in the attempt to build an "overall structural competitiveness" (Jessop and Sum 2000). Economic and spatial restructuring processes have brought about a geographical redistribution of industries which involved some major cities in East and Southeast Asia. These cities have gained an increasingly relevant role in producing and redistributing services, acting as "loci of innovation activities, and the development of consumption and leisure activities as the share of manufacturing in their economy declined" (Daniels, Ho and Hutton 2012, 2). A coexistence of sectors accompanies this phenomenon: in many cases, service-based cultural industries have paralleled and gained ground in overcoming existing manufacturing chains. As a consequence, it is possible to observe the emergence in numerous Asian cities of a young, well-educated creative middle class of practitioners and entrepreneurs with sufficient income to undertake the "consumer experiences" that drive many of the products of the so-called cultural economy (Daniels, Ho and Hutton 2012, 4).

This trend needs to be positioned in a situated perspective. It is not representative of a uni-directional "policy package" transfer; instead, it is referred to an entangled situation which involves the notions of "learning, translation, and mobility" (Clarke 2012 in Wang, Oakes, Yang 2016, 5). Cultural events and mega-exhibitions epitomise this perspective. On the one hand, they respond to an international, standardised paradigm (such as the Biennale format), and to precise regulatory and political frameworks. On the other hand, they embody the representation of local stances, capturing the "tension between the homogenising and anti-homogenising forces of globalisation [involving] both international and local art, and highlights the complex relays between them" (Smith 2012).

The Asian "Biennial Boom" beyond the Global North

SIBERIA 1
MONGOLIA 1
GEORGIA 1
TURKEY 5
LEBANON 1
PALESTINE 2
ISRAEL 2
IRAN 1
CHINA 15
JAPAN 12
SOUTH KOREA 13
TAIWAN 4
PAKISTAN 2
INDIA 3
BANGLADESH 3
NEPAL 1
VIETNAM 1
UZBEKISTAN 1
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 3
SRI LANKA 1
MALAYSIA 2
SINGAPORE 1
PHILIPPINES 1
INDONESIA 3

Figure 1.10_Scheme of the diffusion of biennials, triennials and art/ architecture festivals in Asia. Diagram showing the quantitative proliferation of artistic/architectural recurrent exhibitions in Asia from the 1950s onward. Drawn by the author, combining the data gathered from Oncurating, Issue 39 (June 2018), Archdaily and Biennial Foundation.

Proliferation (cumulative) Asia (1895-2018)

2018
2010
2000
1990
1980
1970
1960
1950

CHINA
1. Animamix Biennial (China)
2. Anren Biennale (China)
3. Art Wuzhen (China)
4. Beijing Design Week (China)
5. Beijing International Art Biennale (China)
6. Bi City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture (UABB) Shenzhen Hong Kong (China)
7. Chengdu Biennale (China)
8. Guangzhou Airport Biennale (China)
9. Guangzhou Triennial (China)
10. International Bamboo Architecture Biennale Baoxi (China)
11. Shanghai Biennale (China)
12. Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale (China)
13. Suzhou Documents (China)
14. Western China International Art Biennale (China)
15. Yinchuan Biennale (China)

SOUTH KOREA
16. Anyang Public Art Project (South Korea)
17. Busan Biennale (South Korea)
18. Changwon Sculpture Biennale (South Korea)
19. Cheongju International Craft Biennale (South Korea)
20. Daegu Photo Biennale (South Korea)
21. Gangwon International Biennale (South Korea)
22. Gwangju Biennale (South Korea)
23. Gwangju Design Biennale (South Korea)
24. Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale (South Korea)
25. Incheon Women Artists' Biennale (South Korea)
26. Jeju Biennale (South Korea)
27. SeMa Biennale – Mediacity Seoul (South Korea)
28. Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism (South Korea)

JAPAN
29. Aichi Triennale (Japan)
30. Dojima River Biennale (Japan)
31. Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial (Japan)
32. Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale (Japan)
33. Kenpoku Art (Japan)
34. KOBE Biennale (Japan)
35. Okayama Art Summit (Japan)
36. Oku-Noto Triennale (Japan)
37. Sapporo International Art Festival (Japan)
38. Setouchi International Art Festival (Japan)
39. UBE Biennale (Japan)
40. Yokohama International Triennial of Contemporary Art (Japan)

TURKEY
41. Canakkale Biennial (Turkey)
42. International Sinop Biennial (Turkey)
43. Istanbul Biennial (Turkey)
44. Istanbul Design Biennial (Turkey)
45. Mardin Biennial (Turkey)

TAIWAN
46. Asian Art Biennial (Taiwan)
47. Kuandu Biennale (Taiwan)
48. Taipei Biennial (Taiwan)
49. Taiwan Biennial (Taiwan)

BANGLADESH
50. Asian Art Biennale (Bangladesh)
51. Chobi Mela (Bangladesh)
52. Dhaka Art Summit (Bangladesh)

INDIA
53. Kochi-Muziris Biennale (India)
54. Pune Biennale (India)
55. Triennale–India (India)

INDONESIA
56. Jakarta Architecture Triennale (Indonesia)
57. Jakarta Biennale (Indonesia)
58. Jogja Biennale (Indonesia)

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
59. Architecture Biennale Dubai (United Arab Emirates)
60. Sharjah Architecture Triennale (United Arab Emirates)
61. Sharjah Biennial (United Arab Emirates)

ISRAEL
62. Herzliya Biennial (Israel)
63. Jerusalem Biennale (Israel)

MALAYSIA 2
64. Kuala Lumpur Architecture Festival (Malaysia)
65. Kuala Lumpur Biennale (Malaysia)

PAKISTAN
66. Karachi Biennale (Pakistan)
67. Lahore Biennale (Pakistan)

PALESTINE
68. Qalandiya International (Palestine)
69. Riwaq Biennale (Palestine)

GEORGIA
70. Tbilisi Triennial (Georgia)

IRAN
71. Iran National Biennale of Architecture, Urban Planning and Interior Design Tehran (Iran)

LEBANON
72. Meeting Points (Lebanon)

MONGOLIA
73. Mongolia 360Åã Land Art Biennial (Mongolia)

NEPAL
74. Kathmandu Triennale (Nepal)

PHILIPPINES
75. VIVA Excon (Philippines)

SIBERIA
76. Graphic Art Biennial, Dry Point (Siberia)

SINGAPORE
77. Singapore Biennale (Singapore)

SRI LANKA
78. Colombo Art Biennale (Sri Lanka)

UZBEKISTAN
79. Tashkent International Biennale of Contemporary Art (Uzbekistan)

VIETNAM
80. Saigon Open City (Vietnam)
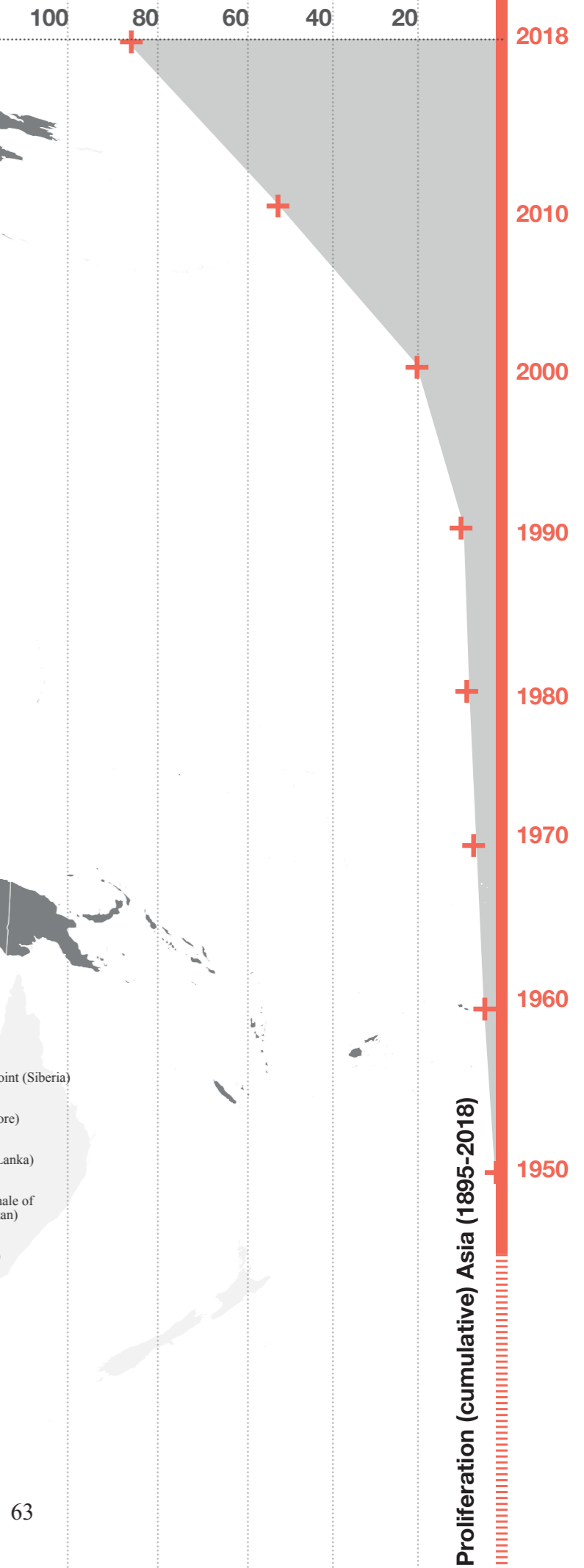
The unprecedented urban metamorphosis undertaken by Asian cities over the last decades has set the conditions that make their narrative dimension - and its connection with the neo-liberal capitalist society - particularly relevant (Campanella 2008; Ren 2013; Altrock and Schoon 2015; Wu 2015). Far from being an Asian specificity, this tendency is a common feature of contemporary urbanisation: however, their political and economic system's strong centralising tendency represents a clear observation lens. Although unified by a global common frame, specific urban images conveyed by cultural events and ephemeral practices differ from each other under a multiplicity of perspectives and subjective positions. According to King (2004), in fact, "all cities are world cities": observing the diffusion of urban narratives and collective images in a globalised scenario allows to understand different phenomena through a situated interpretative key, identifying a dialectical tension between what is interpreted as global and what tries to address to local demands (Huyssen 2008). In the world inter-city competition characterising the urban turn of the globalised era, Asia has acquired a central role due to its unprecedented spatial and economic transformation (Keiner, Koll-Schretzenmayr and Schmid, 2005). Asian urban nodes embed a potential involving the future of the city at large: their constant re-shaping, re-making and production of space makes apparent the tension between the import of models, the overlapping of tradition and modernity, the entangling of global and local (Hee et al. 2012).

Asian cities have fully entered the world cultural stage through the popping-up of so-called Mega Events as a means to chatch up with the global neo-liberal inter-city rivalry within the framework of cultural capitalism. The participation in the Mega-events' carousel has re-shaped well-recognised international brands in a local context. The Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, the Shanghai Expo in 2010, the Dubai Expo in 2020 - and the like - represent a broad field of investigation and debate in their spatial, economical and social outcomes: on the one side, they are often the result of top-down policies and processes and fully positioned against the globalised scenario; on the other, yet, they embody local policy-makers' representational ambitions in propelling urban marketing campaigns and driving political consensus (Broudehoux 2004; Shin 2012; Ni 2012; Wu, Li and Lin 2016).

However, it is possible to identify other types of 'spectacular' forms that populate Asian urban spaces, swinging between the desire of affirmation in the global sphere and the interests in renegotiating local issues in a contextualised framework - often interlocking artistic practices and urban transformation. They act as "other" means to project Asian cities into the creative sphere, where entrepreneurial dimensions overlap with a notion of culture that seeks to embrace local realities by establishing a close relationship between art and society. In this sense, exhibitions, biennials and triennials, festivals and ephemeral practices spreading in the Asian context entail a dualism: they are both instruments for international representation and tools for knowledge, investigation and transformation of local urban spaces, positioning themselves as hybrid territories with an autonomous character.

1.2.3 From a globalised network to autonomous contexts of interpretation

Cultural events, ephemeral practices and bi-triennial exhibitions have gained relevance as tools both to propel and understand the role of contemporary Asian cities in the contemporary cultural scenario, becoming a pervasive phenomenon in the widespread growth of "practices

and policies of making cultural/creative cities in Asia" (Wang, Oakes and Yang 2016, 1). While questioning the relationship between Asian Biennials and globalisation, it would be easy to associate it with the homogenisation to a primary - and stereotyped - Biennale form. As Jones (2017, 106-107) points out, in fact, the biennial "model", commonly intended to be Western-centric, was characterised by a strong emphasis on internationalism which has progressively shifted into the "will to globality". Yet, the spread of such events positions itself not just as a mimicry - or a parochial declension of an existing paradigm - but rather as more complex process of translation and adaptation "within the networked space of global urbanism" (Wang, Oakes and Yang 2016, 5). As Wang, Oakes and Yang (2016,4) underlines, the Asian context does not represent a mere "(cultural) policy recipient", a secluded reality "characterized by some distinct and essential cultural component". Instead, it could be a vibrant "generator", a "citational frame, in which mobile policies and ideas about urban planning, 'best practices' and successful models are increasingly being circulated *within* Asia rather than *between* Asia and 'the West'" (Wang, Oakes and Yang 2016, 4-5) triggering patterns of "inter-referencing" (Bunnell 2018, 10): frictions, "political tensions and social dynamics [...] emerge when Asian cities attempt to become 'cultural' or 'creative'"(Wang, Oakes and Yang 2016, 1).

As Wang (2008) points out, today several Asian countries are taking "an active lead in recent years in founding new biennials/triennials, and the number of them is a crucial component in the worldwide boom of biennials"[28]. Asia-Pacific context matured its own history in setting up recurrent exhibitions, prior to the post-1989 alleged race of "Asian Biennalization" to catch up with the global sphere by "cannibalizing" the western biennial model (Green and Gardner, 111)[29]. Nevertheless, some argue (Clark 2014; Wang 2008) that the seemingly consolidated -and under a unidirectional flow of knowledge- North-South/West-East dichotomy appears to be outdated: some apparently peripheral biennial programs have elaborated peculiar approaches that have led to the internalisation and appropriation of a model, able to overcome conventional hierarchies. As Hanru (2013a, 94) underscores, "the culture of biennials came not only from the Venice Biennale but also from mainly from biennials such Istanbul, Havana, and Gwangju, which represent the possibility of having new kinds of institutions for the arts in the former 'margin' areas in the world".

Beside the 1989 boom, Gardner and Green (2016, 242) retrace a further expansion of these events in Asian countries since 2008 as a reaction of the global financial recession crisis and as a means for emerging cities to "face outwards", inject new forms of cosmopolitan "cultural nomadism" and "*touristic* spectacle", and "maximize glamour". Such a proliferation is referred to as a "shifting gravity" (Bauer and Hanru 2013, 19) from established cultural hegemonic centres towards the creation of "alternative spaces" able to set up a tension between the "spectacular and the critical". Asia is one of the countries, as underlined by Bauer and Hanru

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28   https://www.on-curating.org/issue-39-reader/directory-of-biennials.html#.XorbqKgzZEYn. Accessed 15 February 2019.

29   Bauer and Hanru (2013) and Green and Gardner (2016) underlines Some examples. Among them, the Tokyo Biennale (1952); the Saigon Biennale (1962); the Triennale India in New Dehli (1968); the Arab Art Biennale (1973); the Sydney Biennale (1973); the Jakarta Biennale (1974); the Fukuoka's Asian Art Show (1979); the Asia Art Biennale in Dhaka (1981); the Istanbul Biennale (1987); the Asia Pacific Triennale (1993). Besides these 'historical' experiences, some emerging declensions of the bi-triennial format have rapidly gained ground in Istanbul, Gwangju (1995), Taipei (1992), Busan (1998), Fukuoka (1999), Sharjah (1993), Shanghai (1996), Guangzhou Triennial (2002), Shenzhen (2005), Hong Kong (2005), Singapore Biennale (2006). Also, recently, some "more independent and nomadic" forms of biennials have "joined the rank" (Bauer and Hanru 2013, 20) like the Emergency Biennale, the Ural Industrial Biennial, the Land Art Mongolia 360°, and the Kochi-Muziris Biennale.

Cities on the Move

Figure 1.11_View of the exhibition "Cities on the Move" displayed at the Hayward Gallery in London, 1999. Source: Cities on the Move exhibition archive. © Asia Art Archive.

BEYOND

Figure 1.12_Cover of the catalogue of the second Guangzhou Triennial "BEYOND, An Extraordinary Space of Experimentation for Modernization". © Asia Art Archive.
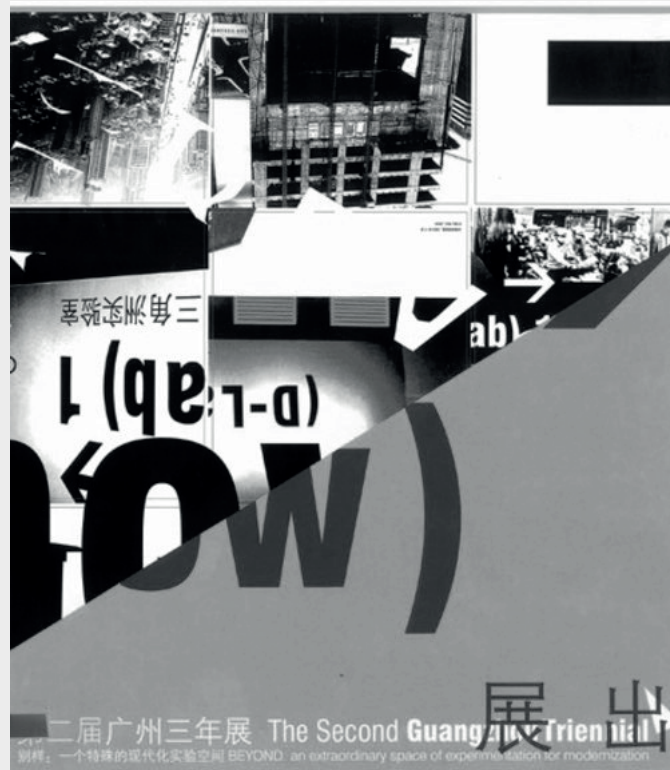
(2013) in the *World Biennial Forum N°1*, where the biennial format had the chance to undertake a set of emerging exhibitionary forms by entailing marketing ambitions and social engagement (Bauer and Hanru 2013): in this perspective, Asian biennials aim at positioning themselves as "testing grounds for artistic experimentation and curation [...] by introducing multi-disciplinary artistic practices, new kind of cultural production, and discursive formats to a wide range of local audiences" (Bauer and Hanru 2013, 20).

Cultural policies, cultural events and temporary practices are one of the ways through which the Asian city has tried to enter the circuit of the global knowledge economy in recent years. This massive generation of urban images and spatial transformations can be considered a multi-faceted tool. On the one hand, they have gradually allowed the Asian city to negotiate its position on the global scene. On the other hand, they are representative of a more articulated phenomenon as tools for representation and investigation of the economic, political, spatial and social dynamics investing Asian urban space. Observing them is significant, as they reflect the growing interest Asian city has gained as a territory of investigation and experimentation.

1.2.4 A field of research and experimentation

Asian contexts have increasingly framed their role both as events' propellers and fields to be investigated. Between the late 1990s and early 2000s, notably, a group of exhibitions and biennials have undertaken a pioneering action in both affirming Asian cities' prominent position - through the involvement of international curators, artists and public - and representing lenses to observe specific local frameworks.

In 1995, Rem Koolhaas'(1995) reflections about the "Generic City" began to shed light on conflicts and contradictions emerging from the intersection between the rapidly expanding globalised consumer economy and the explosion of Chinese contemporary urbanisation. In 1997, the exhibition *Cities on the move – Contemporary Asian Art on the turn of the 21st century*[30] - curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru - triggered a collective and practice-mixed reflection on "contradictory and conflicted histories of modernization in the rapidly developing economies of Asia, which have led to the development of contemporary hyper-cities" (Fogle, 2016). The exhibition itself acted as a spatial device spanning "from the ephemeral to the concrete", intersecting models and plans for architectural projects full-scale installations, projections, photography and performances, taking the cacophony of Asian "hyper-architecture" as a conceptual reference. Visual languages adopted by artists and architects interlocked with research and projects speculating on the present and future of Asian urban spaces, constantly renegotiating their position between the tension towards modernization and the pursue of tradition: the event deployed a double-edged reflection both as an "experiment in the architectonic construction of an art exhibition" and an "investigation of the contemporary urban landscape of Asia" (Fogle, 2016). *Cities on the move* represented the 'cosmopolitan' showcase of a rapidly growing research field which observed Asian megalopolises as a complex object, "a reality that is reconfiguring both East and West, old world and new, and is as much a cultural phenomena as a demographic or architectural one" (Hanru and Obrist 1997). The event slightly anticipated the study led by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and Harvard GSD

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30   The exhibition was held from November 26, 1997 to January 18, 1998 at the Wiener Secession in Vienna. It traveled to the CAPC in Bordeaux and then to New York's P. S.1. (Fogle 2016).

Great Leap Forward: Harvard Design School Project on the City (Chung et al. 2002) which represented, for international audiences, a pioneering investigation on the Pearl River Delta region - whose urban and economic expansion was then in full swing.

The trend set by *Cities on the move* exhibition and by *Great leap Forward* paved the way for another major event which reached international recognition, the Second Guangzhou Triennale inaugurated in November 2005[31]. Titled *BEYOND: An extraordinary space of experimentation for modernization* - and curated by Hou Hanru, Hans Ulrich Obrist and the Guangdong Museum's curator Guo Xiaoyan - it focused again on the Pearl River Delta region as an "extraordinary space of experimentation for modernization"[32] intertwining the notions of global and local. Curatorial statements widely sponsored the pioneering Pearl River Delta's pioneering character as both context and event: the region where the country's most remarkable urban expansion was taking place and the exhibition space blended in a locus "to study the contemporary art within the extraordinary modernization framework [,] a platform for artistic experimentation and practice"[33]. The Second Guangzhou Triennale represented a peculiar exhibitionary format focusing on "research and reflection" on the development model represented by the Pearl River Delta region - gathering an vast set of contributions from domestic and international artists, architects, and scholars. The curatorial process mirrored the exhibition's experimental character in the "cross-space, cross-time, cross-cultural, and inter-disciplinary" structure of the Delta Laboratory (D-Lab) where the term "platform" started gaining ground as a dominating notion, defining a space "for sustainable and evolving research, creation and cultural exchanges". Curatorial intentions propelled a transnational dimension: research projects and art interventions belonging to a cosmopolitan framework intersected the local context by "deeply influencing its future development by blending art, architecture and planning" and "creating new realities". The exhibition also entailed a transformative attitude: in curatorial statement, Obrist (2005) saw the Triennale as deeply rooted in Guangzhou and the Pearl River Delta able to "foster local development" a Triennale which will root itself in Guangzhou and the Pearl River Delta region by building a long term laboratory".

Relying on this conceptual scaffolding, other cultural initiatives such biennials, triennials, and exhibitions have represented an opportunity to reflect on urban phenomena investing the continent. By exploring and intervening in the cityscapes, experimental perspectives have gradually emerge, injecting an imbrication between narrative and transformative dimension. In this perspective, Asian megalipolises and their urban phenomena, epitomized as "messy" (Chalana and Hou 2016) and "spectacular" (de Kloet and Scheen 2013) become a locus for reflection: they become "fertile sites, not for following an established pathway or master blueprint, but for a plethora of situated experiments that reinvent what urban norms can count as 'global'" (Roy and Ong 2012, 2). They represent the scenario that these cultural practices 'put on stage' - subverting the hegemonic Western gaze, positioning themselves as a thresholds between the exceptional character propelled by the temporary event and their aspirations to decode contemporary cityscapes.

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31   The Guangzhou Triennial inaugurated in 2002 as the evolution of the Guangzhou Biennial Art Fair founded in 1992 (Gardner and Green 2016).

32   http://ftp.gdmoa.org/gztriennial/second/theme-en/theme-en.htm. Accessed 17 April 2021.

33   http://ftp.gdmoa.org/gztriennial/second/theme-en/theme-en.htm. Accessed 17 April 2021.

1.2.5 Building spatial relationships

Rem Koolhaas' studies and the experimental research/display approach undertaken through the above mentioned exhibitions illustrate how, since late 1990s, eastern megalopolises gradually gained relevance both in representing global urbanisation phenomena and in setting up transnational and cosmopolitan cultural *loci*: as underlined by Bauer and Hanru (2013, 20) Asian countries aimed at progressively "inventing new realities for the global art scene, artists, and cultural entrepreneurs". Exhibitions emerging in Asian contexts have delineated a layered interlocking between urban space and artistic practices, triggering perspectives able to "produce new localities" (Bauer and Hanru 2013, 20) and relationships between the cultural container and its content: as Gardner and Green (2016, 123) underline in their observation of Asian biennials, some exhibitionary formats "have been centered into art museums", others have "survived" (and flourished) "without the stable use of an exhibition venue from year to year", while some others "spread across their host cities and into temporary sites". The production of new "localities" in the exhibition's framework can be observed in a both discursive and spatial perspective. Some scholars (Gardner and Green 2016, Smith 2012, Wang 2008, Tang 2007, Tang 2011) have explored art biennials and triennials popping-up in Asian contexts by adopting a historical perspective; nevertheless, these recursive exhibitions entail a growing imbrication between art and architecture, which can be visible through the multiple ways they interact with the city's physical infrastructure.

In this frame, Asian urban space becomes then the object of inquiry, the 'spectacular' itself, and the *locus* where the event is displayed: contemporary Asian cities have gained a double-faceted status both as protagonists and theatres of urban transformation - and for its *mise en scène*. Their relationship with space becomes pivotal: oscillating between institutionalised framework and aspirational alternative counter positions, temporary artistic events stand as threshold spaces. They aim at interlocking the seemingly unavoidable spectacularizing phenomena in Asian urban contexts growing under hyper-speed transformations, and experimental forms of knowledge and intervention - establishing 'alternative' relationships in reconfiguring the spatial and social sphere.

A "stronger focus on design and architecture" (Bauer and Hanru 2013, 70) has gradually featured emerging recurrent exhibitions' formats. In the affirmation of urban policies involving Asian cities as cultural engines, the notion of creativity is increasingly conceived by planners and policy-makers "as an image or a design attribute" (Kong and O'Connor 2009 in Wang, Oakes and Yang 2016, 3). It is possible to retrace a growing interest in "producing and presenting artworks in diverse non-art venues outside of the conventional gallery space" (Lu 2010,7). Uncanny locations like abandoned warehouses in Istanbul; 'historical' venues like the Indian ancient city of Muziris; scenic environments like the the rural landscape of Japanese Setouchi archipelago, and everyday locations like Korean Geumnamro Park in Seoul often offer a different experiences of the exhibitionary space offer a combination where international well-rehearsed approaches and local stances are continuously renegotiated through site-specific temporary/long-term interventions.

At the crossroad between Asia and Europe, the Istanbul Biennale[34], which was founded in

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34   The Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSV) has been organising the Istanbul Biennial since 1987. The biennial aims to create a meeting point in Istanbul, in the field of visual arts between artists from diverse cultures and the audience (Vogel 2007). See also https://bienal.iksv.org/en/biennial/history. Accessed 20 February

1987 and gave origin to the Istanbul Design Biennale in 2012, has consolidated its approach in expanding the field of art practices into urban space "nurturing [...] transformation" and establishing a "cultural infrastructure of the city through its discovery of non-conventional and alternative exhibition spaces" (Hanru 2013a, 95). In 2005, curators Vasif Kortun and Charles Esche marked a shift from historical venues in conceiving the spatial imprint to the exhibition[35]: they focused on the interaction between art practices and daily life, locating the exhibition in empty offices room, factories, and apartments (Vogel 2007). After 2015, major transformations followed in the area, engulfed in the ambitious "Galataport project" (Özdamar 2016). The Antrepo No.4 warehouse, which housed the 2003 8th edition *Poetic Justice*, has turned into an art museum, the Istanbul Modern (Gardner and Green 2016, 123) with a refurbishment project led by Istanbul-based office Tabanlioglu Architects in 2004[36] - described as "the first contemporary art gallery in Turkey" (Özdamar 2016, 13). The tobacco warehouse used for the 9th edition now houses a contemporary art space called Depo. In the 10th edition, curator Hou Hanru "let the Biennial fan out into the city" (Vogel 2007) by expanding the exhibition across Taksim Square, a textile market, and in the former Antrepo No.3 warehouse[37] (Gardner and Green 2016, 123). During the 2011 12th edition, *Untitled*, curated by Jens Hofmann and Adriano Pedrosa, Japanese "starchitect" Ryue Nishizawa of the firm SANAA (Sejima and Nishizawa and Associates) designed the Antrepo No.3 interior exhibition space (Tan 2011). Today, the "Galataport project" has triggered the relevant spatial and functional conversion of the former Antrepo No.3 into up-scale apartments, also affecting the neighbouring warehouses and bringing to light gentrification phenomena (Özdamar 2016).

Besides the well-rehearsed trends of post-industrial sites refurbishment - a common feature of cosmopolitan contemporary art and architectural scene worldwide - some Asian biennials have developed a peculiar interaction between art practices, social issues and the notions of heritage and memory in the frame of a counter-hegemonic perspective. Inaugurated in 2012 and referred to as a "people's Biennale", the Kochi-Muziris Biennale "seeks to create a new language of cosmopolitanism and modernity" (D'Souza and Manghani 2017). The event finds its roots in Muziris trading port's historical experience, "a crucible of numerous communal identities"[38], whose site has been recently identified and is currently under excavation. The memory of a colonial past becomes the catalyst to explore the current global context in a different, local-oriented perspective. This attitude also involves space: the founding of the Kochi Biennale Foundation, "engaged in the conservation of heritage properties"[39], has set the conditions to

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2020.

35   "Istanbul" was the key topic of the exhibition (Vogel 2007).

36   The Istanbul Modern has been active until 2018, the international architecture firm RPBW Renzo Piano Building Workshop elaborated a plan for its reconstruction in a new site in the Galata Port development. http://www.rpbw.com/project/istanbul-modern. Accessed 13 April 2020.

37   Antrepo No.3 and No.4 are part of a series of seven former modernist warehouses along the Salipazari Harbor bank in Tophane. During the late 1990s, they have been used as a venues for exhibitions. See Gokturk, Soysal and Tureli (2010) and Özdamar (2016).

38   They can be traced back to the ancient city of Muziris "that buried under layers of mud and mythology after a massive flood in the 14th-century". http://kochimuzirisbiennale.org/foundation/. Accessed 15 March 2020. For an extensive account of the Biennale's agency in renegotiating national and local's positions in the global cultural sphere, see D'Souza and Manghani (2017).

39   The Foundation was founded in 2010 by artists Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu http://kochimuzirisbiennale.org/foundation/. Accessed 15 March 2020.

Figure 1.13_The Istanbul Modern museum, acting as the venue for several editions of the Istanbul Biennale and refurbished in 2004 by Tabanlioglu Architects. Picture by Arild Vågen. ©Istanbul Modern.

Istanbul Biennale

Figure 1.14_ Interior view of Antrepo No.3 with the exhibition design by Ryue Nishizawa (SANAA - Sejima and Nishizawa and Associates) for the 12th edition of the Istanbul Biennale, themed "Untitled" and curated by Jens Hofmann and Adriano Pedrosa. Picture by Mahmut Ceylan. © Archivio Domus.

preserve, reuse and interact with former colonial and local heritage, abandoned factories and warehouses in Fort Kochi-Mattancherry in the specific framework of the event[40].

The impact of Asian urbanisation is acquiring growing relevance also in questioning the rural-urban divide, bridging the notions of heritage and societal issues. Different perspectives emerge from the interlocking between art, space and the social sphere: in Japan, such an investigation takes place with the Setouchi International Art Festival and the Echigo Tsumari Art Triennale.

The Setouchi International Art Festival[41], created in 2010, is a contemporary art event housed every three years on a dozen islands in the Seto Inland Sea (Setonaikai). The festival emerged as a response to the increasing depopulation of the islands due to local inhabitants' ageing. The Triennale seeks to inject new forms of vitality through the cooperation with international artists and architects, trying to involve local population as "an opportunity for local citizens to interact with the world". In its statement, the Triennale acts as a self-proclaimed "driving force in the development of the Setouchi area's future" (Choat 2019). The event adopts a principle of spatial dissemination: besides three existing institutional museums, artworks spread across the islands, emphasizing the prominent role of nature, using abandoned old homes and buildings as exhibition spaces or converting them into artworks[42].

With similar intents - but inserted in a structured regulatory framework - operates the Echigo Tsumari Art Triennale (ETAT)[43], positioning itself as a "leading practice of community building by art"[44]. The festival was launched in 2000 as a core project in response to the regional revitalisation "New Niigata Riso Plan" proposed by the governor of Niigata in 1994. In this frame, the "Echigo-Tsumari Art Necklace Master Plan" was launched as a 10-year plan to enhance the interaction with the population "by highlighting charms of the region via art"[45]. The Echigo-Tsumari region (now called the "Echigo-Tsumari Art Field") has suffered from Chuetsu Earthquake in 2004, which has exacerbated an already rapidly advancing depopulation. Many buildings representing the historical, social and cultural core of the local community have been abandoned. The event proposes an alternative model to heritage conservation in rural contexts by encouraging collaborative practices between local/international artists, residents and visitors, aiming at reaching a "multi-layered curatorial approach" by challenging conventional preservation practices (Mancke 2009). The ETAT positions itself as a diffused event: approximately 200 rural villages in six areas across the region (Tokamachi, Kawanishi, Nakasato, Matsushiro, Matsunoyama, Tsunan) act as an open-air exhibition space where old buildings, abandoned houses and schools constitute the venues for the event. They host site-specific artworks and installations to revitalize unused spaces and trigger local memories, encompassing a flexible curatorial program able to overcome the event's temporal framework. The festival sets also seasonal programs where artists, sponsors and organizations engage with

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40   The initiative takes place in a range of venues centred around Fort Kochi-Mattancherry, with Durbar Hall in Ernakulam. http://kochimuzirisbiennale.org/venues/. Accessed 15 March 2020.

41   https://setouchi-artfest.jp/en/about/. Accessed 15 March 2020.

42   https://www.biennialfoundation.org/2013/06/9200/. Accessed 15 March 2020.

43   https://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/. Accessed 15 March 2020.

44   https://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/about/. Accessed 15 March 2020.

45   https://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/about/history/. Accessed 15 March 2020.

Figure 1.15_View of the installation "A Place Beyond Belief" by Nathan Coley during the first Kochi-Muziris Biennale in the courtyard of Aspinwall House in Fort Kochi, a former warehouse, office and residential compound for the trading company Aspinwall & Company Ltd. established in 1867. Picture by Manuela de Leonardis.

Figure 1.16_View of the glass, wood and steel "Kodaram Pavilion" designed by New Delhi-based Anagram Architects at Cabral Yard in of Fort Kochi for the 2018 Kochi-Muziris Biennale. Picture by Suryan Dang. © Suryan Dang.

Kochi-Muziris Biennale

Setouchi International Art Festival

Figure 1.17_View of the wood and bamboo pavillion "Love in Shodoshima" by Wan Wen Chih realised for the 2019 edition of the Setouchi Triennale. ©Setouchiexplorer.

Figure 1.18_View of the "Project for wall paintings in lane, Ogijima Wall alley" by Rikuji Makabe, a set of site-specific installations spread throughout Ogijima Village during the 2010 Setouchi festival. The installations are mainly realised with wood fragments and materials discarded from unused, local ships. © Designboom.

local inhabitants through collateral exhibitions, performances, workshops and festivals[46].

The notion of urban occupies yet the centre of a relevant set of biennials that tries to intersect and interpret different processes involving the cityscape. Interaction with public space, revitalisation strategies for derelict urban areas and a broader discourse involving the notion of 'commons' are some of the tackled issues in the attempt to intersect, interpret - and in some cases to redirect - urban policies, following an active thread.

In South Korea, the program "Gwangju Folly" and the young "Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism" offer two cases in points. Initiated between 2010 and 2011 as a part of the Gwangju Design Biennale, the "Folly" project evolved into an independent program to showcase a set of interventions located in Gwangju's urban space. The event aims at achieving incremental urban regeneration by "providing a cultural rebirth to the old downtown area, plagued by a phenomenon of 'hollowing out' after 40 years of rapid industrial growth"[47]. The project follows a joint master plan where the overall curatorial strategy promotes the set up of a "cultural landscape". A total of 31 projects have been triggered throughout the four editions[48]. During the first step of the project, ten locations have been involved along the historical traces of the destroyed Gwangju-eup castle to bring back historical memories and to boost the revitalisation of the old part of the city. The second and third editions focused on public and everyday spaces in the city, while the fourth edition has involved the the infrastructural space[49].

A plethora of both domestic and international architects, designers and artists belonging to the cosmopolitan circuit have contributed to the project. In 2011, Spanish architect Alejandro Zaera-Polo realised the "Flow Control" installation, an urban connector linking the Geumnamro Park with the surrounding sidewalks and the underground shopping areas[50]. Drawing inspiration from Korean traditional pavillions, in 2012 the RIBA Gold Medal awarded African architect David Adjaye and the American writer writer Taiye Selasi have cooperated in the "Gwangju River Reading Room", connecting the the Gwangju River embarkment park to the street level and providing a public space for meditation and river. In 2017, Dutch architectural firm MVRDV designed "I LOVE STREET", a 960 square meters permanent intervention which equipped a street close to an elementary schools with a different set of patterns and "pavements that can be used for sitting, painting, jumping on trampolines, and playing in the sand"[51].

The search for representation and urban identity to be renegotiated across global and local positions - and the interest in city commons - are the essential features of the Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism. Born in 2017 and organised by Seoul Metropolitan Government and Seoul Design Foundation, it represents one of the outcomes of the "city council-led effort to increase the general public awareness of architecture and the environment in the South

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46 https://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/about/project/. Accessed 28 March 2020.

47 https://www.gwangjufolly.org/bbs/content_en.php?co_id=en_overview. Accessed 28 march 2020.

48 For an overall overview of the projects, see https://www.gwangjufolly.org/index_en.php. Accessed 16 march 2021.

49 Gwangju Biennale inaugurated in 1995 to commemorate the May 18 Democratization Movement (1980) and the April 19 Revolution (1960). The Biennale is considered as one of Asia's oldest art biennales. The Gwangju Design Biennale was born in 2011 under the direction of Seung Hyo-sang and Ai Weiwei, whilw program "Gwangju Folly" officially kicked-off on 1 September 2011. http://gwangjufolly.org/en/about/introduction/. Accessed 28 March 2020.

50 https://www.gwangjufolly.org/bbs/board.php?bo_table=en_folly1_fo&wr_id=5. Accessed 16 March 2021.

51 https://www.mvrdv.nl/projects/300/gwangju-folly. Accessed 16 March 2021.

Figure 1.19_View of the "Tunnel of Light" permanent installation realised by Beijing-based MAD Architects for the 2018 Echigo-Tsumari Triennale. The architects have restored several scenic points the historic Kiyotsu Gorge Tunnel located in the Niigata prefecture, a 2,500-foot long passageway which crosses rock formations and offers to the Triennale's visitors different experiences of interaction with the surrounding landscape. © MAD Architects.

Figure 1.20_View of the "Hong Kong House" realised in Tsunan by the Hong Kong-based art&architecture laboratory LAAB, which has run for the 2019 Golden Pin Design Award. The Hong Kong House is an art gallery and artists' residence which aims at propelling the exchange between Hong Kong artists and Echigo local inhabitants. © LAAB Architects.

ETAT
Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale

Korean capital". Considering Seoul as a "grand laboratory for the imminent commons", and trying to overcome the gallery walls, the Seoul Biennale "activates" a constellation of urban sites (the Donuimun Museum Village, the Dongdaemun Design Plaza designed by Zaha Hadid Architects[52], and various locations in Seoul) and citizen activities through interconnected projects curated both by local and international designers (Pai 2017). The Biennale aims at becoming an experimental laboratory of urban governance with permanent agency on the city. Through the "Live Projects" initiative, The event has brought light again on the Sewoon Sangga, concrete mega-structure completed in 1968 and bounded to demolition - which is now experiencing a regeneration in a "Design Plaza" to inject new perspectives on the preservation of manufacturing activities in the city centre[53] (Haterley 2018).

Far from being exhaustive, these cases are nevertheless representative of some tendencies intersecting extemporaneous practices happening in Asia context, swinging between the spectacularization of space, the adherence to global paradigm and the aspiration to interact with (and to represent) local contexts. Models from the West and the Global North remain highly influential in the aspirational status of these practices. Nevertheless, these manifestations should not be viewed merely as local variations of universal, hegemonic models. Instead, they are practices that mobilise and re-make policies "as they travel within the networked space of the global" (Wang, Oakes and Yang 2016, 5), engaging a trans-local dimension and encompassing a complex system of stances.

The next chapter will underline the transitional role that emerging biennials are crossing through its main case study, the Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (UABB). The section will show the exhibition through a multi-dimensional perspective, presenting Shenzhen Biennale as a peculiar exhibitionary form able to set a trans-scalar network of connections and as an urban actor with transformative ambitions.

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52   https://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/dongdaemun-design-park-plaza/. Accessed 16 March 2021.

53   https://www.architectural-review.com/today/life-and-seoul-seoul-biennale-2017. Accessed 15 March 2021.

Gwangju Folly

Figure 1.21_View of the wood and concrete pavillion "Gwangju River Reading Room" designed by African architect David Adjaye and American writer Taiye Selasi along the banks of the Gwangju River for the Gwangju Folly II program in 2013. Picture by Kyungsub Shin. © Kyungsub Shin.

Figure 1.22_View of the "I LOVE SQUARE" project, a 960 square meters public space installation designed by the Rotterdam-based architecture office MVRDV for the Gwangju Folly IV program in 2017. © MVRDV.

Figure 1.23_View of the Dongdaemun Design Plaza designed by Zaha Hadid Architects between 2007 and 2014 in Seoul's Dongdaemun historical district, which acts as one of the venues for the Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism. Picture by Julien Lanoo. © Zaha Hadid Architects.

Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism

Figure 1.24_View of the Sewoon Sangga, the 1960s 1 kilometer-long, listed for demolition by the city Government, which the 2017 Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism "Live Projects" have revamped in a long term perspective as a Design Plaza for the integration of creative and manufacturing functions in Seoul's urban core. © Dezeen.

Figure 2.1_Poster of the first Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Chapter 2

Placing the Shenzhen Biennale

Chapter 1 has offered a tentative overview of how some emerging biennials are gradually re-framing their constitutive essence from loci for display to active platforms, aspiring to transform reality and renegotiate their characters within and beyond western paradigms. This chapter aims at positioning the research object, the Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture (UABB), as an event out of the tropes of the Global North and as a trans-scalar actor drawing on the conceptualization of "worlding practice" formulated by Roy and Ong (2012). The chapter shows how the notion of "worlding" - of which the Biennale is an institutional representative - embraces both physical and immaterial aspects of cityscape's building, interlocking the exhibition's agency with Shenzhen's global, national, regional and local ambitions.

2.1 A trans-scalar "worlding practice"

The Shenzhen Biennale officially kicked off in 2005 as the self-proclaimed first international exhibition exclusively dedicated to the issues of urbanism and architecture in China (and, at least according to the Biennale Organizing Committee, in the world)[1]. Born in Shenzhen, the city epitomizing the "Reforms and Opening-Up" period initiated in 1978, since its inception the Biennale has positioned itself as an instrument that has progressively established articulated relationships and autonomous features, where "the neoliberal as a global form comes to articulate situated experimentations with an art of being global" (Ong 2012, 4). In this framework of appropriation, the relationship with the western-centric biennial model, neither oppositional nor characterized by mimicry, becomes 'mobile', open to new forms of hybridization.

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1   http://www.szhkbiennale.org.cn/En/About/. Accessed 16 March 2020.

Figure 2.2_A scene from the First Edition of Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Opening Ceremony, the performance "City Metamorphosis" directed by Meng Jinghui. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives, ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.
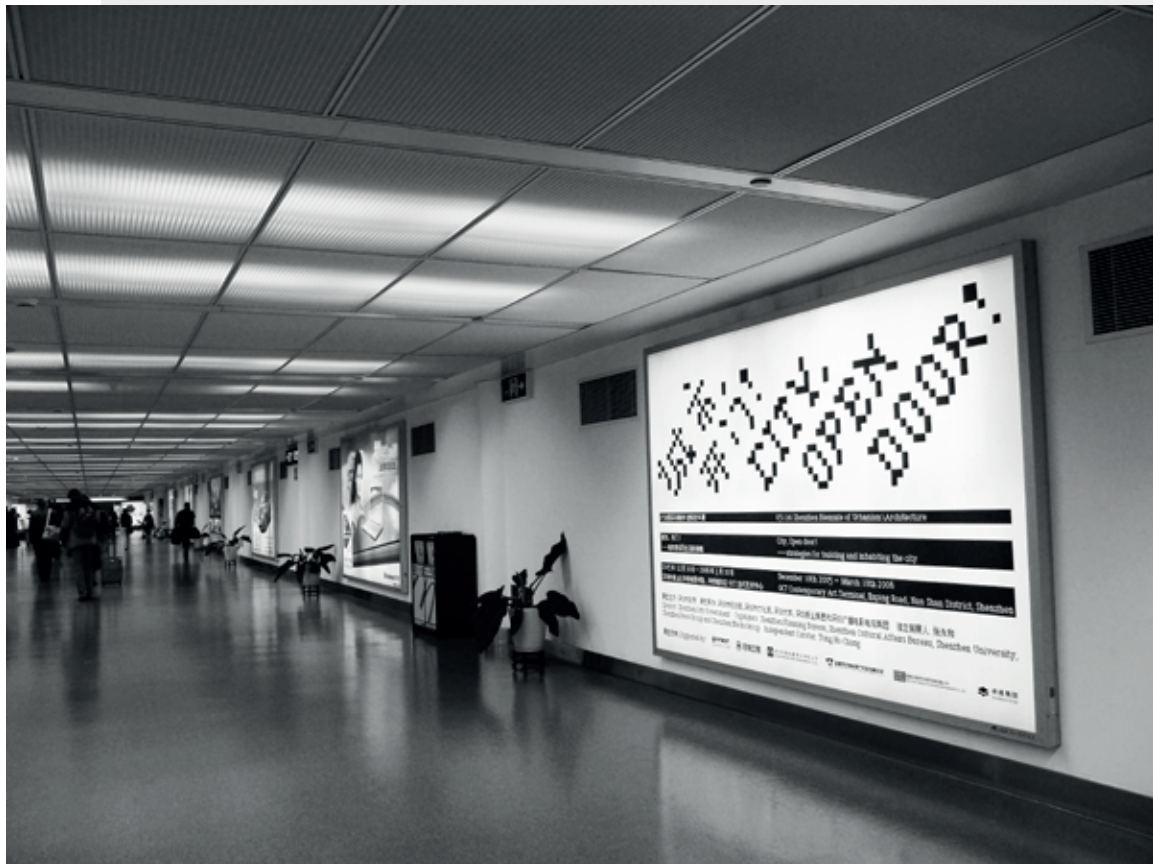
Figure 2.3_Posters of the First Edition of Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture in commercial billboard of Shenzhen Metro. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee archives, ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

The interlocking between the Biennale and the city happens on diverse interconnected layers, reassessing Shenzhen's historically pioneering "civilizing" role (Bach 2017b). On the one hand, the exhibition has paralleled Shenzhen's metamorphosis into a global "knowledge city" (Hu 2020). On the other, the event's municipal regulatory framework has epitomized the capacity of the city to utilize "culture" to set up an infrastructure of local spatial manipulations.

The initiative's political, spatial and economic framework mirrors the "worlding" ambitions of a city striving for its affirmation on the global map. As Ong argues, "worlding practices are constitutive, spatializing, and signifying gestures that variously conjure up worlds beyond current conditions of urban living" (Ong 2012, 13). These practices operate a vast array of methods to negotiate with the notion of global, yet maintaining inextricable links with their local dimension. In this framework, the Shenzhen Biennale positions itself as a "worlding practice" (Roy and Ong 2012), an instrument acting in a trans-scalar way interlocking global, national, regional and urban dimensions. Since its inception, the Biennale has acted not as a static, recurrent cultural event but rather as an evolving object: its reconfiguration can be framed in the attitude, undertaken by Shenzhen's policies, to constantly renegotiate both imaginary and spatial configurations of the cityscape, encapsulating a trans-local debate on the city.

2.1.1 A new urban showcase

Curated by Chinese internationally renowned architect Yung-Ho Chang, under the theme *City, Open Door!*, on 10 December 2005[2] the first Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture officially kicked off in the Southern part of the former Huaqiao East Industrial Area and then under construction OCT Contemporary Art Terminal[3]: since then, in a span of six years, a group of disused factories built in the 1980s will be successively called "OCT-Loft" and will become one of the most famous creative and touristic spots in the city.

The Opening Ceremony was curated by Meng Jinghui, a renowned director of China's avant-garde stage. The performance *City Metamorphosis* aimed at injecting a reflection on the living conditions of contemporary urbanites, a category closely linked to Shenzhen's history, where many inhabitants are migrants. The show underlined the ambiguity between Shenzhen's narrative as a land of opportunities and its inner contradictions concerning inclusiveness, social justice and sense of identity[4].

Covering 12,000 square meters in the former industrial district, hosting 82 exhibits coming from an international background[5] and welcoming 30.000 visitors[6], the event marked a shift for the city: in the exhibition catalogue, Liane Lefaivre (2007, 49) defined the first Shenzhen Biennale a "historical turning point". Two significant reasons for this claim appeared in the first exhibition catalogue. On the one hand - as an exhibition and as a newborn cultural institution - the Biennale tried to gather together, for the first time in Shenzhen, a generation of intellectuals

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2   The first Shenzhen Biennale took place from 10 December 2005 to 10 March 2006.

3   Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

4   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee, Chanh, Y. H. (eds). (2007). *City, Open Door! 2005 Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture*. Shanghai: People's Publishing House, p. 110.

5   Among the countries represented: US, South Korea, Canada, Singapore, Germany, Austria, Japan. From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

6   Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

and "ground-up architects […] deeply rooted in cities", characterized by a "common sensitivity" towards different (economic, technological, aesthetic and social) issues of the contemporary world (Lefaivre 2007, 49). On the other hand, the active involvement of such figures implied a broader interest in the city (and notably in the Asian city) as a whole, which was not intended solely as a production/consumption engine, but as a complex system of spatial and social relations where architects are called upon to react.

As stated in the first official exhibition catalog, "the 2005 Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture aimed to extend architecture's integral relationship to the common and extraordinary daily living processes of the city such as shopping, dressing, eating, playing, learning, thinking and building"[7]. To address this objective, Yung Ho Chang defined his operation as a "Cross-Over curating", a critical and reflexive thinking which involved architects, economic and regional planners, sociologists, social and political activists. This assumption seems relevant considering the Biennale's nature, claimed by its organizers not as an archetypical, global showcase but rather as a platform to display and understand social, urban and architectural issues directly related to the rapid urbanization process investing Shenzhen and its context.

The name of the exhibition clearly stated the interest in the city as a whole, and in the potential of urbanism and architecture in connecting different societal issues through research and spatial transformations: since its inception, the Biennale claimed to be the first exhibition in the world expressively dedicated to the topics of Urbanism and Architecture. The intentional adoption of the mark "\" as a conceptual and typographic connector marks interrelation between the two themes. As Huang[8] underlines, the choice of the mark came from the programming DOS language: it implied "the idea that architecture belongs to cities and the discussions should be made under the context of cities", suggesting an ancillary and mutual depending relation between the two disciplines[9] .

2.1.2 Opening Up the Zone

Besides the general statement, the exhibition's inception seemed a sincere tribute to Shenzhen, in alignment with the pervasive narration that has accompanied the city since its inception. The motto *City, Open Door!* coined for the 2005 Biennale referred to the "Reforms and Opening Up" strategy, which made possible the birth of Special Economic Zone (Chiu 1987; O'Donnell, Wong and Bach 2017; Du 2019).

It is acknowledged that Shenzhen's origins lay in the attempt - made by Chinese Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping - to face the post-Mao economic paralysis. Following the examples of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan (1966) and South Korea (1974), in 1979 the Party Central Committee announced the intention to set up four "Special Export Zones" in the south of China - Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen. By August 1980, it had established three "Special

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7   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee, Chanh, Y. H. (eds). (2007). *City, Open Door! 2005 Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture*. Shanghai: People's Publishing House, p.97.

8   Interview with Huang Weiwen. 5 November 2018.

9   "In the whole globe we just knew biennials for art and architecture but Shenzhen and China the challenge on how to make a better city is more important than discussing architectural issues. We thought to make a biennial for cities, for urbanism. That's why we named our Biennial Urbanism\Architecture: urbanism is more important than architectural issues in Shenzhen Biennial. This is about Shenzhen." Interview with Huang Weiwen. 5 November 2018.

Figure 2.4_The 10-meter-wide, 30-meter-tall image of Deng Xiaoping which has contributed to epitomize Shenzhen as the "Deng's Dream". The billboard hosts Deng's quotation: "Adhere to the Party's basic line for one hundred years with no vacillation". The billboard has changed throughout time: the current version, elaborated in 2004, is a digitally-generated collage whose background displays the juxtaposition of local landmarks (Du 2019). Source: https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2017/08/memory-of-deng-xiaoping-strong-in-shenzhen/.

Figure 2.5_The centre of Luohu under construction in 1981, with Shenzhen's original landmark building, the Guomao (International Trade). The construction of Guomao gave origin to the expression "Shenzhen Speed" and it was a destination for Deng Xiaoping on his 1992 Southern Tour. Source: South China Morning Post.

Economic Zones" (SEZs) in Guangdong Province close to Hong Kong border; Shenzhen was the largest among them, covering an area of 327.5 square kilometers[10] (Blackwell 2013, Bach 2017a). With "cheap land, cheap labour and low taxes" (Zhang 2008, 42), these enclaves represented for Chinese Communist Party leadership potential solutions in attracting foreign exchange capitals and technology, preserving at the same time the prominent features and ideologies of Communism.

The Biennale's birth date was consistent with this overall narrative: the exhibition officially kicked off 25 years after the establishment of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone as a test-bed for "a cautious experiment with market reforms" to foster China's re-emergence onto "world's stage" (Du 2019, 5-6). The event's experimental approach paralleled the pioneering character of Shenzhen itself: as underlined by Vogel (1989), Shenzhen Special Economic Zone acted as a test-site to rehearse - and possibly export - reforms both in the Country and abroad. Shenzhen was situated in a favourable position, able to attract investments both from overseas Chinese and global economic players like Hong Kong and Taiwan: its strategic location - relatively far from the institutional, governmental centralization of Beijing - contributed to inject to the area the feature of an experimental planned operation[11].

The narrative of openness has fueled the whole city's history as a "Window of the World" since its inception (O' Donnell, Wong and Bach 2017). The architectural association with the threshold as a spatial and conceptual connector has positioned the zone/window as a double-edged element, able both to welcome the gaze and to act as a lens to observe in turn. In this perspective, Shenzhen acted both as a "temporal" and "spatial" threshold – connecting China's past and future stages of development, and mediating domestic and international economic spaces (Bach 2017a, 29). The objective was to fulfill its function both as a model for the rest of China and a virtuous example for the rest of the world, at the "forefront of that country's efforts at integration with the world economy" (Ng and Tang 2004a, 193).

A similar narration of exchange has nurtured the establishment of the 2005 Shenzhen Biennale. Adopting the tropes of the global biennial exhibition seemed a logical choice for Shenzhen to pave the ground for a layered experiment. The exhibition intended to act as a pioneering discursive threshold to showcase and observe the striking urbanization phenomena that invested the Pearl River Delta Mega-cities during the last decades. The Biennale has jumped into domestic and international scenes as a platform connecting a culturally peripheral city with the global intellectual community through a flagship event - and as a popular festival for the non-professional audience[12].

On the one hand, setting up of the event aimed at interlocking both the ambitions for a global reach ant the desire to reaffirm Shenzhen on the national and regional level as a pioneering cultural hub. On the other, setting up a festival for the local scene gathering a critical mass of ideas, in a city always in the making, represented a powerful instrument in the hands of the municipal government.

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11   As Liauw (2009, 1371) underlines, through the two paramount Deng's "Southern Tours" in 1979 and 1992, the central government instrumentally set up Shenzhen as "prototype for both economic and urban reforms [...] to experiment and succeed or fail". Thanks to its attitude, Shenzhen "developed faster [...] than other Chinese cities" and could position itself "at the forefront of new urbanism in China".

12   According to the Biennale organisers, "this multi-disciplinary international exhibition seeks to render remarkable conditions of the contemporary city to the normal viewer [shedding lights on] the ongoing cultural phenomena in Chinese architecture and urbanism". The exhibition aimed at Through communicating "professional content [...] in a way that is easily grasped and appreciated by non-design professionals and urban residents alike". From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

2.1.3 Investigating the Zone

The interest in positioning Shenzhen both as the scene of an international exhibition and as the investigation object came when urbanisation phenomena investing Pearl River Delta area gained growing relevance. A vast array of scholars (Du 2019; Bach 2017a; Bach 2017b; O'Donnell, Wong and Bach 2017, Hu 2020) investigate today what the propaganda conventionally portrays as the "miracle city", the megalopolis which sprouted overnight stemming from small fishing villages and rice fields [13].

"Shenzhen Miracle", "Time is Money, Efficiency is Life", "Dare to be the first" and "Shenzhen Speed" are just some among the expressions which describe the exceptional condition of a city whose pace seems all-encompassing in "its urban intoxication, its inexorable nowness, its multi-overlapping fantasies of progress, promise, and peril" (Bach 2017b, 138). Harvard GSD study *Great Leap Forward: Harvard Design School Project on the City* (Chung et al. 2002), co-led by Rem Koolhaas between 1996 and 1997, oriented the attention of international audiences to China's rapid urbanisation and production of cities as realms of indetermination and pace - where every action could be possible through policy and planning. Notably, the study focused on Pearl River Delta as a fertile research field for what would have been later labelled "Big Bang urbanism" (Chung et al. 2002). The impetuous growth of Southern China's cities revealed their layered essence both as generic fields - where buildings act as "floating signifiers" (Koolhaas 1995) - and highly competitive environments striving to emerge on the global scenario, differentiating each other "through accidental and self-organising strategies of "Exacerbated Difference" (Liauw 2009, 1371).

Shenzen and its speed epitomise such dualism. On the one hand, the city's reckless urban growth (Harris 2017) matches the notion of "Generic City" explored by Koolhaas (1995), who described the "hyperurbanism" of tropical metropolises as "amoral and pragmatic, free to start again whenever it desires". On the other hand, the same frantic pace positions the city as a territory of exception. In *Junkspace*, Koolhaas (2002 in Liaw 2009, 1370) pushed further his previous considerations about the Generic City, defining its "lack of uniqueness as a virtue" where "absence is a vacuum always needing to be filled, reworked, redefined". In this framework, as Bach (2017a, 24) underscores, Shenzhen progressively emerged as "one of the leaders of a fast urbanism that came to re-define the image of the new Asian City".

The creation of an exhibition tackling issues related to urbanism and architecture acquires even more relevance if one considers the event's initiators. The 2005 Shenzhen Biennale is a direct emanation of the Shenzhen Urban Planning Department, sponsored by Shenzhen City Government and organised, among others, by the Shenzhen Planning Bureau and Shenzhen Cultural Affairs Bureau[14]. The governmental decision to set up a recursive exhibition aimed at investigating Shenzhen's urban phenomena needs to be contextualised thus against the backdrop of the unprecedented urbanisation involving the SEZ (and Chinese cities at large) during the

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13   For a general overview Shenzhen's history and, notably, for a *remise en question* of some of its founding myths, see O' Donnell, Wong and Bach (2017) and Du (2019).

14   The exhibition was sponsored by Shenzhen City Government and organised by Shenzhen Planning Bureau, Shenzhen Cultural Affairs Bureau, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen Press Group and Shenzhen Media Group. The "guiding body" of the event was the Chinese Architectural Association, the Chinese Urban Planning Society and the Hong Kong Society of Architects. The "coordinating body" was represented by the Shenzhen Cultural Industry (International) Exhibition Co. Ltd and the OCT Contemporary Art Center. From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.
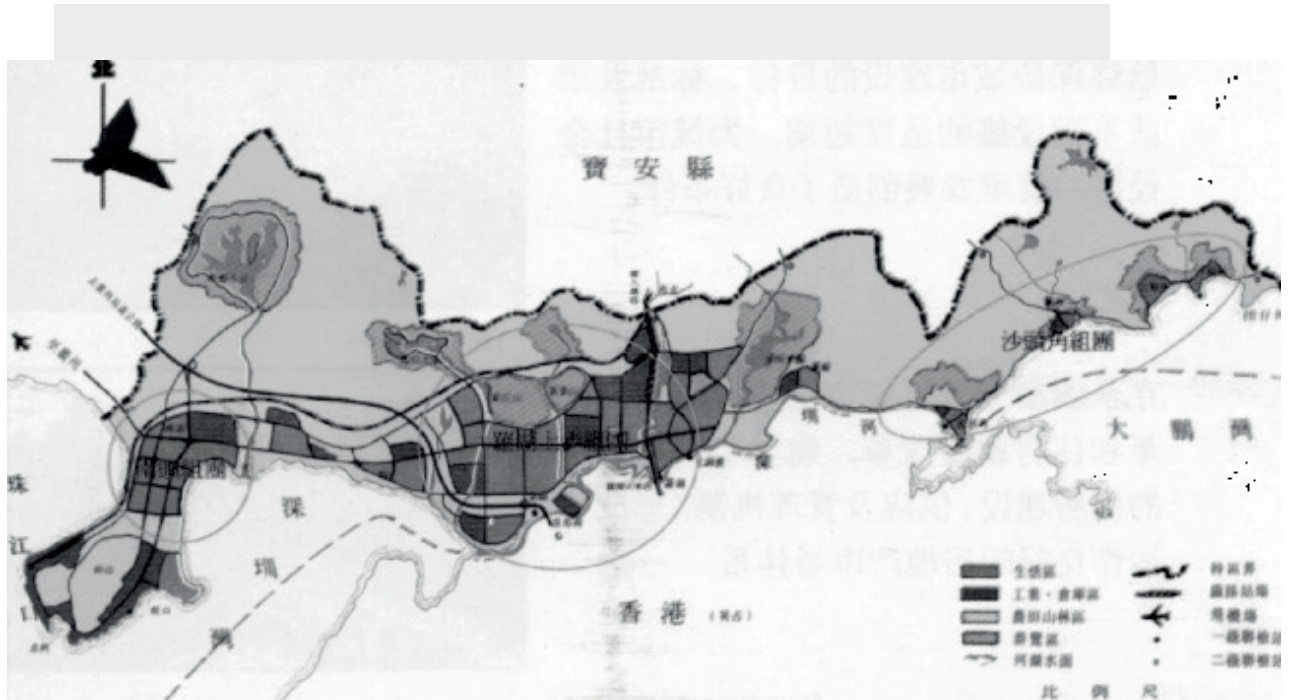
Figure 2.6_1982 Shenzhen Master Plan, elaborated by Shenzhen Municipal Government.
Source: http://www.isocarp.net/Data/case_studies/2162.pdf.
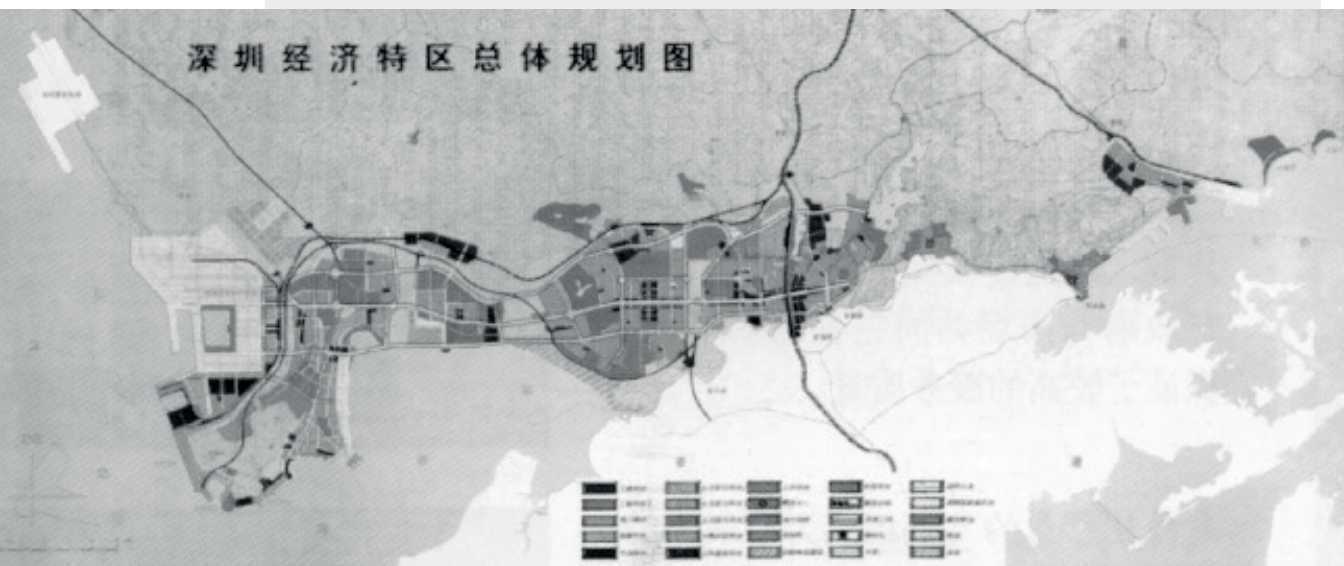
Figure 2.7_19992 Shenzhen Master Plan, elaborated by Shenzhen Municipal Government.
Source: http://www.isocarp.net/Data/case_studies/2162.pdf.
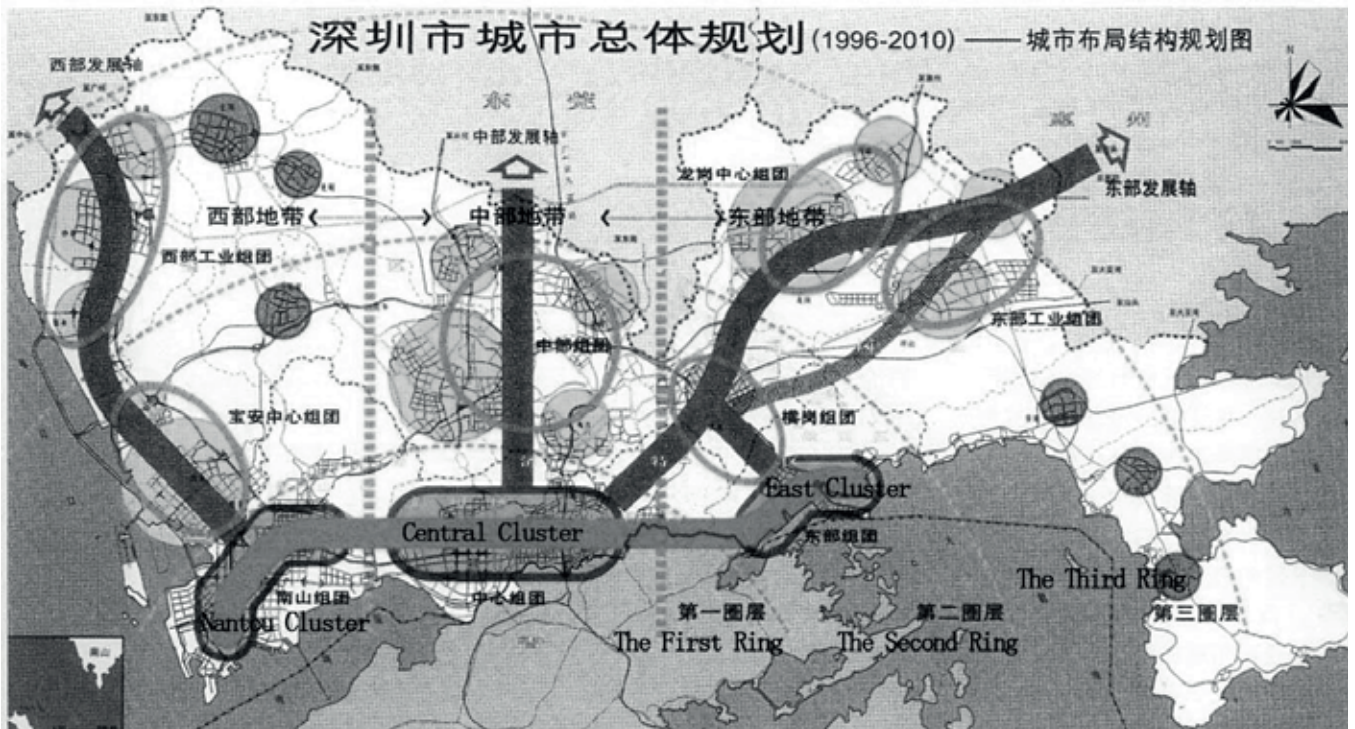
Figure 2.8_Shenzhen Master Plan 1996-2010, elaborated by Shenzhen Municipal Government.
Source: http://www.isocarp.net/Data/case_studies/2162.pdf.
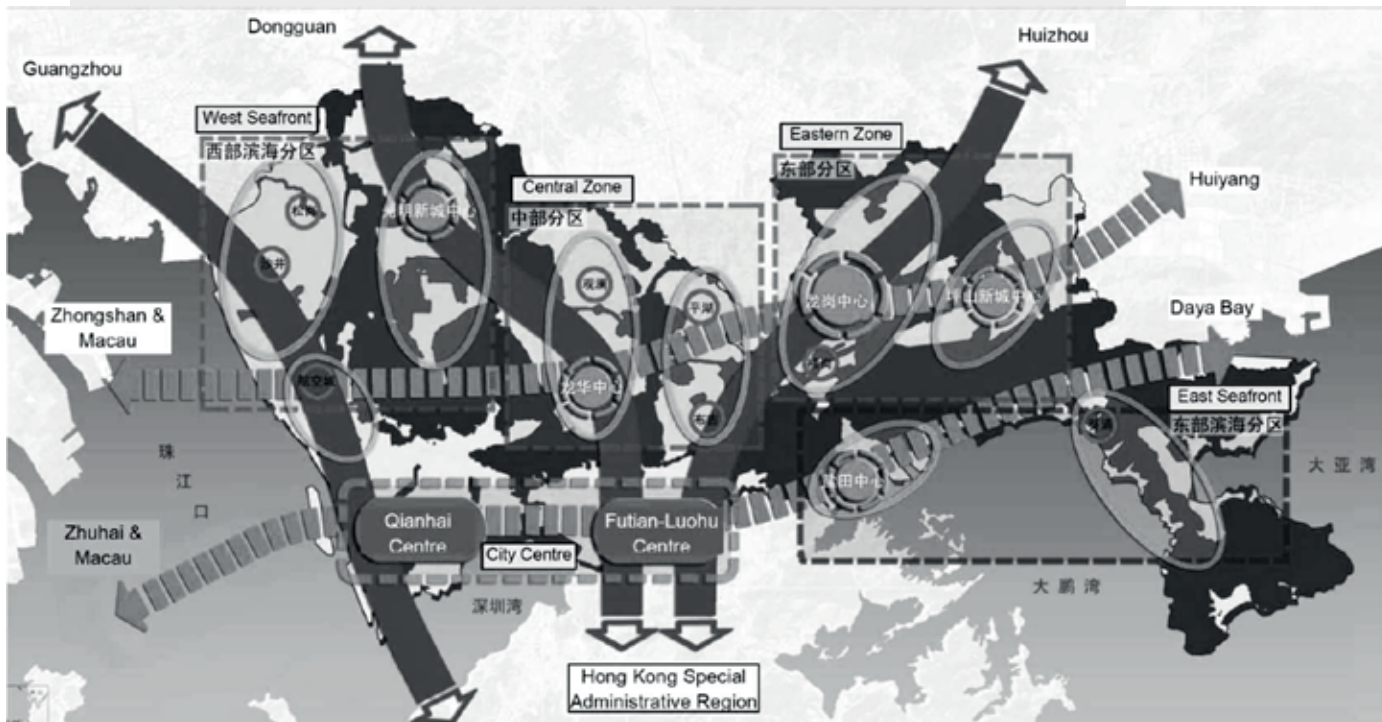
Figure 2.9_Shenzhen Master Plan 2010-2020, elaborated by Shenzhen Municipal Government.
Source: http://www.isocarp.net/Data/case_studies/2162.pdf.

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last three decades (Campanella 2008; Altrock and Schoon 2013; Ren 2013; Wu 2015). In this context, planning, urban design and architecture have been a powerful experimentation domain, often instrumentally used to materialise aspirations and initiate a new urban paradigm for post-reform China. As Huang (2017, 65) points out, three decades after its inception, Shenzhen "exploded", averaging a 12 per cent annual population growth; the most prominent feature of this growth, yet, is the rate of building construction and the scale of construction.

Four urban plans and four main phases - which the Biennale has intersected, trying to adopt a critical gaze - have gradually contributed to reshape both the physical aspect of the city and its imagined and shared visions[15]. The 1982 Master Plan focused on the development of the city through the realization of "relatively independent clusters [...] connected but functionally separated". The model changed towards a more integrated vision with the 1986 plan, which propelled the implementation of a "modern special zone city with a focus on urban manufacturing": the 1996 plan envisioned the city metamorphosis towards the "global city" status, while the 2010 plan directed Shenzhen's collective images towards a modern technological and financial global hub Huang (2017, 65). To this path, one should add the vision propelled by the recent 2020 Master Plan, which enhances both the regional and global competitiveness of the SEZ, fostering sustainable urban development and advanced technologies.

The speed of Shenzhen's development allowed the city to re-orient its economy - and physical shape - with each comprehensive urban plan, adjusting its (both imagined and real) construction according to different contingencies. In this perspective, Ng and Tang (2004a, 195) underscore that rhetoric and imagination have played a relevant, instrumental role in reshaping and accommodating different "development realities of Shenzhen over time"[16]: each plan embodied the "consolidation of Shenzhen as an entity that could be directed and and deployed in order to achieve social order and economic goals" (Huang 2017, 66).

Shenzhen has interiorized this attitude by adopting rhetoric and visions according to a double-edged strategy. On the one hand, the city has attempted to affirm its "global shift from labour-intensive manufacturing to knowledge-based economies"; on the other, it is possible to observe its ambition to compete for "the ever-growing array of zones within China vying for both domestic and foreign attention" (Bach 2017a, 30). Bach (2017a) retraces an inherent "civilising mission" in the constant remaking of the city's identity. In the 1980s, Shenzhen was constructed to be an export-oriented and manufacturing zone, exploiting its special status and proximity with Hong Kong to attract both domestic and foreign capitals. To keep pace with domestic and global structural changes, throughout the years, Shenzhen undertook a logic of adaptation. Small-scale manufacture factories turned out to be less profitable due to the increase in labour costs: as a consequence, high tech, services, logistic and other kinds of emerging industries gradually gained ground as economic and spatial actors in the city[17].

In 2005, when the first Shenzhen Biennale took place, Shenzhen was a bustling 25 years old city conventionally "started from scratch" (Florence 2017) and depicted as a land of opportunities. According to Huang Weiwen, the Shenzhen Urban Planning Bureau started to reflect on the city's reckless growth and continuous spatial restructuring[18]. Wang Peng - the then head of Shenzhen's Planning Department - was "not satisfied with the local professional scene for architecture" : the need emerged to establish a platform to "push communication" on relevant urban issues involving the city (Huang 2014, 7). The Biennale was one of the answers,

Year	Planning document
Phase 1: 1980–1985 • Rapid development of domestic economic linkages • Outward processing industrial activities	
1980 **1981–1985** **1982** **1982**	Draft Master Layout Plan Sixth Five-Year Plan Shenzhen Socioeconomic Outline Plan (SSEOP) The First Master Layout Plan
Phase 2: Mid-1980s to mid-1990s • Export-oriented economy through attracting foreign direct investment • Economic restructuring toward high-tech and tertiary-sector development	
1986-1990 **1986** **1989** **1991–1995**	Seventh Five-Year Plan Second Master Layout Plan The Comprehensive Report on Modifications of the Second Master Layout Plan Eighth Five-Year Plan and the Shenzhen Socioeconomic 10-Year Development Plan
Phase 3: Mid-1990s - 2010 • Planning control extended as Longgan and Bao'an Counties were turned into Districts within the Shenzhen Municipality in 1993 • A need to reinvent Shenzhen in the face of mounting competition within China and in the global economy	
1993 **1995** **1996–2000** **1996** **2000** **2001–2005**	Review of Master Layout Plan started. Municipal Government approved the Outline for Modifying the Shenzhen Master Layout Plan Ninth Five-Year Plan Draft Third Master Layout Plan Third Master Layout Plan approved by the State Council Tenth Five-Year Plan
Phase 4: 2010-2020 • Following a sustainable development path • Promoting regional development, enhancing socio-economic restructuring to address environmental resource constraints • Pursuing the city's global competitiveness as an experimental site for integrated reforms to develop a "circular" economy based on green industries • Boosting Shenzhen as a reference urban node for high tech industries and cultural heritage • Privileging qualitative rather than quantitative spatial changes • Fostering the cooperation with Hong Kong in the "One Country, Two Systems" framework • Promoting Shenzhen's role as an infrastructural hub	
2006 **2007** **2008**	Surveys on public opinions rom October to December 2006 Discussion fora from December 2006 to April 2007. The Plan was publicly exhibited from May to July 2007 The Plan was sent to the State Council for approval

Figure 2.10_Tab comparing the main planning phases delineated by Shenzhen Master Plans and the propelled urban rhetoric. Source: Ng and Tang (2004), Ng (2011).

aiming at questioning (and potentially addressing) "urban problems and actual policies"[19]: by tackling "economic, social and cultural sectors, and systematically solving the city's problems, there [was] a need to engineer an art platform wherein scholars and professionals as well as the general public both from home and abroad can exchange views on urban and architectural issues"[20].

Since its inception,the Biennale can't thus be conceived separately from the relevance planning in Shenzhen, both as a research platform and as an instrument to potentially re-orient urban policies. In the "Curator's Message", Yung Ho Chang recalled the main issues, or "phenomena", to explore within the exhibition's frame. Some of them tackled planning issues and architectural practice in the evolving context of Chinese urbanisation, which has resulted in the "collective unconsciousness of planning practice". According to Chang, "the unconditional acceptance of existing planning guidelines" has progressively led to the "repetitive of certain urban qualities and even the re-occurrence of certain problems, such as object buildings which are environmentally confrontational and isolated". From this considerations, the "city image is perceived as a means of advertisement": the exhibition represented thus the occasion to develop evolving planning criteria "from the economic growth model towards the livability model"[21].

A seemingly comprehensive planning attitude has narrated, reshaped and reinvented Shenzhen throughout its history. Architecture and urban design quality are now seen by the Shenzhen government as complementary to the rigid masterplans - which become quickly outdated due to the rapid development of the city (Liaw 2009, 1372). They drive today the cityscape's spectacularization: the regulatory use of planning is strongly linked to the representational role of architecture in materialising the narratives driven by public and promotional discourses that articulate an ideal image of the city (Cartier 2002).

As Liauw (2009, 1372) asserts, "a powerful forward-looking and risk-taking Planning Bureau [...] has been organising regular design competitions in the fields of urban design, architecture, landscape and urban regeneration" over the years: public projects by contemporary Chinese and international architects have been paralleling the production of vast commercial and residential developments. Together with planning, architecture plays a significant role in fostering the pioneering character of Shenzhen, epitomizing, Shenzhen epitomises the entrepreneurial neo-liberal Chinese city (Blackwell 2013 and Wu 2015). Urban and architectural projects commissioned through design competitions include buildings designed by Arata Isozaki, Coop Himmelblau, Rem Koolhaas, Hans Hollein, Steven Holl, Chang Yung Ho, Massimiliano Fuksas, Norman Foster, Kisho Kurokawa, and Mecanoo: "iconic" architecture and planning represent a necessary tool for both public and private actors to consolidate their status (Sklair 2017).

As Cartier (2002, 1514) underlines, "a blend of design styles characterises many of these signature development projects", representing a material basis to observe how local aspirations for representation interlock with economic powers: they serve as "both representations of national legitimacy and internationalised economic leadership associated with contemporary Chinese transnationalism". Such projects show the planning and architecture's imbrication in addressing the "world-class city" requirements that Shenzhen aims at embodying and displaying: the Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture fits in this frame, as an trans-scalar instrument addressing both global and local ambitions.

2.2 Global Dimension: feeding the "world class city" narrative

2.2.1 Setting up a global stage

The Biennale Organising Committee formalized the choice of Yung Ho Chang (at that time Director of the Architectural Research Centre of Beijing University) as Independent Curator on 28 June 2005, during a public meeting in Shenzhen's Planning Tower[22]: appointing such an internationally-renowned intellectual figure mirrored the effort of the newborn Biennale in building a critical perspective on contemporary urban phenomena that are investing Chinese cities.

Nevertheless, it is possible to detect a dualism in such an attitude. On the one hand, the curator aimed at carrying on a critical and investigative mission. On the other hand, city officers, in the promotional claims of the Media Release, seemed less concerned about setting up a critical/discursive platform, and more keen to reinforce the narrative around Shenzhen as future world-class city through a big, international event. The official communication of the Biennale clearly pointed out this objective, affirming that it was "crucial [for Shenzhen] to maintain the role of a pioneering city"[23]. This is evident also in the Biennale self-definition - in the words of the official propaganda - as the *first* biennale dedicated to urbanism and architecture. The Biennale initiators were not confident with the western-centric "biennale format"[24]: in its initial phase, the event aimed at "summing up the construction achievements of [the city as a] resume and illustration of [Shenzhen's] urban development". The *City, Open Door!* theme, divided in the three sub-topics "Open Policy", "Open City" and "Open Attitude", epitomized this intention: Shenzhen - and its achievements throughout 25 years - acted as a lens to observe the urban phenomena investing Chinese cities at large[25]. The theoretical framework established by the event in its recursivity, moreover, aimed not only at summing up and showing a 'state of the art' every two years: as stated in the exhibition statement, the Biennale's vocation was to "find new ideas from the two years' thinking [...] both showing works and collecting the researches"[26]. Setting up a method to investigate the city is an aspirational status that still permeates today every edition of the event: to differentiate the Shenzhen Biennale from the rest of other -ennials exhibition worldwide; but also – and arguably - to keep affirming the pioneering position of Shenzhen as an experimental test-bed for urbanization.

Critic and scholar Shi Jian (2006, 81) declared "symbolic" that on 6 December 2005

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22 From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

23 From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

24 "When we talked about of the biennial all the officers never had heard about the biennials. We discovered them, also architecture students read some magazines of Venice biennial, but we never visited biennials when we started it. We borrowed the name and the form, but we need some opportunities to discuss our problems and our questions: that's why we set the Shenzhen Biennale" Interview with Huang Weiwen. 5 November 2018. See also Huang (2014, 6).

25 "Delving through economical, social and cultural sectors, and systematically solving the city's problems, there is an urgent need to engineer an art platform wherein scholars and professionals as well as the general public both from home and abroad can exchange views on urban and architectural issues". From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

26 From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

(four days prior to the inauguration of the first Shenzhen Biennale) the Shenzhen Planning Bureau held a conference to announce the *Shenzhen 2030 Development Strategy* (Ng 2008), which stated the strategic objectives for Shenzhen's development in the coming 25 years. The initiative set the long-term objective to affirm Shenzhen as a pioneer city in "reforms, opening-up and system innovation; [as a leader of indigenous innovation and industry transition; [as a] promoter of Shenzhen-Hong Kong cooperation; [and as a] forerunner of China's participation in global competition" (Shi, 2006, 81): the first 2005 Biennale can be perceived "as a platform to demonstrate Shenzhen's aspirations for 'recreating glory' after having experienced 25 miraculous years of over-speeding development" (Shi, 2006, 81).

Liauw (2009, 1372) underlines how the city has been trying to move "from its generic past, towards prototyping new urban models in an unknown and post-generic future" in two ways: on the one hand, through the experimentation within a neo-liberal market-driven economy; on the other, by upgrading the quality of its architecture and urban design. The setting up of a new kind of exhibition proved to be instrumental in building such narrative. Over the span of 14 years and 8 editions, the Shenzhen Biennale has managed to enter the global circuit of cultural exhibitions: despite its relatively young history, in 2019 the web platform Archdaily defined the event "the most interesting architecture Biennial in Asia" and inserted it among the 11 biennials to pay attention to in 2019 and among the most influential architecture events of 2019, next to well established international events (Valencia 2019a; 2019b).

2.2.2 Acquiring a growing relevance

The eight editions of the show have gathered an increasing number of curators and actors: contextually, the event became more and more international.

The 2005 Biennale in OCT-Loft post-industrial precinct officially marked the entrance of Shenzhen on the global stage of recurrent mega-exhibitions. The first edition in 2005, welcoming over 30,000 - mainly domestic - visitors, featured one Chief Curator, Yung-Ho Chang - Chinese, yet internationally well-known and both domestic and international exhibitors.

The worlding aspirations of the exhibition undertook a significant step in 2007: ten year after 1997 Handover, the neighbouring city of Hong Kong joined the event which will be called since then UABB Shenzhen-Hong Kong *Bi-City* Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture[27] and will be since then organized as "one theme, two sites"[28]. While the Shenzhen exhibition was housed in Nanshan's OCT-Loft post-industrial site, its Hong-Kong twin (themed *Refabricating City*) was displayed in former Central Police Station historical venue and featured Wang Weijen as chief curator. The exhibition in Shenzhen, curated by Ma Qingyun and themed *City of Expiration and Regeneration*, staged 138 exhibits and hosted 70,000 visitors. The 2007 edition proclaimed itself as the edition which epitomised the idea of an "organic part", a "people's collection"[29]: Ma Qingyun was accompanied by a constellation of domestic and international co-curators (Yuyang Liu, Peter Zellner, Charlie Koolhaas, Chen Zhanhui). The international attitude of the

27 Italic mine

28 The two biennials set themselves as a collective project featuring a common leading theme. Yet, they are developed and managed independently under separate organizing committees, sponsor and curatorial groups (Huang 2014, 6).

29 From Shenzhen Biennale 2007 Manifesto. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

exhibits   visitors

82
30,000
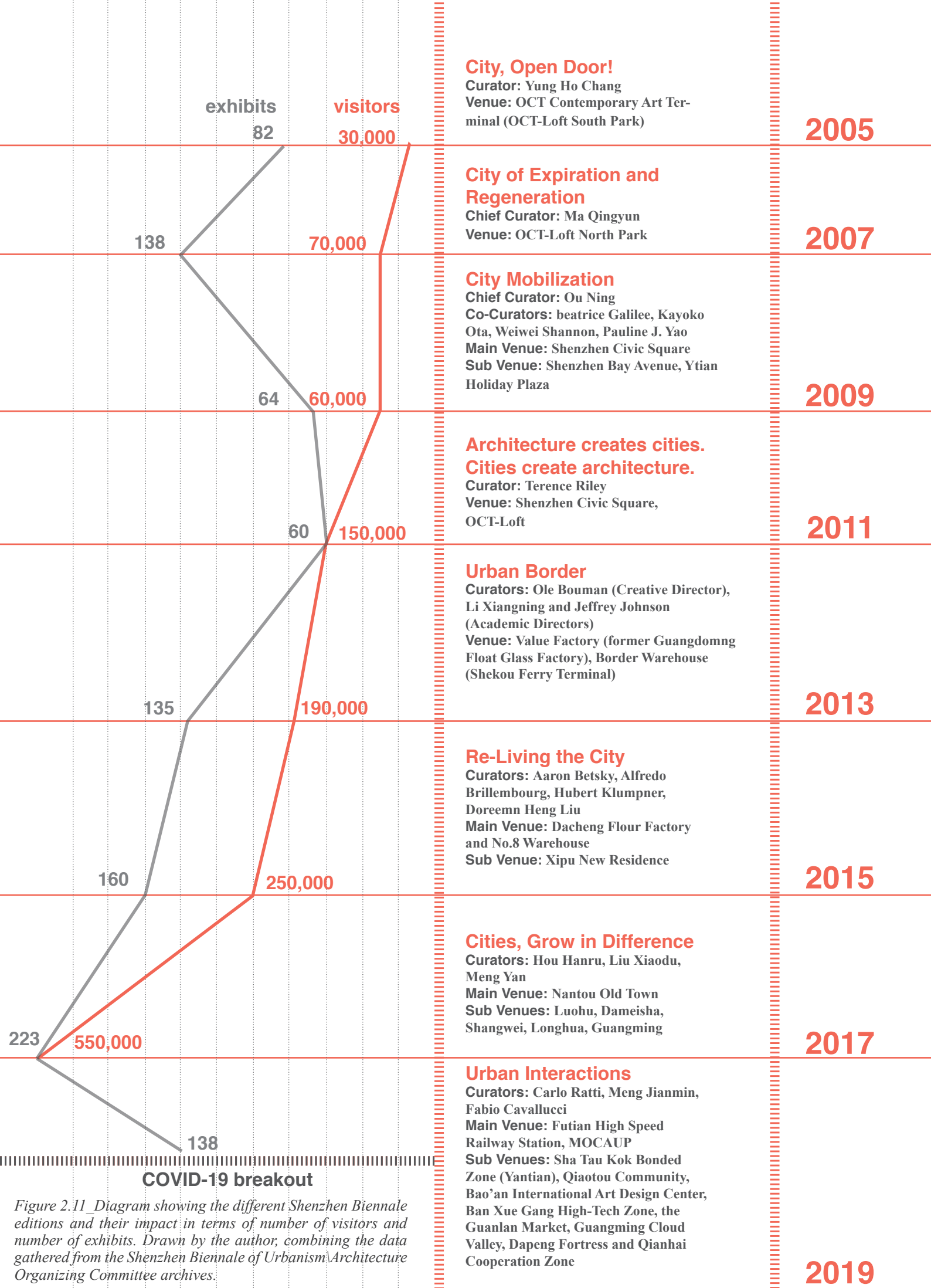
City, Open Door!
Curator: Yung Ho Chang
Venue: OCT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCT-Loft South Park)

2005

138
70,000

City of Expiration and Regeneration
Chief Curator: Ma Qingyun
Venue: OCT-Loft North Park

2007

City Mobilization
Chief Curator: Ou Ning
Co-Curators: beatrice Galilee, Kayoko Ota, Weiwei Shannon, Pauline J. Yao
Main Venue: Shenzhen Civic Square
Sub Venue: Shenzhen Bay Avenue, Ytian Holiday Plaza

64   60,000

2009

Architecture creates cities. Cities create architecture.
Curator: Terence Riley
Venue: Shenzhen Civic Square, OCT-Loft

60   150,000

2011

Urban Border
Curators: Ole Bouman (Creative Director), Li Xiangning and Jeffrey Johnson (Academic Directors)
Venue: Value Factory (former Guangdomng Float Glass Factory), Border Warehouse (Shekou Ferry Terminal)

135   190,000

2013

Re-Living the City
Curators: Aaron Betsky, Alfredo Brillembourg, Hubert Klumpner, Doreemn Heng Liu
Main Venue: Dacheng Flour Factory and No.8 Warehouse
Sub Venue: Xipu New Residence

160   250,000

2015

Cities, Grow in Difference
Curators: Hou Hanru, Liu Xiaodu, Meng Yan
Main Venue: Nantou Old Town
Sub Venues: Luohu, Dameisha, Shangwei, Longhua, Guangming

223   550,000

2017

Urban Interactions
Curators: Carlo Ratti, Meng Jianmin, Fabio Cavallucci
Main Venue: Futian High Speed Railway Station, MOCAUP
Sub Venues: Sha Tau Kok Bonded Zone (Yantian), Qiaotou Community, Bao'an International Art Design Center, Ban Xue Gang High-Tech Zone, the Guanlan Market, Guangming Cloud Valley, Dapeng Fortress and Qianhai Cooperation Zone

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COVID-19 breakout

Figure 2.11_Diagram showing the different Shenzhen Biennale editions and their impact in terms of number of visitors and number of exhibits. Drawn by the author, combining the data gathered from the Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives.

2019

event can be retraced also in the diffused system of conferences (named "international forums") that the Biennale has set up both in China and abroad.

If 2005 and 2007 editions represented the necessary injection for the consolidation of the Biennale as a cultural institution, the 2009 and 2011 editions marked a further shift. Themed *City Mobilization*, the 2009 exhibition advocated for citizens' social engagement. An articulated spatial structure began to take shape, mutating the well-rehearsed 'out of the white cube gallery' approach, diffused across the city, adopted by other biennials worldwide. The exhibition was staged in three different locations: Shenzhen Civic Square[30] as a Main Venue, and Shenzhen Bay Avenue and Yitian Holiday Plaza as Sub Venues. By appearing and disappearing in different areas of the city, ephemeral installations temporarily colonized the urban space of the koolhaasian "generic city" epitomizing Shenzhen both as stage and event: an international pop-up carnival, and "an entertainment gala that engages all citizens"[31]. In 2011, *Architecture Creates Cities. Cities Create Architecture* was the first edition curated by a non-Chinese figure, American architect Terence Riley. The edition represented the legitimacy for the event to become a stable actor in the global circuit of recurrent exhibitions. Spatially, the principle of extraterritoriality undertaken in 2009 was repeated by staging the exhibition in two main venues: Shenzhen Civic Square and former industrial compound OCT-Loft became the theater of an urban festival gathering 60 participants from all over the world and welcoming 150,000 visitors.

The 2013 and the 2015 editions, titled *Urban Border* and *Re-Living the City*, represented respectively the start and the consecration of the event's (and of Shenzhen as a world-class city) ambitions. In 2013, the former Guangdong Float Glass Factory, managed by he State Owned Enterprise China Merchants' Group, was converted in the Value Factory cultural hub. As stated by the Dutch curator Ole Bouman, the 2013 Biennale undertook a real international turn. It did not function as an exhibition in the literally sense of the term; rather, it was a platform gathering professionals and contributions both from mainland China and all over the world, aspiring to become "a vehicle […] for real change"[32]. Moreover, for the first time, the event established a direct trans-national partnership with foreign cultural institutions such as Ney York Museum of Modern Art, the Sao Paulo Architecture Biennale, the MIT Center for Advanced Urbanism, the MAXXI Architettura museum in Rome, the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, the Het Niewe Instituut, the Berlage Laboratorium, the Museum of Finnish Architecture, the Victoria & Albert Museum[33]. Again in Shekou, in 2015 another neglected industrial building managed by China Merchants Group - the Dacheng Flour Factory - was transformed into an exhibition venue. The Biennale curatorial approach, under the theme *Re-Living the City*, became even more international. Four curators formed the leading team (Aaron Betsky, Alfredo Brillembourg, Hubert Klumpner and Shenzhen-based architect Doreen Heng Liu) while diverse domestic and international co-curators covered a vast set of roles. Moreover, 2013 and 2015 marked also a shift in the Biennale editorial outreach.

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30 The exhibition in Shenzhen Civic Square was spread across two venues: the Civic Square and the Underground Space underneath the Civic Square.

31 From Shenzhen Biennale 2009 Curatorial Statement. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives

32 From the Shenzhen Biennale 2013 Opening Press Release. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives

33 See Chapter 4.

Besides the domestic publications, international specialized publishers began to embrace the editorial spread of the event concerning exhibition catalogues, exploiting the transnational network of international curators: Dutch publishing house Archis issued the 2013 Biennale catalogue, *Urban Border*, while Barcelona and New York-based Actar publisher distributed and promoted the 2015 Biennale volume, *Re:Living the City*.

The 2017 Biennale, curated by Hou Hanru, Liu Xiaodu, Meng Yan and themed *Cities, Grow in Difference* epitomized the trans-local attitude of the exhibition. For the first time, the event staged one of Shenzhen's Urban Villages (*chengzhongcun*), underlining the constitutive essence of the city as a layered space of coexistence between top-down, extensively planned spaces and its informal areas. The 2017 edition represented a twist for the Biennale, being the most visited edition with over 550,000 visitors. The theoretical and curatorial framework tackled and brought to the global stage an issue which has been broadly explored by both Shenzhen's municipal officers and cultural circles. The spatial configuration of the 2017 edition exhibition, moreover, marked a further step towards the affirmation of the Biennale as an urban event. The interlocking between the local reality of Shenzhen's informal enclaves, the bold spatial configuration of the event (hosting 223 among domestic and international exhibitors and performing 380 public education activities) and its broad promotional infrastructure, made the exhibition officially entering the global circuit gaining full international recognition.

In 2019, internationally renowned architect Carlo Ratti was among the curators of *Urban Interactions*, focusing on the relationship between technology and the city. The international character of the event manifested itself through the adoption of an "open curatorial" system which gathered over 60 exhibitors from all over the world and enhanced an extensive debate on the online platforms Archdaily and *e-flux*[34].

In all the editions, the Biennale portrayed Shenzhen's role as increasingly paradigmatic in front of international audiences. In 2005 e 2007, Shenzhen has been observed as a local and national phenomenon. In 2009 and in 2011, this dimension broadened. The 2013 edition marked new interpretative paradigms for Shenzhen, depicted as a creative city able to set up international strategies, while in 2015 Shenzhen was presented as an experiment of radical urbanism to trigger trans-scalar reflections expanded to other realities worldwide. In 2017, an extremely local context has been used as a trigger on the issues of urban regeneration, making Shenzhen case paradigmatic again. Finally, the 2019 edition paralleled the city's increasing affirmation as a global technological hub, stating its role as a locus where urban space and technology interlock

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34   Before and throughout the exhibition, the web platforms *Archdaily* and *e-flux* have launched and promoted a series of articles revolving to Eyes of the City leading themes. Archdaily has gathered worldwide contributions from scholars, historians, academic and practitioners while e-flux has promoted the Software as Infrastructure symposium. See https://www.archdaily.com/tag/shenzhen-2019-bi-city-biennale and https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/308615/software-as-infrastructure/. Accessed 5 April 2021.

2.3 National Affirmation: from 'cultural desert' to 'oasis'

2.3.1 The instrumental role of 'civilization'

Since 2005, the Biennale has strongly connoted Shenzhen's cultural landscape, embodying its tension to the status of 'world class city'. In this framework, yet, Shenzhen's worlding ambitions cannot be disjointed from local aspirations: rather, they form a dense entanglement with national and regional issues.

Notably, the Biennale as a cultural institution is instrumental in pursuing the role of Shenzhen as an outpost of a renewed notion of national, spiritual and material "civilization", which is strongly embedded in the history and in the narrative surrounding the city. King and Kusno (2000, 59-60 in Bach 2017b, 169), notably, refer to "civilization" as a primary mode for cities "to accept, and contribute to, the same urban symbolic language, to participate in the same symbolic economy, to speak in the same architectural and spatial terms, as exists elsewhere in the global economy". As Bach (2017a, 23-24) underscores, yet, the notion of "civilization" embedded in Shenzhen is strongly featured by a national character, as the city "arose specifically against the backdrop of two genealogies of the SEZ". On the one hand, the zone represented a planned economic locus for the global circulation of goods and capital's accumulation; on the other, the zone acted as a "version of the imagination of the modern rational city with an inherent civilizing mission". This notion is apparent in how the city conveys its own narrative and - notably - in its spatial configuration: the second Shenzhen SEZ Masterplan, published in 1986[35], stated that the Shenzhen SEZ "would be built into a predominantly industrial, export-oriented, multi-functional, industrially well-structured, technically advanced, comprehensive economic zone with a high degree of civilization" (Du 2019, 72). As O' Donnell (2017a) underlines, it is possible to observe how Shenzhen image has been shaped since its inception around a cultural construct of the city through a "pervasive narrative of progress, prosperity and urbanization".

Two different yet interconnected channels have been fuelling this rhetoric. On one side, Shenzhen stands firmly as a paradigm to test and inspire reforms[36]; on the other, it constantly needs to renegotiate its cultural identity from the inside. During its earliest years, Shenzhen represented a land to be shaped by pioneers eager to build a new experimental territory. In 1990's, the city was "culturally constructed as a space in which rural and urban youth might realize aspirations for social mobility" (Florence 2017, 98). Workers flocked to Shenzhen not only to look for higher wages than elsewhere in China (Blackwell 2013), but also and foremost to be 'educated', in order to progressively meet the standards required from a new kind of national (and, possibly, international) 'urbanite'.

The notion of "civilization" has been progressively interiorized and adapted as an integrative part of the past, present and future identity of Shenzhen. From being a national requirement, it

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35 The Second Shenzhen Master Plan was refined by the Shenzhen Urban Planning Committee and published in August 1986 as the "Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Master Plan (1986-1990)" to coincide with the release of "Shenzhen's Seventh Five-Year Plan" (Du 2019,72).

36 The relationship between Shenzhen and the Central Government has not always been free from conflict: its role as a model has been often questioned. As O' Donnell (2017a, 54) points out, "'reform' in Shenzhen depended upon post facto recognition by Beijing politicians". The changing of the political situation in central government often made the operations undertake buy Shenzhen's local leaders vulnerable, at risk of being "turned around and reinterpreted as 'spiritual pollution' or bourgeois liberalization".

has undergone a metamorphosis to meet the global standards of the 'world-class city': projected in the knowledge economy, as a fundamental prerequisite to enter the global stage, civilization today goes through a rhetorical, instrumental and regulatory use of culture which crosses global, national, regional and local dimensions.

In contemporary China, the regulatory role of cultural institutions is underlined by Ho (2018, 208): during the Cultural Revolution, politics of display in China had an educational role "to create class consciousness" for the masses as "class education" exhibitions. This kind of display "originated during the Socialist Education Movement (1962–1966) and [...] was mounted by all units, from the village to the city, from the school to the factory". With the transition from a planned economy to a market one, it is possible to observe how traditional socialist notions of culture and cultural policy as propaganda - and a definition of culture relying on Adorno's account of its primarily ideological role (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979) - have increasingly encountered policy flows which presented the cultural industries as a "source of economic growth" (Shan 2014, 115). As pointed out by He and Wang (2018, 2), creative/cultural urban policies in East Asia are "deeply rooted in the Confucian philosophy" and "follow a common path of developmentalism", becoming "an integral part of the broader national and urban development schemes [...] to consolidate and reproduce state power": as a consequence, "cities are converted into sites of propaganda through citizen entitlement and public participation programs, and the general public are immersed involuntarily in state-sanctioned aesthetics" (He and Wang 2018, 4).

2.3.2 Metamorphosis of the City without History: from "cultural desert" to *oasis*

In contemporary Shenzhen, the epitome of the Chinese entrepreneurial city (Wu 2015), civilization also crosses the production and consumption of culture. As Florence (2017) points out, Shenzhen's aspirations aim at positioning the city "at the pinnacle of modernity", epitomizing "the modernist [urban] dream [...] as the ultimately rational, civilizing force in human development". As mentioned above, civilization may represent a useful notion to read Shenzhen and its urban evolution: it represents a trait d'union with one of the last and most striking metamorphosis of the city, notably its recent reconfiguration as a culture-led and service oriented metropolis.

Beside the worlding ambitions, the creation of an aspirational cultural icon such as the Biennale embodies "the open attitude, innovative spirit and exploratory courage of Shenzhen special district"[37] and fuels the path towards the realization of a "world class cultural" outpost with a strong national relevance. A platform where "professional content will be communicated in a way that is easily grasped and appreciated by non-design professionals and urban residents alike", represents a precise declension of this notion. As reported in 2005 Media Release, "the practice of holding such an exhibition, [...] held every two years, is a declaration of building a culture-oriented city and an 'advanced city'"[38].

Shenzhen is conventionally presented as a city grown - in a span of 30 years - from a small

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37   From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

38   From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

group of fishing and rural villages into a bustling megalopolis of over 12 million registered inhabitants[39], whose national legitimacy has been based on frantic economic and spatial growth (Cartier 2002, 1515). The flourishing of industrial economy experienced during the first decades since the foundation of the SEZ led to see the city as a 'dream' of opportunities.

What had always been Shenzhen's pride - being a young city "started from scratch" (Florence 2017, 98) - represented yet a stigma both in the frame of a rich national historical and cultural background, and towards its own increasingly global ambitions. As Zhang (2008, 42) underscores, Shenzhen was "not easily loved by outsiders" out of the boundaries of the Special Economic Zone: business people from the West or from Hong Kong labelled the city as "place for cheap and ambiguous goods and services" and as "Hong Kong's industrial hinterland", while people from Mainland China living in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai or Xi'an considered it as "materialistic, decadent and corrupt". Above all, Shenzhen had the reputation for being "the greatest manifestation of the notion of a 'cultural desert'" (Zhang 2008). The expression "cultural desert" (wenhua shamo) is an conventionally used for the Pearl River Delta area, which is located far from historical, political and cultural centres Beijing and Shanghai (Craciun 2002, 111). A city without history lacks cultural distinction, and Shenzhen's reputation on the national scene was the one of "a city on the make with the new and brash everywhere" (Abbas 2000, 780 in Cartier 2002).

What was conventionally considered as a stigma, yet, has been purposefully exploited by the entrepreneurial attitude of the Zone. The cyclical "elision of the past" (O' Donnell 2017a) - deployed in plans, collective images and official narratives of Shenzhen - allowed the city to reconfigure its position, both discursively and spatially, through a mixture between rhetoric and pragmatism: in this frame, the use of culture - in different declensions, which the Biennale has been able to cross - turned out to be instrumental.

Since 2003, Shenzhen began to plan the development of creative enterprises. Contextually, China started to lay the groundwork for establishing culture-based city strategies linked to the principles of the knowledge economy which had already involved many cities worldwide. As Cartier (2002, 1514) underlines, by contrast to the Maoist era, "cultural amenities and their urban forms" began to find their place in the new Chinese city "as they exemplified shifting state ideologies about acceptable cultural symbolisms and activities". The discourse on the creative city, postulated by Landry and Bianchini (1995) and later consolidated by Florida (2002), represents a mainstream instrumental narrative extensively adopted by many post-industrial European-American-Australia area economies to undertake a decisive economical turn in urban policy (Hesmondhalgh and Pratt 2005, 4 in Kim 2017, 314). In Asian context, as Kong and O'Connor (2009) and Kim (2017) observe, the adhesion to the global "creative turn" trend has taken distinctive declensions in appropriating and reconfiguring global paradigms. Kim (2017,13) underlines that the "creative city" discourse, nurturing many narratives and transformations of contemporary Asian cities, has become "a new strategic urban planning method to reinvent the city as a vibrant hub [...] with the potential to improve the 'quality of life' for citizens": in this sense, it represents a priority in the agendas of policymakers and bureaucratic elites of aspirational worlding cities. According to O' Connor and Liu (2014, 132), such discourse "allowed [cities lacking historical capital] to embrace an open present, a future yet to be determined": this approach "had a strong impact on the development of the design

sector, as indeed it did on the 'non-creative' sectors in Shenzhen".

Although Shenzhen is often depicted as a "city without history", it is possible to retrace some elements that have been crucial in nurturing its reconfiguration towards a peculiar declension of "cultural city" involving both global aspirations and local stances - showing the coexistence of different scenarios of cultural production and consumption.

As Zhang and Parker (2008) points out, in fact, the imagery of Shenzhen as a "cultural desert" can be questioned, since its role as a test-bed and as a pilot zone has been pivotal in a time of profound economical, cultural and societal changes that involved China during the Reforms and Opening Up period. In 2008, the exhibition *Contemporary China Design* at the Victoria and Albert Museum depicted Shenzhen as the birthplace of contemporary graphic design in China, exploiting the package design industry that was flourishing by virtue to the proximity with Hong Kong. The curators' statement presented the city as an experimental locus that, by the late 1990s, attracted generations of design students and well-educated young professionals. Moreover, although Shenzhen's origins conventionally lie upon a flourishing manufacturing activity, , its pioneering role was not limited to the industrial vocation: the Zone as an experiment was intended as a more complex operation, aspiring to test different kind of activities in its civilizing mission (Bach 2017a, Du 2019). Du (2019, 71) underscores that "a comparison between 1982 and 1985 Master Plans shows the city's intention to remould itself from a loose collection of industrial clusters into a *comprehensive city* [:] in addition to industrial zones, the second Master Plan specified land use for commercial, political, educational, and leisure activities"[40].

The subsequent creation of areas of tourism, recreation and consumption - of which the theme park "Window of the World" realized and managed by State Owned Enterprise OCT-Overseas Chinese Town represent one of the most paradigmatic cases - contributed to gradually shape the city as a land of opportunities, nurturing the symbolic power of its transformations; moreover, it would be relevant to add to this frame the role played by existing ancient settlements (Huang 2017, Du 2019) such as historical Hakka residences and villages (O' Donnell, Wang and Bach 2017, Du 2019).

With the transformation of the regional economy, the city has rapidly become a center for business services industry supporting the surrounding manufacturing system of the Pearl River Delta economic region (Cartier 2002, 1515). As Shenzhen expanded beyond its manufacturing zone function - and industries progressively moved inland, away from increasingly costly coastal areas - the city's leadership manifested the need to restructure its economic base (Zacharias and Tang 2010): this shift has accelerated the transition into a 'world' city of business services and high-technology industries, distinguished by international standard architecture and urban cultural amenities. In January 2003, Shenzhen Municipal Government elaborated a strategy to make "a cultural and ecological city" in order to sustain and promote design culture: as a consequence, in 2004, a propaganda campaign began to underline the importance of cultural and creative industries as a way to restructure the city economy (O' Connor and Liu, 2014; Bontje 2014). In this perspective, promoting culture and creativity as key points in urban agenda and policies was functional to meet the standards of a nationally and internationally relevant city profile. The symbolic – and spatial - narrative of the city shifted thus from low-cost/low-tech mass manufacturing towards high-tech, capital-intensive and innovative production (Altrock

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40   Italic mine.

2003, January
Shenzhen Municipal Government elaborated a strategy to make 'a cultural and ecological city' in order to sustain and promote design culture.

2004
Propaganda campaign to underline the importance of 'cultural and creative industries' as a way to restructure the city's economy

2005, December
First Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture

2006
Creation of a dedicated Cultural Industries Development Office appointed to manage the application to become UNESCO City of Design: the Shenzhen City of Design Promotion Association (SZDPA) was established in this framework as a para-governmental and non-profit body commissioned by the Shenzhen municipal government to promote the "City of Design" programme.

2007
11th Five-Year Plan of the city clearly confirmed Shenzhen's ambitions as a creative city: a "Shenzhen Declaration" on cultural and creative industries was one of the most prominent elements of the plan, which presented cultural and creative industries as the "fourth pillar" of Shenzhen's economy. the intention to make Shenzhen "capital of creative design" and a "city of culture" in 2007 was indicated as one of the pivotal points of the initiative.

2007, December
Second Shenzhen-Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture
Director Yan Xiaopei pointed out that "the 2007 Shenzhen Hong Kong Biennale of Urbanism and Architecture is part of an ongoing attempt to strenghten the city's competitiveness and increase its cultural appeal"

2009
Shenzhen was labeled as a "City of Design", the first Chinese city of the UNESCO Creative City Network.

2009
Second Shenzhen-Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture

2011
Third Shenzhen-Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture

2012
12th Five-Year Plan
Promotion of the 2011-2015 Shenzhen Cultural and Creative Industries Revitalisation and Development Plan to support the cultural and creative sector and to create new economic development models

Figure 2.12_Scheme showing the steps that have brought to the definition of Shenzhen's image as a 'world class cultural city'. Drawn by the author.

from desert to oasis: feeding the "cultural city" narrative

and Schoon 2013; Liauw 2012; Coase and Wang 2013; Bontje 2014; Kim 2017).

2.3.4 "Civilization" through Design

According to Shenzhen Government (2020), Shenzhen has set up new approaches in "promoting cultural innovation and the development of cultural industries": this strategy turned out to be successful in obtaining the title of "National Civilized City" for five times. The creation of the Shenzhen Biennale in 2005 represented a consistent part of the strategy that Shenzhen municipality deployed in order to hinder the "City without culture" stigma. The attempt was in line with the urban development ambitions of "building a culture-oriented and well structured city": drawing on the experience of Cultural Expo, the significance of the event also fitted in the overall framework of "building a modern metropolis"[41]. The strategy was supported in the Biennale 2005 catalogue, which underlined the transition from "functional" to "cultural"[42] cities - and the creation of a cultural brand for Shenzhen. The cultural industry sector has become today a pivotal engine for Shenzhen, accelerating the transition of its economy and promoting " its rapid and healthy social and economic development" : the official statistics enthusiastically presents the city as the home of "more than 100,000 cultural enterprises with over 1 million employees" with an added value of "more than 7 percent of the city's GDP" (Shenzhen Government 2020).

Another strategical move undertaken by Shenzhen Government was the creation, in 2006, of a dedicated Cultural Industries Development Office appointed to manage the application to become UNESCO City of Design (O' Connor and Liu 2014, 134): the Shenzhen City of Design Promotion Association (SZDPA) was established in this framework as a para-governmental and non-profit body commissioned by the Shenzhen municipal government to promote the "City of Design" programme.

In 2007, the 11th Five-Year Plan of the city clearly confirmed Shenzhen's ambitions as a creative enclave: the "Shenzhen Declaration" was one of the most prominent elements of the plan, which presented cultural and creative industries as the "fourth pillar" of Shenzhen's economy (Bontje 2014). Notably, the intention to make Shenzhen "capital of creative design" and a "city of culture" in 2007 was indicated as one of the pivotal points of the initiative (O' Connor and Liu, 2014; Bontje 2014). The extensive use of slogans - "Two Cities and One Capital", "City of Piano", "City of Library" and "Capital of Design" mirrors the relevance that government entrusted to the potential of Shenzhen as an outstanding cultural spot (O' Connor and Liu 2014, 134). The ambition was reiterated in the occasion of 2007 Biennale: Yan Xiaopei, Director of the first "Bi-City" Biennale edition exhibition committee in 2007, pointed out that "the [Biennale] is part of an ongoing attempt to strenghten the city's competitiveness and increase its cultural appeal"[43]. Arguably, the event played a major role in the subsequent promotion of Shenzhen as a "City of Design", exploiting the "potential of creative capital to

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41   From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

42   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee, Chang Y. H. (eds). (2007) *City, Open Door! 2005 Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture.* Shanghai: People's Publishing House, p. 68.

43   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (Ed). 2008. *City of Expiration and Regeneration. 2007 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen).* Shenzhen: Shenzhen Press Group Publishing House, p. 2.

transform urban blight" (Papastergiadis and Martin 2011, 45), similarly to what happened in other cities worldwide[44]. Observing Shenzhen's case, Bontje (2014, 57) argues that "in a city that had to be built out of virtually nothing in a few decades [...] specializing in design [was] a logical choice as a next step towards a 21st century creative knowledge economy". The official recognition came in 2009, when Shenzhen was labeled as a "City of Design", the first Chinese city of the UNESCO Creative City Network[45]. In 2012, the 12th Five-Year Plan reconfirmed Shenzhen's national ambitions as a creative city through the issue of the *2011-2015 Shenzhen Cultural and Creative Industries Revitalisation and Development Plan* (Bontje 2014): the strategy was endorsed to support the cultural and creative sector and to create new economic development models (O' Connor and Liu 2014, 134).

The 2005 Biennale Media Release reported enthusiastic reactions to the first edition: *Shenzhen Evening Post* described it as "a citizens' festival"; the oversea Chinese newspaper World Journal praised it as a "Campaign of China"; while Architecture Times and ABBS website selected it as one of the 10 most important events in the domain of Chinese architecture and design[46]. Keane (2009, in O'Connor and Liu 2014) points out that "spiritual civilisation" is an instrumental concept diffused in socialist countries that serves educational and normative functions, and to generate ''soft power'': the creation of the first Biennale in 2005 can thus be contextualized in a nationalizing strategy leaning on the adoption of two global instruments - the creation of a worldwide well-rehearsed institution as a biennial and the UNESCO recognition as "City of Design" - aimed at reassessing the "civilizing" role of the city.

2.4 Regional scale: Shenzhen and the Greater Bay Area

2.4.1 Cross-border relationships and rivalry

The 2005 Biennale edition *City, Open Door!* marked the start of a comprehensive reflection on Shenzhen and the Delta region; however, it was with the 2007 edition *City of Expiration and Regeneration*, curated by Ma Qingyun, that the exhibition became a "Bi-City" event, fully engaging the participation of the adjacent city of Hong Kong ten years after the handover (Naso and Federighi 2021). It is possible to observe the close interlocking of the Biennale's worlding attitudes and regional interests, at the crossroads between Shenzhen's global, national and regional ambitions. 2007 marked a decisive shift for the exhibition: the synergetic relationship

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44   Papastergiadis and Martin (2011, 45) underline how "Liverpool's nomination as the 2008 Capital of Culture was avowedly contingent upon the success of the 2006 Liverpool Biennial: International 06, just as the nomination of Istanbul as the 2009 Capital of Culture arguably rests on the 2005 and 2007 Biennales".

45   Korea, Japan and China emerged in the early 2000s within the creative policy discourse: Seoul, won the World Design Capital 2010 Award and is a member of the UNESCO Creative City Network, along with Yokohama, the host of Creative City International Conference 2009. (O'Connor and Liu 2014). Shenzhen was the first Chinese city in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, obtaining the label in 2009, soon followed by other cities. China accounts today for 12 creative cities: Shanghai (2010), Chengdu (2010), Beijing (2012), Yangzhou (2012), Hangzhou (2012), Suzhou (2014), Zingdezhen (2014), Shunde (2014), Qindgao (2017), Changsha (2017), Wuhan (2017), Macao (2017), Nanjing (2019). Among them, Wuhan, Shenzhen, Beijing and Shanghai are listed as "Cities of Design". https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/creative-cities-map. Accessed 19 April 2020.

46   From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

with Hong Kong epitomized the ambiguous relationship with the former British colony, underlining the ambitions of cooperation and competition between the two cities.

The "Bi-City" shift of the exhibition can be framed in the ambitions which interest the broader Greater Bay Area. Born as economic, political and civilizing experiment strategically located in Guangdong province, Shenzhen has gradually acquired regional relevance. Manuel Castells (2010, 407–10) portraits the city as part of "a megacity in the making" that links several realities in the Pearl River Delta region: deeply embedded in global and regional connectivity, it is significant both for its "economic, technological, and social dynamism" and its potential in "cultural and political innovation."

Througout its history, Shenzhen's pioneering ambitions have always been tied to Hong Kong: the two neighbouring cities have been always been in a reciprocal (political, social and economical) interdependence. Such a relationship has not always been frictionless, defining a dialectical and somehow controversial dialogue where Shenzhen has suffered for a longtime from a subaltern position. Speaking about the mechanisms inherent in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in relation with its neighbouring city, Keller Easterling (2016, 48) defines the SEZ as "a double of Hong Kong", where the former British colony and the new "Reforms and Opening Up" experimental zone have mutually become "doppelgängers".

If, for a long time, this relationship has defined the Special Economic Zone as "'asssembled bit by bit' from Hong Kong" (Bach 2017a, 33), today it is possible to observe a shift in perspective, a progressive "decline of Shenzhen's 'big brother' [...] Hong Kong, as an aspirational model for Shenzhen" (O'Donnell, Wong and Bach 2017, 7). Initially born as a satellite city to attract capital and investments in the shadows of its cosmopolitan and economically ruling sister, over the last decade Shenzhen's narrative of independence in the frame of regional relevance has grown, acquiring a stronger autonomy. The construction of the "worlding" narration of the cultural city and high-tech hub - together with the imagery of the Zone as a pole of attraction for global and domestic investments - has grown in relevance, positioning Shenzhen as a leading character in promoting an updated version of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Shenzhen Government 2021). As Florence (2017, 89) observes, Shenzhen has "catalyzed the political and the economic restructuring of the Pearl River Delta", where single local municipal government are not subjected exclusively to "accordance to a national plan", but rather where competition "to provide investors with land, infrastructure and labor" emerges as a driving force crossing a narrative of integration. This storytelling has gradually acquired a material relevance with the inclusion - and prominent positioning - of Shenzhen as an actor in the Pearl River Delta region and in the Greater Bay Strategy. If Hong Kong has always been a reference point for its neighbouring twin, the narration circulating today encapsulates it in a broader framework: "Shenzhen's 2030 urban development strategy now includes Hong Kong in *its* own plans to become a world city"[47] (Bach 2017a, 33). *Shenkong* is a vision projected in the close future, which sees 2030 as the point where Shenzhen's regional autonomy and pioneering role will be fully affirmed: the urban system formed by the two metropolitan areas will appear "as one extended urban area and common capital market with twin hubs for finance, trade and shipping" (Bach 2017a, 34).

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47   Italic mine.

Guangzhou
Area: *7436 sqkm*
GDP: *$99.1 billion*
Population: *14.04 million*

Zhaoqing
Area: *15006 sqkm*
GDP: *$30.2 billion*
Population: *4.06 million*

Foshan
Area: *3875 sqkm*
GDP: *$25.3 billion*
Population: *7.50 million*

Zhongshan
Area: *1770 sqkm*
GDP: *$46.4 billion*
Population: *3.23 million*

Jiangmen
Area: *54 sqkm*
GDP: *$34.8 billion*
Population: *4.54 million*

Zhuhai
Area: *1696 sqkm*
GDP: *$32.3 billion*
Population: *1.68 million*

Macau
Area: *30 sqkm*
GDP: *$44.7 billion*
Population: *0.64 million*

Hong Kong
Area: *1104 sqkm*
GDP: *$319.3 billion*
Population: *7.37 million*

Shenzhen
Area: *2007 sqkm*
GDP: *$283 billion*
Population: *13 million*

Dongguan
Area: *2512 sqkm*
GDP: *$99.1 billion*
Population: *8.25 million*

Huizhou
Area: *11159 sqkm*
GDP: *$49.5 billion*
Population: *4.78 million*

Figure 2.13_Overview of the Greater Bay Area. Diagram redrawn by the author. Data retrieved from https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/greater-bay-area-una-silicon-valley-cinese-23503

Figure 2.14_Image of the section "Counterpart Cities" at the 2011 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives, ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

2.4.2 Propelling the Bay

The *Shenkong* vision positions itself in a broader perspective. The Pearl River Delta region has undertaken an unprecedented growth over the last four decades, transforming itself into a mega-city (Routley 2018): today, its economic and urban development are at the core of the "Greater Bay Area Strategy". What is termed today as Greater Bay Area encompasses both a geographical and strategical framework: on the one hand, it occupies less than 1% of the total area of the country and hosts 5% of the population; on the other hand, it accounts for 12% of the GDP, contributing to the national economy with US$1.5 trillion (Naso and Federighi 2021).

The publication of the *Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area* on 18 February 2019 publicly announced the Greater Bay Area (GBA) strategy (Hong Kong Government 2019) - which originated from the *Framework Agreement* jointly signed by Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau in 2017 (Chung 2020). Today the strategy, endorsed by Communist Party Leader Xi Jinping (Hong Kong Government 2019, 6), aims at strengthening the cooperation between nine cities in the Pearl River Delta and two cities in the Special Administrative Region (SAR) - Hong Kong and Macao[48]. Seven thematic areas - which constitute the structure of the project - address urban and economic issues, propelling technological innovation, advanced infrastructure connectivity, and sustainable industrial and urban systems (Hong Kong Government 2019). The project's strategic role is relevant both in developing a "world-class city urban cluster" and fostering the competition of the Guangdong - HongKong - Macau area, with other "global cities [...] situated on bays, such as San Francisco, New York or Tokyo" (Cheung 2019 in Naso and Federighi 2021, 180). The strategy aims at giving a pivotal role to the region in "advanced manufacturing, innovation, shipping, trade and finance" by 2030 (KPMG, HSBC and HKGC 2018). As underscored by Chung (2020), the development of a story-telling plays a major role in nurturing the innovative potential of the initiative: the Greater Bay Area emerges as a cultural construct "prior to its material realisation", positioning itself "as a novel urban system, a *milieu* for innovation-driven high-tech manufacturing, where an aspirational network of smart cities is to come into being" (Naso and Federighi 2021, 180).

2.4.3 The 'Biennale' Narration

The role of civilisation and its narrative power come again into play. The *Outline Development Plan* describes the initiative as a "civilising" system, where "the level of social civility should reach new heights, with cultural soft power demonstrably strengthened" (Hong Kong Government 2019, 10). Once again, the spiritual role of civilisation sets the basis for the construction of a "world class" city cluster" of regional relevance, where Shenzhen would ideally play a pivotal role. While it was officially proclaimed in 2019, the Greater Bay Area can be observed as the consolidation of a longer process of regional identity construction. The Biennale fits again in this narrative: according to Shenzhen Government (2020), the role of design and creativity is pivotal in "building a regional cultural core city" in the framework of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area development.

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48   Zhuhai, Shenzhen, Dongguan, Huizhou, Guangzhou, Zhaoqing, Foshan, Jiangmen, Zhongshan, Macau and Hong Kong, mentioned as "the nine Pearl River Delta (PRD) municipalities" (Hong Kong Government 2019).

It is possible to observe how, from 2005 to 2019, the "moments of growth" of the Bay, and the "perception of its potential", have found in the eight editions of the Biennale a mouthpiece. The event has contributed to shed light on Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta as the centre of researches and projects "reflecting the wide-ranging themes addressed in the Greater Bay Area Outline" (Naso and Federighi 2021, 183). The exhibition has gradually set up a "discursive threshold" - through curatorial texts, official promotional statements and the selection of the exhibits - on the most relevant issues which features Shenzhen's development in the Greater Bay Area framework, stressing "the pioneering role of the city in the future possible scenarios for the region" (Naso and Federighi 2021, 185). The event has broadly explored the Pearl River Delta region "as a nonlinear, multiscalar and multidimensional phenomenon, in terms of infrastructure and transnational connectivity, the geopolitical and ecological dimensions of the bay, the urban scale of the city of Shenzhen" (Naso and Federighi 2021, 185). Different editions of the exhibition have observed the cross-border linkage between Shenzhen e Hong Kong, underlining Shenzhen's relevance in the above-mentioned dialectical cooperation/competition relationship and its regional pivotal role.

In 2007, the Hong Kong Biennale curatorial team and the Shenzhen General Institute of Architectural Design and Research jointly curated the project "A Pictorial Illustration of Two Cities: Hong Kong and Shenzhen": the exhibit represented the "One Country, Two Systems" structure by displaying contrasting scenarios of the two urban areas, underlining the complexity - and potential controversies - which the increasingly blurred notion of "boundary" entails[49].

The narration of the potentials embedded in the Hong Kong - Shenzhen relationship continued in the following Biennale's editions. In 2011, the dedicated "Shenzhen and Hong Kong" section displayed the "Counterpart Cities" bi-city system[50] (including and shedding lights on the strategical node of the Bay) as a political, social and ecological network: Shenzhen and Hong Kong are promoted as "counterpart cities" in a framework of cooperation, as interdependent and necessarily collaborative urban systems[51]. In 2013 the theme of the border emerged once again in the need "to synchronize with Hong Kong [...] to reinvent the [PRD] economic formula based on labour-intensive industrial production and upgrade to a service economy" (Oosterman 2014b, 3).

In 2015, the section "PRD 2.0" assessed the role of Shenzhen in the Pearl River Delta Region as a "pilot region for China's rapid urbanisation" (Liu 2016, 359) undertaking radical transformation. The system is presented at a "crossroad", opening perspectives of crisis (polarisation of socio-economical inequalities and ecological risks) and opportunities, contextually projecting an holistic perspective of "balance and experimentation" (Liu 2016, 362). The power of storytelling is strong: it positions Shenzhen - a network of globalised and local dynamics - at the centre of the region, with the ambitious aim to "balance economic development with social and ecological health" (Liu 2016, 363).

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49   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (ed.) 2008. *City of Expiration and Regeneration. 2007 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen)*. Shenzhen: Shenzhen Press Group Publishing House, p.79.

50   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (ed.) 2014. *Architecture Creates Cities. Cities Create Architecture. 2011 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen)*. Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, pp. 134-185.

51   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (ed.) 2014. *Architecture Creates Cities. Cities Create Architecture. 2011 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen)*. Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, pp. 150-153.

The extensive narrative deployed by the Biennale has increasingly paralleled and fuelled the aspirational leading role of the city in the regional context. The Chinese megalopolis is the object of a vast reform plan elaborated by the central government to transform the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) into a "pilot demonstration area for socialism with Chinese characteristics" and a new domestic "sci-tech innovation hub" (CCTV 2020). The plan, "jointly issued by the general offices of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council", embraces the period 2020-2025 as a time span to promote innovation through the integration of industry, university, research and development strategies. In this framework, the role of Shenzhen is meant to increase in "carrying out market-based economic reform, improving market and legal environments for global businesses, building a high-level open economy, providing service for people's livelihood, bettering the ecological environment, and urban space", to let the city play a key role in building the Greater Bay Area as a global innovation centre (Shenzhen Government 2020).

2.5 Urban dimension: hard branding, spatial manipulations

2.5.1 A city of landmarks

As seen throughout the chapter, Shenzhen's cityscape represents the testing ground for urban cultural policies pursuing a civilizing mission in a worlding framework. Its multiple re-configurations epitomize both "evolving processes of urban formation and how cultural and economic spheres intersect with transnational forces in the construction of the new city" (Cartier 2002, 1514). Observing some of the recent cultural reconfigurations recently undertaken by Shenzhen, it seems that a multi-faceted notion of 'culture' is gradually reshaping many portions of the cityscape. The shift towards the knowledge economy has resulted in the profusion of "new exhibition and consumption spaces [...] to the city's repertoire of functional sites" (Hall 2006 in Daniels, Ho and Hutton 2012, 6) with the mushrooming of cultural venues and their related spatial transformations (Sun 2019).

According to Shenzhen Government (2020), throughout the years the city has set up a strategy "of building a city of culture", through the promotion of a "coordinated development of spiritual and material civilization". The strategy includes the reinforcement of a "public cultural service system": the city housed in 2020 673 public libraries, 52 museums and memorial halls, 11 art galleries[52]. The creation of a worlding cultural framework reached with the recognition of UNESCO "City of Design" intertwines a local and national ambitions: in 2013, the city obtained the title of "Global Model City for the Promotion of Mass Reading" and in 2016 it was included in China's ten "cities of digital reading".

Many initiatives have been undertaken by private stakeholders in nurturing the creation of cultural venues, capitalizing on the well-rehearsed "Bilbao Effect" (González 2011). The use and display of cultural landmarks and venues bolster the symbolic power of Shenzhen: both

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52   According to Shenzhen Government (2020), the realisation of another set of ten cultural venues is "in full swing".

public and private initiatives pursue the planned imaginary of a 'cultural (re)birth' of the city, following governmental policy guidelines and intersecting the entrepreneurial vocation of the SEZ.

The Central Axis of Futian Central Business District - which has housed so far three Biennale editions in 2009, 2011 and 2019[53] - is highly representative of the aspirations of Shenzhen institutional powers to set up a strong cultural vocation for the city. As the backbone of the Central Business District, the axis connecting Lianhua Mountain and the Futian Convention and Exhibition Centre is a highly symbolic pivotal node bonding political, economical and cultural institutions. Shenzhen Civic Centre, representing the governmental institution and hosting the Shenzhen Museum, stands in front of Civic Square as a solemn and spectacular stage for public cultural facilities such as the MOCAUP - designed by Coop Himme(l)blau - and the Shenzhen Cultural Center - designed by Japanese architect Arata Isozaki - while commercial/cultural *promenades* are surrounded by financial institutions, office buildings designed by international architects and residential functions.

A 'cultural attire' is some time instrumentally exploited as a catalyst to activate urban projects with the leading guide of real estate developers. One of the most renowned case is the above-mentioned OCT-Loft area, which housed the Biennale in 2005, 2007 and 2009[54]. The site epitomizes the interlocking of consumption and cultural experiences in the "non conventional" approach undertaken by Shenzhen in "industrial restructuring through the cultural turn" (Liauw 2012, 205). Capitalizing on the rough appeal of a former industrial area in Nanshan District and developed by the State Owned Enterprise Overseas Chinese Town (OCT), the cultural and creative cluster designed by the Shenzhen based firm URBANUS is now "a major hub for […] designers to mix in a post-industrial chic environment, surrounded by cultural tourism and theme-driven real estate" (Liauw 2012, 210). The cluster positions itself as a part of a broader urban context which has been progressively re-shaped through real estate operations, cultural facilities (including the Chinese Art Centre, the He Xiangning Art Museum and the OCAT-OCT Contemporary Art Terminal), commercial and leisure spaces, and tourist attractions.

In other cases, the joint cooperation between a developer and an international cultural institution have led to 'franchise' experiments. The Sea World Culture and Arts Centre in Shekou, Nanshan District, designed by Fumiko Maki and Associates and completed in 2017, reflects this tendency. Engulfed in the commercial and leisure site Sea World, the complex is the result of a partnership between the China Merchants Property Development (CMPD) - a branch of the State Owned Enterprise China Merchants Group - and the Victoria and Albert Museum. The project intends to combine museum functions, public space and retail. The entanglement of consumption experiences, exhibition venues and learning spaces, through the promotion of initiatives and events, aims at enhancing "the interplay of activities in and around the facility" and nurturing "the cultural interests of Shenzhen and beyond"[55]. Moreover, Shekou area has housed two different editions of the Biennale in 2013 and 2015, which led to the renovation of two derelict industrial buildings: the Guangdong Float Glass Factory and the Flour Factory:

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53   See Chapter 6.

54   See Chapter 4.

55   https://www.archdaily.com/885148/shenzhen-sea-world-culture-and-arts-center-maki-and-associates-not-ready. Accessed 17 July 2020.

Figure 2.15_The Shenzhen Stock Exchange, designed by the Rotterdam-based architecture firm OMA - Office for Metropolitan Architecture and inaugurated in 2013. © OMA.

Figure 2.16_The Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Planning Exhibition (MOCAPE) designed by the Dutch architecture firm Coop Himme(l)blau. ©Coop Himme(l)blau.

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both the intervention were patronized by the China Merchants Property Development[56].

The list could be much longer: many of Shenzhen's administrative districts seem to have adopted these trends, realizing spectacular cultural and exhibition venues and involving international renowned designers, by competing each other in the attempt to affirm their position in the city. The Pingshan Performing Arts Centre and Longgang Cultural Centre, for instance, epitomize such attitude. Respectively completed in 2018 and 2019, they position themselves at the core of newly urbanizing areas in peripheral locations of the city. Pingshan Performing Arts Centre, designed by Beijing-based office OPEN Architecture, was announced in 2015 as the first theatre planned for the newly-developed Pingshan area[57]. Longgang Cultural Centre, designed by Dutch architects Mecanoo, stands as a self-defined "urban connector" (embedding an art museum, a youth centre, a science centre, and a book mall) realised in a rapidly urbanizing area of Longgang district, between a Hakka residence and a commercial and business district. In both cases, the buildings aim at acting as "catalysts" to inject a cultural (and commercial) appeal to developing areas suitable for future middle-class residents: such venues often position themselves as pivotal points of the site, re-configuring its imaginaries, spatial imprint and functions.

The Shenzhen Biennale conveniently fits in this framework: in 2011 the "Shenzhen Builds" section curated by Terence Riley promoted the city as China's "leading position in the world as a laboratory for urban and architectural experimentation". In the exhibition's narration, the buildings realised in the city over the last decade - and displayed through the event[58] - perpetuate Shenzhen's role as a civilising outpost, "setting international standards for each of their respective building types[59].

2.5.2 'Happening' the cultural city

Beside the 'hard' spatial manipulations brought about by flagship projects and urban cultural policies, the legitimation of Shenzhen as a cultural outpost goes also through a 'soft' capillary infrastructure. Events and temporary practices nurture the image of a vibrant municipality: by occupying urban space, such actions enhance patterns of spectacularisation and cultural consumption which intersect different fabrics of the city. As (Bontje 2014, 62) underlines, a vast set of yearly or bi-annual events - of which the creation of the Shenzhen Biennale represents one of the most outstanding elements - represents an important part of Shenzhen's branding strategy as a creative city. Festivals mushroom in diverse strategic areas of the city: such initiatives, often undertaken by the municipality, aim at fostering the cultural spirit of the city in line with the ambition to make the city a cultural 'oasis'.

In 2020, the municipal government issued the "Shenzhen Cultural Innovation Development Plan" to set up "a batch of iconic international cultural brands" in the city. The plan positions the "Shenzhen City Culture Menu" as one of its pivotal elements, promoting "representative cultural events" to display the city's "cultural achievements" (Shenzhen Government 2020). These initiatives are instrumental to position Shenzhen as a cultural outpost, in line with the grand narratives of the 'world city'. The China (Shenzhen) International Cultural Industries Fair (ICIF)[60] is one of the best known of those events, together with the annual Shenzhen

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60   The City of Shenzhen claims that the China (Shenzhen) International Cultural Industries Fair is "the No.1 exhibition of Chinese cultural industries" (Bontje 2014, 62)

Design Week and the China Design Exhibition, the Public Art Design Exhibition regularly held at the Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning (MOCAUP), and the Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale.

Beyond big institutional moves, a set of initiatives contribute to nurture the image of Shenzhen as a vibrant locus for cultural and consumption experiences by blending global and local lifestyles. The Huaqiangbei Digital Art Festival puts emphasis on the local culture of digital makers, which has made Huaqiangbei neighbourhood an internationally renowned technological enclave (Deng 2019). The Shenzhen Fringe Festival, initiated 2010, acts similarly by setting up "its main stage in public streets and squares", blending "arts into people's daily lives" and aiming at creating a space "beyond hierarchy and borders" (Chen 2018b). Other initiatives are promoted by private and corporate institutions. The "Go! Community Festival", as well as the "Makers Fair", are held in the expat-friendly Shekou neighborhood and are promoted by the newly created cultural institution Design Society, while the Creative Market is housed in OCT - Loft area. In other cases, festivals focus on the re-shaping and on re-imagining of local cultural identities: the Shenzhen Craft Beer Festival housed in Baishizhou, for instance, combines the informal setting of Baishizhou Urban Village with the aspirational global lifestyles of domestic (and cosmopolitan) consumers.

2.5.3 Consuming and producing culture: a new creative class

The development of Shenzhen's cultural and creative sector, in which the Biennale can be contextualized, has been reinforced also by another paramount factor: the consumer revolution in the Chinese urban society has rapidly led to the emergence of a new social layer that mirrored the close interlocking between state and market. In this perspective, Wang (2001, 70 in He and Lin 2015) points out how the introduction of cultural economy policies by Chinese state has led to the conversion of cultural capital into economic capital, observing that "political, cultural, and economic capital in post-1992 China now emerge as interchangeable terms of value". Since its inception, Shenzhen had the ambition to attract young and well-educated professionals: the emergence (and consolidation) of a strong, urban educated middle class represents nowadays a paramount feature to pursue the aspirational status of 'world class city'. This principle can be applied also to the creative and cultural sector, where it is possible to retrace the presence and of a so-called 'creative class' – notably young educated professionals with an international background (Bontje 2014)[61].

As Sonn et al. (2017) underlines, the huge demand for houses - related to the city's rapid growth when the population arose from several thousand to 13 million[62] over the course of three decades - increased the offer of design services such as architectural and interior design, furniture, and decorative art design. Contextually, a growing number of start-ups and some of the largest IT companies in Shenzhen demanded advertising, web design, and other design-related services. Moreover, the city's status as an experimental economic zone and its proximity to Hong Kong strongly influenced its ability to attract talents, young artists and designers - who

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61 Bontje (2014) expresses a skeptical attitude concerning the apparently frictionless relationship between the image of Shenzhen as a creative city and the emergence of a locally rooted creative class.

62 Shenzhen's official population has been estimated in 13 million; nevertheless, the actual population could surpass 20 million (He 2020).

Figure 2.17_The Overseas Chinese Town Art and Design Gallery, designed by the Shenzhen-based architecture firm URBANUS. ©URBANUS.

Figure 2.18_Shenzhen Sea World Culture and Arts Center, designed by Maki and Associates.©Maki and Associates.

set up small firms, and could learn from different international advanced practices.

It is also possible to retrace the emergence of an urban educated middle class – sophisticated, able and willing to pay a premium for quality - that considers discretionary goods and not just basic necessities. As Ho (2019, 127) argues, this latter segment of public represents an economically privileged urban elite which "is not particularly aligned with the state's interests in Chineseness or political patriotism: they can be more easily identified as 'culturalists', 'utilitarian art learners', 'social learners' and [...] 'aesthetic cosmopolitans'" (Sassatelli 2011, 23 in Ho 2019, 127). In Shenzhen, today, this new generation of cultural producers and consumers detains the symbolic and economic power to experience and mold the cultural outreach of the city, representing a link between the civilizing ambitions of the governmental policies and the entrepreneurial sector (Blackwell 2013, Bontje 2014). By establishing transnational relationships, they embed a "micro-cosmos of diverse cultural identities" interlocking "political culture, tradition, and contemporary culture driven by global forces, the cultural industry and mass consumption that are in operation in Shenzhen" (Ho 2019, 136).

As Sharon Zukin (1995, 113) notes, "culture today [...] responds to the [...] demands of many collective patrons who compete over both the definition of symbols and space to put them": it represents an "agent of change [,] a tool of material civilization". Images and imaginary have an ambiguous role: they represent the basis to set both a "collective identity" for the city, and economical speculation for tourist and real estate market. As Bach (2018b, 160) underlines, "proper consumption" through the developing of "proper taste" is one of the ways through which the new generation of Shenzhen's urbanites can acquire civilization. Beside representational ambitions, in fact, culture represents today a large segment of consumption. In Shenzhen, an entrepreneurial declension of 'civilization through culture' emerges at the crossroad between cultural production and consumption, influencing modes and spaces through which culture is diffused, commodified and made 'spectacular'.

The Biennale embraces this trend: self-labelled both as a "popular festival" and as "entertainment with high taste"[63], the exhibition positions itself as a multi-faceted object. Global ambitions of putting Shenzhen 'on the map' - together with the aspirations to set up a critical framework in observing urban transformations which are investing China and Shenzhen - are the key pivotal points which drive the efforts in promoting the event. In the Biennale, as in other ephemeral practices happening in the city, space acts not just as a simple background: its temporary occupation is functional both to integrate and enhance the spirit of such initiatives, and to spectacularize/celebrate the city itself.

2.6 A strong regulatory framework

2.6.1 Between narration and reality

Both permanent and ephemeral uses and production of space - contextualized in the urban cultural policies undertaken by Shenzhen - depict a portrait of a city where the notion of culture

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63   From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

is a layered concept.

On the one hand, an institutionalized use of culture drives the global narrative of the city through the 'cultural/creative' policy making. The emphasis on the appeal of an internationally renowned 'biennale' label parallels the construction of a 'worlding' cultural space through state and corporate-sponsored, top-down actions: such initiatives aim at shaping the notion of 'cultural city' in a saleable form, closely tied to tourism and consumption, as a way to enhance the ambitions of powerful urban actors. On the other hand, it is possible to retrace the interlocking with another notion of culture, closely tied to the local urban sphere and leaning on its existing cultural capital. The Biennale festival tries to establish a close relationship with the city in a popular event which is not strictly relegated to the architectural disciplinary domain; rather, it aims at involving a broad public made by local and international audiences. In this frame, the Biennale appropriates the notion of 'culture' to operate spatial manipulations in the city, epitomizing the ambitions to relate with the ordinary and existing urban dynamics and spaces, re-imagining and reinventing local culture. This multi-faceted notion of culture represent the coalescence and coexistence of different systems that contribute to depict a diversified ecology, constantly oscillating between the narrated city and the real one.

2.6.2 Setting the Biennale instrument

In this framework, it is relevant to remark the strongly top-down character of the Biennale. Shenzhen Municipal Government is listed as the main initiator and sponsor[64] of the event in all the official communications, while Shenzhen Urban Planning Bureau lies at the background of every edition of the exhibition. According to Huang Weiwen, the Urban Planning Bureau is a powerful actor in Shenzhen, since it is in charge of the definition of the development plans of the city and can influence a vast array of the real estate projects investing Shenzhen. Moreover, it has played several relevant roles throughout the planning and implementation processes led by the Biennale: firstly, development ideas were largely generated within this organization; secondly, it often served as mediator between the actors involved; thirdly, it was the coordinator of the projects[65].

The inception of the first Biennale started on 27 July 2005 with the 5th conference of Shenzhen Municipal Government presided by the then Shenzhen Mayor Xu Zongheng. In the *Report on the Structural Problems of the First 2005 Shenzhen Biennial Urban and Architectural Exhibition*, submitted by the Urban Planning Bureau, the council approved the exhibition. It was decided that the event would be held in the name of the Shenzhen government, while the Planning Bureau and Cultural Bureau would lead the "experiment"[66]. What is relevant to note is the relatively weak evolution of the Biennale's regulatory framework, which has not undertaken significant changes since its inception throughout time. The driving force of the initiative still depends from the Municipal Government and from the Urban Planning Bureau, which are in

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64   Sources of funding are provided by government subsidies and corporate support. The organizer committee is the implementing body. However, the agreement between this year's exhibition and supporting enterprises stipulates that the event shall not be subjected to any commercial influence. From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

65   Interview with Huang Weiwen. 5 November 2018.

66   From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

charge of the financial and public promotion of the event.

In 2005, the Biennale Organizing Committee offices set at the Urban Planning Bureau; in 2007 the offices moved to the Shenzhen Public Art Centre[67]. The Shenzhen Public Art Centre - which replaced the Shenzhen Sculpture Academy in 2009 – and the Shenzhen Centre for Design[68] act together since 2010 with the Biennale Organizing Committee[69] as the main operational organizers of the event, mediating between the independent curators[70] and the two main bodies of Municipal Government and Urban Planning Bureau: since 2012, the organizational structure of the Biennale as it operates today was fully formed.

Besides the steering body, an Academic Committee[71] – initially set up by the Organizing Committee, formed by domestic and foreign scholars and experts in architectural, artistic and cultural circles - operates to strengthen the theoretical and critical framework of the exhibition, giving commentaries on academic-related issues and defining the guidelines for the overall theme of each Biennale edition.

The interdependence between the Urban Planning Bureau and the Shenzhen Biennale strongly characterises the exhibition as an entity fully embedded in the bureaucratic public system. When the Biennale kicked off, the governmental support was essential to set the conditions to support and finance an ambitious event with such an articulated organizational framework. Since the earliest phase of its inception, the Biennale initiators aimed at gradually building an independent institution to foster the creation of a non-governmental organization[72] based on the model provided by the Venice Biennale - and by many cultural institutions leading recurrent exhibitions worldwide. The ambition of pushing the Biennale to the non-governmental system[73], nevertheless, was never realized. According to Huang Weiwen, the intention "to build a long-term sustainable system for UABB" resulted so far ineffective due

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67 Interview with Huang Weiwen. 5 November 2018.

68 Interview with Caizi Xiao, 27 November 2018.

69 As stated in the 2005 Shenzhen Biennale Media Release, "The members of the organizer committee are leaders from the units that sponsor, coordinate and support the event. It is a body that prepares and carries out the work of the exhibition. […] As the decision-making body, the organizer committee has the overall authority over the exhibition projects, is endowed with the mandate to make decisions relevant to the exhibition, examines the plans and funding of the exhibition, and approves or rejects designs submitted according to its policy". From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

70 From UABB 2005 Media Release "The exhibition adopts the international practice of the accountability of independent planners. responsible for submitting the general planning report and implementation details. He has also taken charge of inviting Chinese and foreign exhibitors according to exhibition themes, determining seminar topics and keynote speakers, deciding on exhibiting designs and communication with authors, and for the quality of the seminar topics, designs and speeches. Other areas of his undertaking include collecting exhibitor data, determining exhibit formats, and the overall display design. Additionally, in collaborating with the organizer committee, he is to invite Chinese and foreign guests and engage in publicity. The planners are "experienced and renowned professionals" and are entrusted by the Biennale Organising Committee. From 2005 to 2011 the curators were directly appointed by the Biennale Organising Committee upon selection made by Academic Committee. Since 2013, the appointment of UABB Curators is operated through an international Open Call. From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

71 Members of the academic committee comprise of selected by the organizer committee. From Shenzhen Biennale 2005 Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

72 Interview with Huang Weiwen. 5 November 2018.

73 "When the Biennale was initiated by some officers of the Urban Planning Bureau, we had a long-term vision for the event: a 'step by step' growth towards a non-governmental system. Yet, The leaders governmental leaders and officers change quickly, carrying different ideas. The "bureaucratic" approach of the government towards the exhibition makes difficult for officers in charge to understand the long-time plan for the Biennale: they just see the successful event, they don't want to make any change, they do not fully realize problems and potentials". Interview with Huang Weiwen. 5 November 2018.

Timeline labels:

1991 Shenzhen Sculpture Academy
2007 UABB Organizing Committee Office
2009 Shenzhen Sculpture Academy
2010 Shenzhen Public Art Center / Shenzhen Center for Design (SZDC)
2012 Re-Organization

SHENZHEN PUBLIC ART CENTRE

General Management Department
- Financial
- Human Resources
- Admin. Functions
- Office Support

Exhibition Department
UABB Office

Design Department
SZDC

Art Department
Sculpture Academy

Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale Organizational Structure

Urban Planning, Land & Resources Commission of Shenzhen Municipality
— General Supervision

Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee
Organizing Decision-making

ACADEMIC COMMITTEE
Academic deliberation and evaluation

UABB Organizing Committee Secretariat
Set at Urban Planning, Land & Resources Commission of Shenzhen Municipality

CURATOR / CURATORIAL TEAM
Independent Curatorial Responsibility system

Administrative contact
Financial Supervision

General Management Department
Financial Management
Human Resources

UABB Organizing Committee Office
Set at Shenzhen Public Art Centre

Managing and implementing

Administration Department
Government coordination
Conferences
Contract
Agreemens management
Document management

Branding Department
Press and communication
Publication
Media promotion
Graphic design + other design products
Documentary
Branding
Marketing
Promotional events

Exhibition Department
Exhibition coordination
Venues
Exhibition move in / out
Public Education
Volunteers

Figure 2.19_UABB Organization and Evolution. Drawn by the author, based on the data gathered from the Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives and Volume #54. On Biennials.

to the constant turnover of the public officers in charge of the event's organization. As a result, the Biennale still positions itself today as an institution which strongly depends from municipal government - negotiating with a restricted group of actors. This interdependence implies both opportunities and limits: on the one hand, the direct link with the governmental system, which sees the Biennale as a representational tool, allows the event to operate in a condensed time frame with a privileged status; on the other hand, the same institutional framework might generate tensions and obstacles in assuring the alleged freedom that should be ideally granted to a cultural, open platform. Such an operational system plays a relevant role in defining the agency of the exhibition at the local level, as the next section argues.

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PART TWO

Through the Object

Chapter 3

A City of Fragments: Reading the Biennale's Spatial Narratives

This section represents a methodological clincher: it explores how the research project has observed the Biennale to understand its agency as an urban player, unpacking the multiple relations that the event has been deploying in Shenzhen's cityscape since its inception

Following the conceptualization given by Ong and Roy (2011), Chapter 2 described the Biennale as a "worlding practice" operating across different scales through four interconnected dimensions. It has progressively gained ground as an instrument to reinforce Shenzhen's role on the international scene; as a tool to display the image of the Special Economic Zone at national level; as a locus to promote the city as the new outpost of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" in the strategy of the Greater Bay Area mega-region. Nonetheless, the Biennale reveals - and promotes - its most tangible aspect as an instrument of urban transformation.

3.1 An urban operational device

According to its initiators, through the creation of an international urban brand name, an "*operational device* [has been] set up to [...] boost urban development" which, in turn, will bring about comprehensive benefits"[1]. This self-definition represents a theoretical lens to further sharpen the focus of the research and it sets an explicit association with the conceptualization of "*dispositif*" (device) formulated by French philosopher Michel Foucault.

Foucault (1977, 194-195) referred to the term *dispositif* (or "apparatus") as "a thoroughly

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2005

2007

2009

2011

2013

2015

2017

2019

Figure 3.1_Posters of the different editions of the Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture from 2005 to 2019. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives.

heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical and moral propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid". He also defined the relational network which grows within such an apparatus, connecting diverse discursive and non-discursive elements. He emphasizes the fact that the essential function of the *dispositif* as "formation" is to address "an urgent need" projected in a precise historical moment: it has a "dominant strategic function [in the pursuit of] a strategic objective", which implies a "perpetual process of [...] elaboration". Time and power play a major role in defining the agency of the apparatus: Foucault portrays the device as inextricably embedded in manipulating power relationships, to orientate them in a given direction, to block them or to fix and re-utilize them. Years later, Gilles Deleuze (1989) analyzed the notion of "device", leaning on Foucault's conceptualization. He observed the constitutive character of each device as a multiplicity, in which different processes "under development" operate, highlighting the importance of the fractures and lines that might trigger its innovative potential.

As mentioned above, the Biennale defines itself as a device. What looked like being a merely promotional statement prompted by the Organising Committee actually turns out to be relevant if one focuses on the exhibition and tries to unpack its agency: it is in the urban action of the event and in its interaction with the different fabrics that make up the city that such disposition emerges.

As a cultural governmental infrastructure, the exhibition evokes the device's character in its perpetual evolution and sedimentation: it creates spaces, remoulds urban imaginaries, and, in doing so, sets up a dense network of relations. The peculiar relationship that the Biennale entertains with Shenzhen's local environment makes the exhibition a relevant player in the urban domain: the event addresses the need for international and regional recognition; contextually, it primarily aims to operate spatial actions grounded in the urban fabric, to foster a sense of "locality" and place-based identity for its sites.

It is possible to retrace a double coexistence of intents in the operational disposition of the Biennale: showing and injecting changes in urban space. Throughout its various editions, the exhibition has gradually acquired the power to produce material space within the city by directly acting on its socio-spatial components. Its mechanism, players, relational networks and operational approaches have become more refined and complex over the years, outlining a progressively trans-local dimension which directly impacts Shenzhen's reality.

The event turns out to be a complex object "with Chinese characteristics", entailing the cooperation between professionals such as curators, the municipality and the public. To this picture, one should add the presence of private economic players: this entanglement of material and immaterial relationships directly involves the notion of space in general (as an exhibition of urbanism and architecture), and Shenzhen's urban space in particular. A pragmatical, muscular force parallels the exhibition's theoretical scope. Looking at how the event has evolved from this original starting point, the idea of showcasing urban change has progressively - and literally - shifted towards the overlapping of the Biennale's venues and the surrounding urban context, erasing conceptual and physical boundaries between the cultural container and urban space. Almost every edition of the event is housed in a different location: besides providing a venue for the exhibition, this constant turnover injects and displays the process of urban transformation in each location, which plays a central role in representing the exhibition's themes.

In the most recent editions of the Biennale, the curatorial team actively transformed the exhibition area. The relational and spatial network gradually set up by the event in Shenzhen represents an entanglement where different perspectives and narratives intersect in observing, curating and transforming the city: the event's organizers, curators, participants, public and private sponsors, public and local communities have participated to varying extents in the articulated system of transformations that the Biennale has consolidated over time.

The kind of device represented by the Shenzhen Biennale through its interaction with the urban system, the kind of agency it performs - and how to 'read' it - constitute the core issues of the research, which will revolve around space.

3.2 The spectacular "Biennale City"

The most tangible outcome of the Biennale device's operational function is the production of spatial 'fragments'. The creation of physical space through the exhibition can be observed in the accumulation of sites, installations and architecture which compose an ideal urban realm, a 'Biennale city'.

A growing number of sites have been involved - and physically manipulated - by the event, which has appropriated the narration and in some cases has influenced - implicitly or explicitly - the evolution of these spaces. This process of accumulation[2] has grown through the eight editions of the exhibition, injecting both ephemeral and permanent transformations and drawing attention to an exponential phenomenon of refraction. The exhibitionary architectures created by the Biennale act as an accumulation of 'mini-spectacles', following - as Castle (2015, 5) highlights - the frantic pace regulated by speed and spectacle, the pressure of which requires a prompt response in terms of experience and accumulation in "being more novel and eye-catching".

Observed synchronously, the result is the staging of a 'double', parallel city made up of fragments, which almost composes a 'doppelgänger' of Shenzhen. This double does not strictly act as an 'evil twin' of the existing city: its intentions are aimed more at proposing an idealised and frictionless image of the city by displaying and transforming selected samples of meaningful urban situations, making them exemplary[3].

Fragmentation - entangling and coexistence of multiple elements - strongly characterizes temporary practices, like the Biennale, as hybrid forms. As Laura Lieto (2019, 133) points out, in urban realms, the notion of 'hybridity' "opens new perspectives on the mutuality of society and physicality [positioning itself] in the frictional space between discourses and material processes of urban transformation [and it] is assembled through both local and transnational networks".

2   The 2005 and 2007 editions were housed in one main venue; in 2007, the exhibition occupied one main venue and two sub-venues; in 2009, two sub-venues paralleled one main venue. In 2011 and 2013, the exhibition split into two main venues; in 2015, the event was articulated in two main venues and two sub-venues; in 2017 the main venue was paralleled by five sub-venues; in 2019 a total of seven sub-venues accompanied the two main venues. http://www.szhkbiennale.org.cn/En/default.aspx. Accessed 28 November 2020.

3   I use the term "doppelgänger to indicate, as used in literature starting from XIX century, the "double". I also adopt the perspective proposed by Eran Dorfman (2020) in Double Trouble in observing the shift of the literary figure from Romanticism to Postmodernism. He proposes a view of the "double" which does not necessarily define an "intimidating" twin of the original version, but opens up a perspective on the coexistence of multiple possibilities. As highlighted by Dorfman (2020, 4), "rather than 'threaten' the original, transforms it and extends its boundaries".

These fragments are of different types, created through the actions of different subjects. Curators and the Biennale Organizing Committee produce curatorial and exhibition statements; designers produce site-specific installation projects and architecture; while contractors and developers materially produce the spaces, together with the institutional players who hold the power to regulate their transformation. These fragments form what archaeologist Hilary Orange (2014, 16) calls "material memory", madde up of "the material properties of objects, landscapes, books or indeed monuments or buildings". At the same time, they constitute a spatial archive of the exhibition, which embeds multiple perspectives of observation. They also hold a robust narrative power, which continuously creates and recreates memories and visions of the city through its own staging.

Both the narrative and the spatial imprint of the event have become stratified over time. Born as an urban planning and architecture exhibition, the biennial has progressively evolved into an urban 'catalyst' capable of physically transforming portions of the city through the different editions. Architectural projects carried within the event embody the ambitions of curators, real estate developers and public administration to inject changes into the city, regenerating urban areas and acting as 'models' for future transformation strategies. In this scenario, the power of storytelling is strong. The physical transformation triggered by the Biennale intersects its own narrative and the narrative of Shenzhen in general: the 'city of fragments' is created, as well as being narrated.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the notion of 'display' represents a paramount instrument to reinforce the powerful visionary imagery which permeates the whole city of Shenzhen. Spectacleengulfs almost every material and immaterial aspect of the city: it is materialized both in planning and in signature architectures, and evoked in the countless slogans and narrations that constitute the infrastructure of urban branding/marketing campaigns through which the city has tried to redefine its identity since its inception.

The Biennale creation parallels what Chen (2017, 116) calls the "second phase of urban renewal that has invested Shenzhen" (from 2005 to 2016 and still ongoing): the exhibition had positioned itself in the overall narrative investing the city, playing a significant role in promoting Shenzhen in the transition from 'manufacturing hub' and 'cultural desert', to 'global knowledge city'. Shenzhen's official narration firmly prompts the image of an instant and 'ideal' city which has rapidly risen from being a small fishing village, now representing an *avant-garde* best practice in urban governance. The Biennale interlocks with this narrative and becomes an active part of it, offering a critical look at the Special Economic Zone's urban development and directly operating spatial manipulations. The fragments created by the Biennale stand as "creative interruptions" (Jordan and Lindner 2016) in a metropolis dominated by planning and the mechanisms of *tabula rasa*. Their micro-scale and dissemination within the urban fabric seem to contrast with the vastness of the city, with the scale of significant urban transformations and with the compactness of Shenzhen's urban vision.

In actual fact, the creation and narration of fragments enacted by the 'Biennale City' do not diverge from Shenzhen's constitutive character as an episodic city, but overlap instead. Since its inception, Shenzhen has epitomized the spatial materialization of a dream: the vision of a 'civilized' and up-to-date metropolis, the heaven of the 'Reforms and Opening Up', an economic and urban *renaissance* for China. Storytelling has continuously shaped the city's history and physical space, playing a paramount role in bridging the gap between the imagined

24.

21.

Guangming District

16.

10.

23.

Longhua District

Pingshan District

14.

20.

Bao' an District

15.

Dapeng District

Longgang District

13. **27.**

Yantian District

25.

22.

Nanshan District

12. Luohu District

19.

Futian District

3.
18.

1.
5. **2.**

17.

11.

4.

26.

Hong Kong

8. **7.**

9.

6.

2005	
1. OCT-Loft (South Park)	

2007
2. OCT-Loft (NorthPark)

2009
3. Shenzhen Civic Square
4. Shenzhen Bay Avenue
5. Ytian Holiday Plaza

2011
3. Shenzhen Civic Square
1. 2. OCT-Loft

2013
6. Value Factory
7. Border Warehouse

2015
8. Dacheng Flour Factory
9. No.8 Warehouse
10. Xipu New Residence

2017
11. Nantou Old Town
12. Luohu
13. Dameisha
14. Shangwei
15. Dalang
16. Guangming

2019
17. Futian High Speed Railway Station
18. MOCAUP
19. Sha Tau Kok Bonded Zone
20. Qiaotou Community
21. Bao'an International Art Design Center
22. Ban Xue Gang Hi-Tech Zone
23. Guanlan Market
24. Guangming Cloud Valley
25. Dapeng Fortress
26. Qianhai cooperation zone
27. Xichong of Dapeng New District

Legenda
Main venue // Temporary transformation
Main venue // Permanent transformation
Sub venue // Permanent transformation
Sub venue // Temporary transformation

Figure 3.2_Diagram of the diffused urban network of permanent and temporary transformations across the Shenzhen Biennale's Main and sub venues. Drawn by the author. Data gathered from the Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives.

and real versions of Shenzhen. In a city which - according to the conventional narrative - arose overnight as a land of exception, the constant manipulation of physical space plays a major role in nurturing urban visions. However, as Du (2019) points out, the "instant city", is not a compact object that originates from scratch and undergoes cyclical radical transformations, but a complex entanglement of layers, sediments, objects and transformations within the frame of a unitary narrative. Shenzhen is also a highly fragmented "city of satellites" (Bontje 2019), , incorporating older and newer kernels which have been - or will be - built both within and beyond the central city area, each with different planning goals and target groups in mind.

Thus, two distinct layers take shape.

On the one hand, the constant turnover of transformation plans nurtures the image of an ideal city through the spectacularization of the urban space and its "starchitectures" (Ponzini and Nastasi 2016). On the other hand - contrasting the vision of a megalopolis proceeding compactly towards a constant succession of brand-new identities - Shenzhen emerges as an entity made up of multiple pre-existent layers, which calls for a broader understanding. The coexistence of different types of fabric fragmenting the city confirms such entanglement as a continuous re-layering, a palimpsest of spaces and memories: as Clark (1997) points out, "constituted by difference[,] Shenzhen is not one, but many places".

Urban villages, industrial sites and Central Business Districts have stratified and transformed over the decades, representing the major urban types that have been populating Shenzhen's fabric since its inception. Today, the "global knowledge city" (Hu 2020) keeps adding fragments to this coexistence: brand-new developments, shiny cultural containers and architectural objects designed by internationally renowned 'archistars' populate the city's skyline.

While offering a critical gaze, the Biennale behaves similarly. The event proceeds by fragments and tries to hold different layers of coexistence in the city together - through a unitary conceptual operation, within the framework of a cultural institution.

The "city of fragments" generated by the Biennale's actions parallels and mirrors Shenzhen's multiple pre-existing nature. These fragments create a kind of 'other' space, an ideal city. Foucault (1984, 8) refers to these kinds of spaces as "heterotopias". Heterotopic spaces are capable "of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" and in presenting a transcending version of reality. Notably, he focuses on the relationship of heterotopias and space as swinging between two poles. On the one hand, they "create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory". On the other hand, they form "a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled".

Conceived, realized and narrated within the compressed time frame of the exhibition, the actions of the Biennale transform these sites into "places", as Jordan and Lindner (2016, 10) define them: "contingent sites of focalized meaning produced [...] by the interplay of memory, visuality, and urban change". The cohesive narration of the Biennale embeds such meaning, portraying the exhibition as a pacifying event: the exhibition acts as a *deus ex machina* which transforms meaningful portions of Shenzhen's urban fabric through a seemingly flawless process - potentially indefinitely repeatable - every two years.

The repetition of the process with the spatial fragments as its outcomes defines what Fan (2017) - referring to the fragmentation of Shenzhen - calls "poly-rhythmic space": the

coexistence of different spaces which tell different stories and move according to different rhythms, capable of grasping different realities and different 'speeds'. These fragments make up a layered space where the notion of 'culture' crosses both global and local dimensions (Wang, Oakes and Yang 2016): such an attitude is reflected in space, fueling the debate on Shenzhen between the narration of the city and its physical materialization.

The fragments transformed by the Biennale function as miniature city tiles, displaying the dynamics and processes that (should) occur in an 'ideal city'. Within this framework, the Biennale acts as a device both for narration and for spatial production, as a lens to observe the city in its transformations, and to transform it in turn. The staging of such a city - a mix between reality and the construction of an imagery - parallels the creation of a widespread spectacle and a "unified space", as Debord (1967 in Shin 2012, 18) argues. Debord also highlights a potentially paradoxical but actually interdependent relationship between the space of spectacle and reality. On the one hand, "the spectacle that falsifies reality is nevertheless a real product of that reality". On the other hand, "real life is materially invaded by [...] the spectacle, and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it" (Debord 1967, 25 in Shin 2012, 18).

The physical spaces created within the framework of the Biennale operate simultaneously as real places and a fictional lens to see (and to represent) the city: these spatial fragments act as "a whole range of utopias in miniature" (Rowe and Koetter 1984).

It is possible to perceive an apparent dualism between the traditional planning tools governing Shenzhen, the megalopolis inhabited by over 12 million people, and the 'city of fragments' created by the Biennale: this dualism oscillates between the hegemony of institutions - the Biennale is a branch of the same governmental organs which rule the significant transformations in the city - and the search for 'another' - possibly alternative and critical - look at the urbanisation phenomena investing urbanscapes.

The Shenzhen Biennale's history is not a one-way story, but the story of a multifaceted object responding to many instances and involving different players. It is possible to observe the exhibition's agency by moving beyond the centralized plans and actions for - and standard narratives about - its development and observing the local, informal and often contradictory ways in which it has developed.

As mentioned in the Foreword, the Biennale device incorporates the notion of "assemblage" in its multiplicity and multidimensionality. Colin McFarlane's (2009; 2011c) reflections on the notion of "trans-local assemblage" provide a helpful lens to understand the trans-scalar entanglement of relations embedded in the exhibition's agency. The event's site-specificity crosses global, national, regional and local spheres, playing a role in transforming different levels of social, political, and physical space. As MacFarlane puts it, trans-local assemblage implies the exchanges of material and immaterial resources and practices across sites. The interlocking of these elements, far from being unified or unifying, manifests itself in the physical space and allows for a deeper learning of the different processes which constitute the city's socio-spatial realm, overcoming the local-global binary dichotomy. McFarlane (2011b) argues that an assemblage is the result of the interactions between elements rather than the properties of the components and is defined by the "co-functioning" of the individual elements. In the Biennale's 'assemblage' catalogues, curatorial statements and images of urban transformations constitute the promotional and narrative component of these interactions, while urban transformations are their physical infrastructure and spatial component.

3.3 Unpacking spatial narratives

The narration of the ideal city conveyed by the event has a strong link with its real counterpart. How to observe, describe and understand the agency of the 'city of fragments' created by the exhibition raises a methodological question. In this perspective, space emerges as the core of the research: it is the fundamental component of an event aimed at triggering urban development mechanisms.

Doreen Massey (2005) interprets "space" not as a static concept; in her conceptualization, it embodies a multiplicity. Space is "the product of different interrelations [...] constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny [...] as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist, as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity" (Massey 2005, 10). It s necessary to welcome a fragmented understanding of space to "take on board its coeval multiplicity [and] to deal with its constitutive complexity" (Massey 2005, 8). She advocates for a "relational" and "networked" understanding of space which would allows us to question fixed narratives, highlighting a "multiplicity of trajectories" (Massey 2005, 5).

The Biennale fits into this framework as a spatial practice, appropriating and producing space, thus representing an agency. As Melanie Dodd (2020b, 7) points out, "spatial practices [...] have the capacity to influence the 'social' or the 'political'". In this perspective, space can be a way to investigate a broader ecology, a lens to observe an entangled network of material and immaterial relations.

Architectural context and its vocabulary traditionally refer to space as a fixed entity, as a "container" for objects and actions. Questioning this approach, Dodd (2020a, 10) advocates for an understanding of space not as a product, an outcome or a fixed, single form. In line with Massey, she empasizes that embracing a multiplicity of stories allows us to avoid the conception of space as the product of a uni-directional flow: rather, it can trigger the unfolding of a "myriad of processes [...] into which [...] actors (of many different types) can intervene". Dodd (2020a, 10) underscores that "these are not processes that have single linear trajectories, but an interconnected system of relationships and contingencies".

This conceptualization helps to frame the spatial fragments produced by the Biennale, which represent its tangible legacy. Mapping the fragments - and the system of relations linked to them - allows us to retrace the pattern of action embedded in the exhibition, its agency, its 'disposition'. It is also possible to construct a tentative taxonomy of such agency, observing how the event transversely acts on three typologies of space: former industrial spaces, urban villages and the Central Business District.

These spaces are significant, as they strongly characterize Shenzhen's urban fabric: their metamorphosis, triggered by the event, connects the city's history with its future urban ambitions. The observation of these spaces, their transformations, the networks of players that shape and reshape them continuously, connect the idealised narrative conveyed by the Biennale to its physical component, which is firmly enmeshed in the political, economic and socio-spatial reality of Shenzhen.

The fragments left by the Biennale can be considered as "spatial narratives". Tricia Austin (2020, 157) defines "spatial narratives" as "stories *about* spaces and stories embedded *in* and expressed *through* space"[4]. The built environment's physical form embeds the two components

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4   Italic mine.

of the narrative system. Its tangible dimensions can communicate both explicitly and explicitly: thus, spatial narratives embody "a triple sequence of movement: the progression of content, through space, and over time, with a deliberate intention to communicate a story" (Austin 2020, 158).

As highlighted by Ryan, Foote and Azaryahu (2016, 1), "space can intersect with narrative in two principal ways. On one hand, it can be an object of representation, on the other, it can function as the environment in which narrative is physically deployed, or, to put it differently, as the medium in which narrative is realized". The Biennale acts as a device intersecting space both in a narrative and spatial way, generating "stories as an active form" (Easterling 2016, 90). In this sense, "the physical environment (architectural site) is not seen only as a container for action but rather as a medium with inscribed and reflecting yet changeable meanings and symbolic values (Hee et al. 2012, xviii)".

In order to explore the spatial narratives conveyed by the Biennale, the research adopts a relational understanding of the notion of space: "relations are understood as embedded practices", imagining the spatial narratives of the Biennale as a "simultaneity of stories" deployed in space through time (Massey 2005, 9-10). The observation of the Biennale and its related spatial transformations highlights how space is not a static product but a dynamic element in a constant transformation: it brings different forces into play, implying continuous processes of re-appropriation and negotiation, highlighting its political value.

The methodology of observation leans on this conceptualization, oscillating between off-site and on-site research. The identification of the spatial fragments (on which and how many types of space did the exhibition act?) carried out through a diachronic and synchronic mapping of the sites crossed by the exhibition, parallels the study of the narrative space of the event (How are the spaces narrated by and through the event?). The latter - which comprises the observation of catalogues and curatorial statements, the mapping of the players involved in the spatial transformation of the sites, and interviews with the Biennale's curators and steering group - unveils the hegemonic narrative of the spaces, the imaginaries it conveys and the implicit stories it communicates, highlighting the gap between intentions and realizations.

The on-site activity has made it possible to question hegemonic narratives through the reconstruction of different, layered stories that the "city fragments" transformed by the Biennale embed. Each of these spaces contains an entanglement: they do not represent a secluded ecosystem; instead, they are closely linked to the existing dynamics which are investing the city. These micro-stories constitute an assemblage of components and trajectories with a spatial result that is far from the fixed form and the 'crystallized' narrative represented during the limited time frame of the exhibition and in the glamorous narration of its catalogues.

The observation of space tries to hold together the superposition of different layers "in which events, narratives, voices, occupation and invisible infrastructures are foregrounded" (Dodd 2020a, 10). The aim is to unpack the exhibition's agency by exploring the implicit metaphors and actions hidden in the explicit manipulation of physical environments operated by the exhibition.

Catalogues and curatorial statements offer a stereotyped narrative of the exhibition agency. Beyond such codified and frictionless description, however, the sites transformed by the Biennale - observed in their post-event evolution - tell different stories. Conflicts emerge between the ideal spaces staged by the exhibition and their successive manipulation, constantly in progress.

Disused sites, promotional panels, hollow spatial installations and converted exhibition spaces whose functions have changed after the event: the spatial and physical apparatuses left behind by the Biennale can tell the story of a multi-faceted and multi-directional object. Their materiality - connected with their history - frames the exhibition's constitutive character as an assemblage and its potential political agency. To quote Albena Yaneva, they offer a perspective on "how specific capacities to act are performed through design and urban practices" (Yaneva 2017, 6 in Dodd 2020a, 16). Spatial narratives act as an instrument of documentation: the "unpacking and repacking" of the fragments tries to highlight the agency of the exhibition and to understand its multiplicity. The research interprets the 'city of fragments' created by the Biennale through an alternative approach questioning the narratives and understandings of the catalogues, seeking an understanding of space which embraces a fragmented narrative.

The following three sections (Chapter 4, Chapter 5, Chapter 6) will explore some of the Biennale's spatial narratives. They will observe how the exhibition has deployed different modes of spatial spectacle, consumption and manipulation in the three above-mentioned urban typologies - and how the 'Biennale city' has been gradually set up to reshape urban Shenzhen's imaginary. This parallel city stages an archipelago of carefully selected urban issues, in which the characteristic features of every part need to be pushed to the extreme – taking on an almost 'burlesque' allure - to be effective in the exhibitionary frame: the observation will try to unpack the agency of the doppelganger, the object of its mimicry and what it represents.

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OCT-Loft
UABB 2005, UABB 2007 - Main Venue
UABB 2011 - Sub Venue

DaChan Flour Factory
UABB 2015 - Main Venue

Guangdong Float Glass Factory (Value Factory)
UABB 2013 - Main Venue

Figure 4.1_The three post-industrial sites object of research. Source: Google Maps.

Chapter 4

Displaying the Post-Industrial Legacy

This chapter show the action of the Biennale in approaching three different sites representing the post-industrial memory of Shenzhen. The exhibition's agency has displayed a series of tropes that characterize the approaches undertaken by global exhibition worldwide in dealing with neglected industrial buildings. The Biennale has staged and 'glorified' Shenzhen's historical memory, instrumentally exploiting, reshaping and renegotiating its stigma of 'cultural desert' and 'city without history'.

The relationship that the exhibition has established with the post-industrial legacy displays the coexistence of several actors who use the biennial and its venues as a showcase: the sites are exhibited, showing the succession of different forces - curators, organizers of the Biennale, powerful State-Owned Enterprises - in exploiting and leaving the space open to subsequent transformations and speculations in the context of the profit-driven growth and economic competition of the entrepreneurial city.

4.1 Shenzhen's new urban trend

Throughout its history, the Biennale has crossed different post-industrial spaces, thus consolidating its narrative as an urban catalyst. The spatial transformations conveyed by the event have been paradigmatic in affirming Shenzhen's transition from a manufacturing hub to a city projected into the global scenario of the creative and knowledge economy.

Three lines interlock in this process, witnessed both by the spaces and physical legacy left by the exhibition. Firstly, it is possible to observe how the Biennale has epitomized Shenzhen's worlding ambitions, positioning the city on the global map of recursive exhibitions through the worldwide, well-rehearsed post-industrial legacy upgrading. Secondly, the gathering of domestic and international curators, cultural institutions and contributors presented the event as a

physical and conceptual space to investigate and - possibly - re-orient Shenzhen's representation in its shift from a manufacturing hub to a cultural city, by injecting new perspectives on the notions of 'heritage' and 'memory'. Thirdly, the Biennale intersection with these notions deals with the 'eventization' of space as a means that the entrepreneurial city deploys to create a new urban imaginary interlocking cultural and consumption spaces, symbolic capital and economic growth.

Differently from other cities, Shenzhen's industrial legacy dates back to only three decades: in the so-called "city without history", memory is a notion that needs to be (re)constructed before being recovered. In order to do so, the Biennale has reinterpreted both domestic and international experiences in a local context . Through curatorial statements and the partnership with corporate actors, the constant re-imagining of Shenzhen's industrial memory and spaces epitomizes a manipulation of the past which has been functional to different actors to pursue diverse objectives.

Notably, it is possible to observe how State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) have entered the stage as powerful urban actors cooperating with the event. State-Owned Enterprises[1] have been crucial urban actors in shaping Shenzhen's spatial configuration: since its foundation, industrial zones actively contributed to the city's urban renewal operations, managing a vast set of urban sites. Born as industrial enterprises fully controlled by the government, the structure of State Owned Enterprises has grown over years. Many of them have become big real estate players enjoying a high level of political and economic autonomy: in many cases, agreements between policy-makers and these enterprises often allowed the latter to extend their land-lease terms and change land uses to more profitable ones at discounted prices (Chen 2017; Lai et al. 2020). Chen (2017) underlines that often SOEs' developers obtained the permission to operate comprehensive renovations of industrial zones to revaluate both the land and the surrounding areas. This interlocking often occurred under the motto "government sets up the stage, enterprise puts on the show" (Chen 2017, 116): through incentives and informal negotiations, municipal offices set favorable conditions for SOEs to undertake relevant urban renewal activities.

The relationship between these actors and the Biennale has turned out to be far from neutral, affirming a strong link between developers and the Urban Planning Bureau - one of the event's main organizers. The Biennale's material legacy witnesses this mutual dependency: the event's stage has gradually allowed developers to undertake spatial reconfigurations through the spectacularization of city space, gaining media attention and recognition in return. The spatial interventions in post-industrial sites mirror diverse explorations of the aesthetics of the urban ruin and entrepreneurial strategies for economic growth: OCT-Loft, the Guangdong Glass Factory, and the Dacheng Flour Factory have materialised ambitions and stances of different actors involved in the process, underlining the role of the event as a mobile vector.

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1   Chen (2017, 1) offers a comprehensive account of the growing relevance of State-Owned Enterprises as urban actors in the "open door policy" and in the present era. Conventionally, SOEs are "wholly or partially owned and controlled by government agencies" and "are perceived as the corporate face or alter ego of the state". Nevertheless, their power and agency are often independent from governmental rules and result into operations with a high grade of autonomy. In particular, the most powerful SOEs have gained strong incentives in obtaining privileged plots of land to set their activities and have transformed in economic actors able to manipulate urban space with vast real estate operations after the economic reforms.

4.2 OCT-Loft Living

On 6 December 2005, the first edition of the Biennale officially inaugurated in the southern part of Huaqiaocheng Eastern Area, in Nanshan district. Archival images of the event show the Biennale taking place in a seemingly dismissed area, populated by raw buildings and prefabricated manufacturing shelters. For the first time, an exhibition shed light on a vast portion of disused industrial space located in the city's central area: through the Biennale showcase, the 'city without history' started to deal with its own memory.

After 15 years, the situation looks now radically different from what Biennale's archival sources depicted. Today, anyone who walks through the site faces the spatial materialisation of what Sharon Zukin (1995) refers to as "symbolic economy". In a little more than a decade, OCT-Loft has become a valuable design cluster and tourist hotspot: the area is considered one of the first and most successful creative clusters in the city - and in China -, a lively environment filled with busy cafes, art galleries, design and architecture offices (Sonn et al., 2017). Young people belonging to the well-educated middle class stroll along the alleys holding drinks and Starbucks coffees, sit in one of the many restaurants mushrooming in the area, or shop in the vast array of bookshops and design stores disseminated along the tree-lined pathways.

According to O' Connor and Liu (2014), the - relatively short - history of OCT-Loft's transformation from a rural space to a manufacturing hub and, eventually, a creative cluster epitomizes the notion of "Shenzhen speed". It represents a successful example of "a planned cluster established under a top-down management model that [has transformed] a low-value manufacturing space into a vibrant creative park [with a] mix of innovation and entertainment spaces" (O' Connor and Liu 2014, 135). It also exemplifies Shenzhen's ambitions to positions itself as a cultural centre able to attract creative capital through the union of spectacle, commercial activities and cultural consumption.

4.2.1 OCT: early history

The transformation of the former industrial site into a creative cluster should be framed in the broader metamorphosis that have invested the area during the last four decades, underlining the role undertaken by State-Owned Enterprise OCT - Overseas Chinese Town (*Huaqiaocheng Jituan Gongsi*) as a powerful urban actor. OCT-Loft is located in the northern section of the former East Industrial Zone of OCT in Shenzhen Nanshan District. The area is divided into the South and North Parks, covering approximately 0.15 square kilometers and separated by Xiangshan East Street (Xie 2012 in Sonn et al. 2017,): the South Park covers 55,465 square meters, for a total floor area of 59,000 square meters; the North Park covers 95,571 square meters and has a floor area of 150,000 square meters (Shi, Zhu and Qing 2012, in Sonn et al. 2017).

The site was part of the OCT property, an area created by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council (OCAOSC) to provide business opportunities for returning Chinese overseas, especially after the anti-Indonesian-Chinese agitation in the 1980s. As Chen (2017, 234) observes[2], in 1985 the OCAOSC "took over 4.8 sq km of hilly land from the local Shahe

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2   Chen (2017) offers a deepened account of OCT area's early history.

Figure 4.2_Overview of the Huaqiaocheng Eastern Area before transformation. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 4.3_Site visit in the Huaqiaocheng Eastern Area before the 2005 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 4.4_Setting up of the exhibition "Entertainment Town". Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 4.5_2007 Biennale entrance in the OCT-Loft South Park. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

2011
North Area
Construction Area: *95,571 sqm*
Building Area: *150,000 sqm*

2007
South Area
Construction Area: *55,465 sqm*
Building Area: *59,000 sqm*
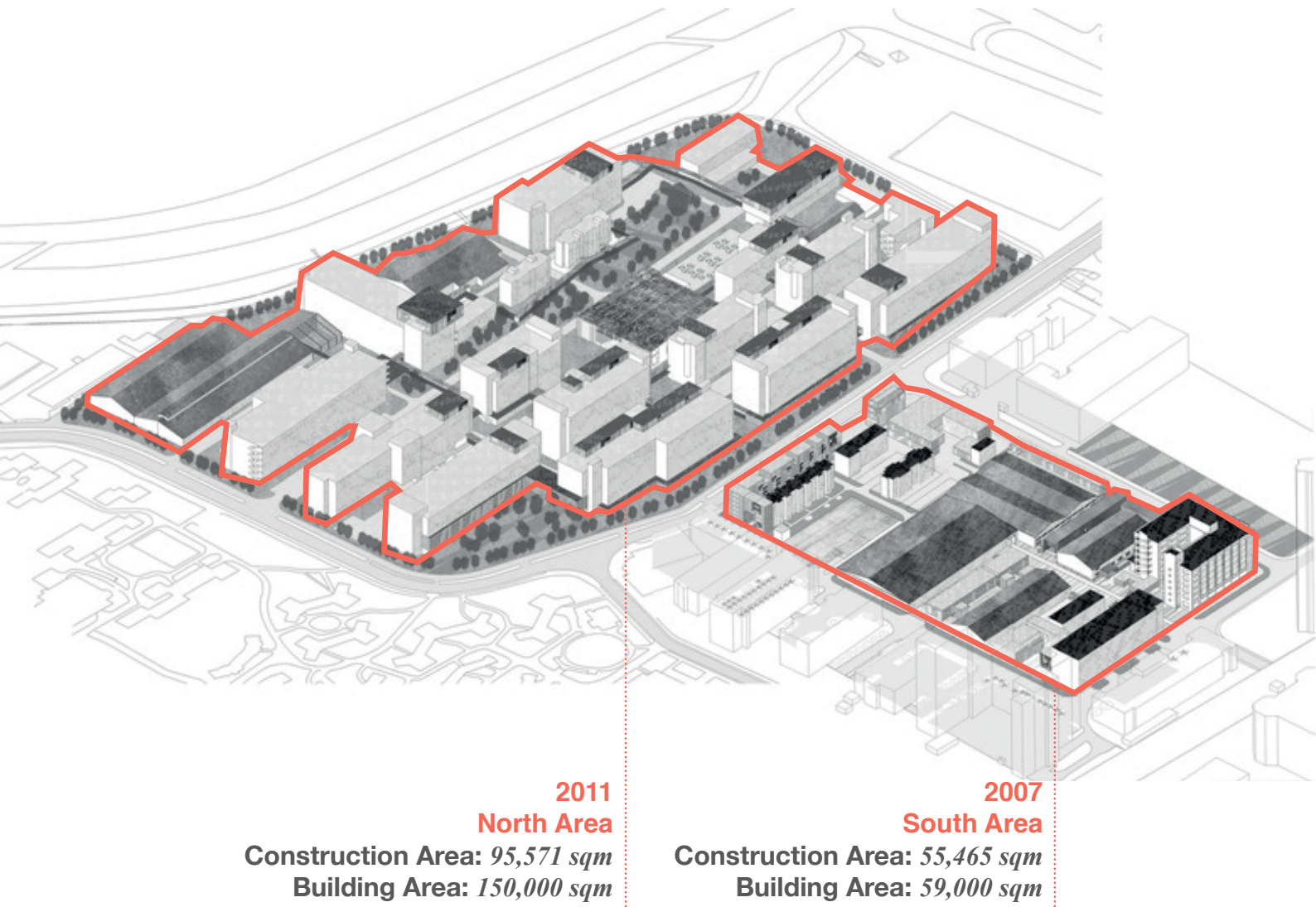
Figure 4.6_Axonometric drawing of the OCT-Loft area before the transformation. ©URBANUS. Re-elaboration by the author.

State Farm[3] to build a comprehensive zone called Overseas Chinese Town (OCTown)". The affiliated SOE "Overseas Chinese Town" was set up for the occasion: it appointed another affiliated SOE - the Hong Kong-based "China Travel Service" - to manage OCT's initial development. At that time, China Travel Service had developed a vast overseas network, since it was the only domestic official travel agency managing foreigners' visits to mainland China - and Chinese people's travels outside China. Leaning on its position, OCT initially focused on export-oriented industrial development "to attract investments from the Chinese diaspora and [...] overseas companies that had connections with the Chinese Communist Party"[4].

In 1985 the company was renamed "Shahe OCT Corporation" and merged with local factories around the area. OCT initially developed manufacturing industries that provided production services based on the "three-plus-one" trading mix: investors could use free land

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3   See Chen (2017) for a complete overview of the transformation of Shahe State Farm.

4   The so-called "red capitalists" (Chen 2017).

for 15 years to set up custom manufacturing businesses with their supply of materials, designs and samples. The industrial park was devoted to manufacturing with the prevalence of small clothing industries, without services or residential functions inside the precinct[5]. During the 1990s, the zone had expanded housing nearly 60 enterprises, including electronics firms such as Konka Group, Huali, Huasheng Furniture Decoration Co., Ltd (Xie 2012 in Sonn et al. 2017). Thanks to economic policies to encourage foreign investments, the number of industrial enterprises in the area increased to 55 in 1994 and over 80 in 2004 (O' Connor and Liu 2014). While industrial buildings' construction proceeded regularly between 1985 and 1999, during the early 2000s the industries progressively relocated - mainly due to the growth of average salaries, labour costs and the changes in the city economic structure. Manufacturing activities and industrial production gradually left the site: as a result, the OCT-Loft area was a dynamic combination of industrial production and vacant spaces[6]. Contextually, as the inner-city land values grew, the site became more attractive to other potential land uses (O' Connor and Liu 2014; Sonn et al. 2017).

4.2.2 Regeneration and creativity: a mutual intersection

In 2004, OCT Southern part was already nearly empty while the Northern part still presented a mixture of vacant buildings and factories. When the first Biennale opened in 2005 in the Southern part of the former industrial area, the event occupied a 30 years old industrial area with abandoned buildings, uneven floorings and no specific functions.

Although the event's images show an almost deserted industrial landscape, the area was already going through a transition phase. The role played by the Shenzhen Biennale in OCT-Loft development is often overlooked, focusing mostly on a "content/container" relationship between the event and the creative park. Nevertheless, it is possible to retrace a mutual interdependence between the event and the district's transformation. At the time of its creation, the Biennale was an experiment, a newborn institution without a permanent venue: through an agreement with OCT Group - who offered room and sponsorship for the exhibition - it established its first edition in three dismissed buildings of the compound's southern area[7].

As mentioned in Chapter 2, these moves should be contextualised in the broader perspective of China's creative cultural industry policies. In this frame, Shenzhen undertook some strategical moves both in following state political ambitions of soft power and maintaining a high degree of local political autonomy (O' Connor and Liu 2014). In 2003 and 2004, Shenzhen Municipal Government issued a strategy to make a Shenzhen a "cultural and ecological city": the propaganda campaign endorsed the importance of cultural and creative industries nurtured the shift towards Shenzhen's creative turn, stating the ambition to become a "city of culture" by 2007. The central government designated creativity and design as an advanced business sector: arguably, it is not by chance that the interlocking of Biennale's inception and the transformation of OCT-Loft rose against this backdrop. Moreover, O' Connor and Liu (2014, 134) relate the birth of OCT to the particular features of Shenzhen's urban development and expansion. The

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5   Interview with Shi Jian, 13 December 2018.

6   Interview with Shi Jian. 13 December 2018.

7   OCT Group is listed as one of the main sponsors of 2005 and 2007 Shenzhen Biennale.
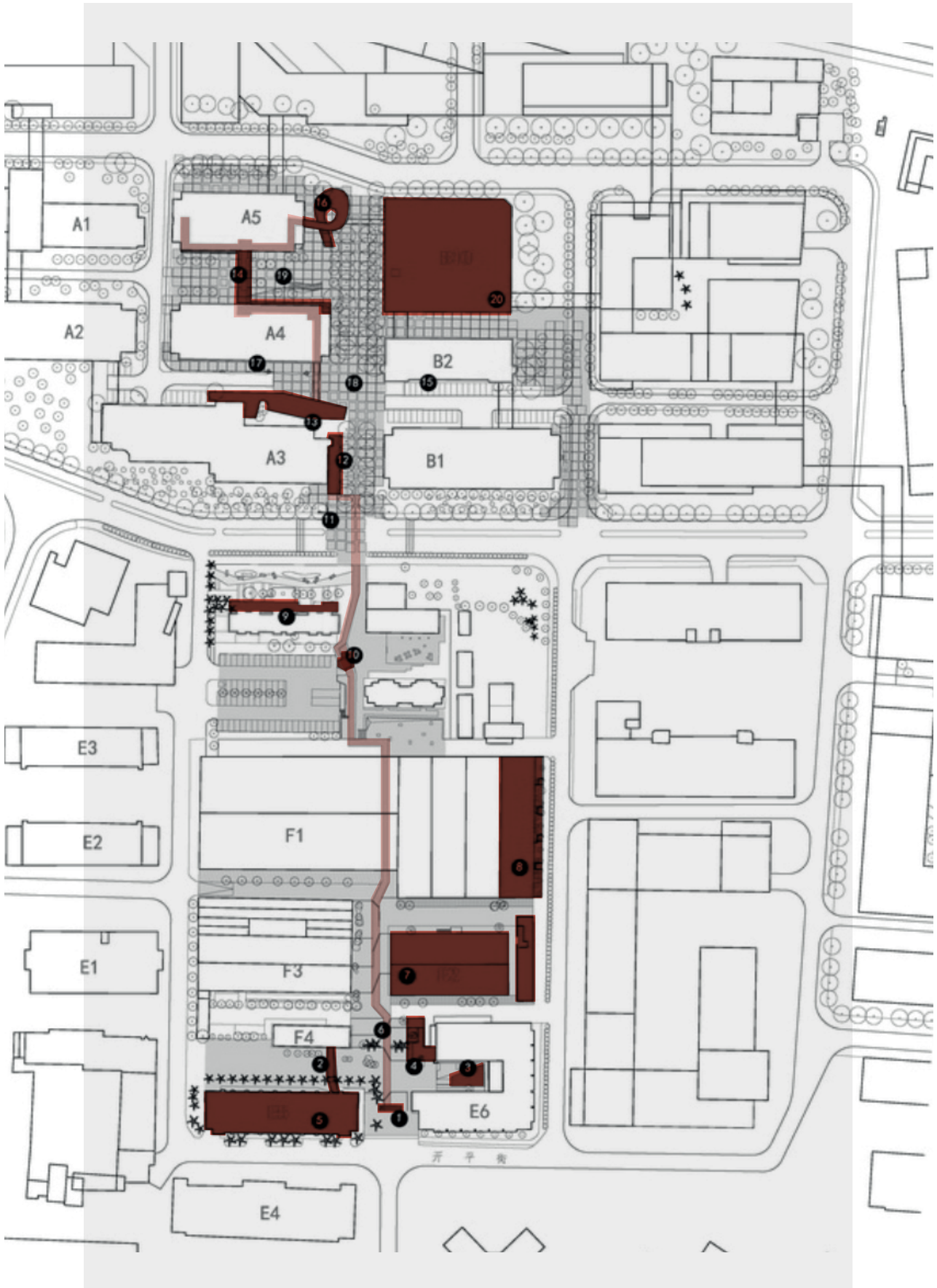
Figure 4.7_Master plan for the regeneration of OCT-Loft area. ©URBANUS. Re-elaboration by the author.

city gradually encircled former peripheral industrial areas, factories and warehouses, thus creating new potential city centres "available for [...] transformation into other uses" following the "creative industry cluster model" adopted elsewhere in domestic and foreign contexts (O'Connor and Gu 2012; 2016).

As Yuan (2020) observes, since the early 2000s OCT began to investigate possible plans for the site, which resulted in upgrading the empty industrial zone into a creative park. The process of transformation followed the progressive relocation of the factories that were occupying the area[8]: OCT Real Estate, the real estate branch of OCT Group, was in charge of the site's transformation while the Loft Company - a subsidiary of OCT Real Estate - managed the compound's setting up.

At that time, Beijing 798 Art District and Shanghai Tanzifang creative block[9] began to take shape and attract a lot of media exposure, becoming fashionable and capturing the interest of OCT Group. According to O' Connor and Liu (2014) Chen Yifei, an artist who participated in the Shanghai Tianzifang project and connected with Ren Kelei - the then chairman of the OCT Group - endorsed the transformation of the old factories into cultural and creative parks in the broader context of the urban metamorphosis undertaken in the Overseas Chinese Town (mostly theme parks and real estate). The association with culture turned out to be pivotal, since Nanshan district - where OCT-LOFT is located - was elected in 1996 as one of the most prominent Shenzhen's cultural centres in the fifteen-year urban plan (O' Donnell 1999 in O' Connor and Liu 2014).

The first step towards OCT-Loft happened in 2003, when the Hexiangning Art Museum decided to set up a non-profit contemporary art centre in the vacant warehouse F2. The OCT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT), a subsidiary of the Xiangning Art Museum[10], actively took part in the planning and investment process of the site (Sonn et al. 2017). In 2004, Shenzhen OCT Properties Co., Ltd. appointed the then Hong Kong-based architectural practice URBANUS to elaborate a broader renovation plan involving the whole Southern area. OCT Group's approach was initially investigation-based: apparently, the developer had no defined plans for the renovation and the site was mainly intended as a test-bed to explore possible scenarios for future transformation[11]. The articulation of the master plan - both in time and space - reflected this attitude and matched the newly born Biennale's experimental approach. According to URBANUS[12], the master plan aimed at "replacing and filling up the buildings by applying the new spatial form with small-scale operations and improvements on infrastructure". The first 2005 Biennale of marked OCT-Loft's debut and somehow reflected this attitude, showing a close intersection with the two-phase strategy adopted in the former industrial compound.

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8   The metamorphosis of the Huaqiaocheng Eastern Industrial Zone was explored in 2014 in the exhibition *A Journey of Rebirth: From Industrial Zone to Creative Cultural Park*, curated by Shi Jian from 14 May to 30 June 2011 and housed in OCT-Loft.

9   For an in-depth account of creative districts in China, see also Keane (2006; 2009); Kong and O' Connor (2009); O' Connor and Gu (2012; 2016).

10   The OCAT is described as a non-profit institution owned and managed by the OCT Group (Sonn et al. 2017).

11   Interview with Wendy Wu. 28 October 2018.

12   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/projects/oct-loft/?lang=en. Accessed 27 June 2020.

OCT-Loft Transformation Timeline

Figure 4.8_Timeline showing the transformation of OCT-Loft area crossing the Shenzhen Biennale editions. Drawn by the author.

Figure 4.9_Diagram showing the incremental spatial transformation of OCT-Loft area in a creative spot. Drawn by the author.

1979
Establishment of Guangming Overseas Chinese Furniture Factory

1984
Establishment of Guangdong Huasheng Furniture Decoration Co., Ltd.
Building F1 + F2

1985
Establishment of OCT
'Shahe OCT Corporation'

1985 / 1986
Establishment of Shenzhen Huali Packa-gingTrade Co., Ltd.
Building C1 + C2 + C3

1989
Shenzhen Huasheng Furniture Decoration Co., Ltd.
Building F1 + F2

1993
Establishment of Wide-Density Disk Ltd.
Building B10

1999
Shenzhen Huasheng Furniture Decoration Co., Ltd.
Production Suspension

1999
Wide-Density Disk Ltd.
Relocation

Building F1: Ya Shilong Badminton Hall
Building F2: Vacant Site
Building B10: Vacant Site

2004
He Xiang Ning Art Museum
OCAT - Contemporary Art Terminal
Opening

2004
Conversion of Huasheng Furniture Industry
Building F2:
OCAT - Contemporary Art Terminal

2005
1st UABB
December 10th 2005 – March 10th 2006
"City, Open Door!"
OCT South - Contemporary Art Terminal

2006
"Creative December" Initiative

2006
Creation of Shenzhen Cultural Industries Fair

2006
Factory conversion:
Building E6
Design Studio
URBANUS practice enters OCT Loft

2007
2nd UABB
December 8th 2007 – March 9th 2008
City of Expiration and Regeneration
OCT North, Building B10

2007
January 28th 2007
OCT South - Opening

2008
"OCT-Loft 08 Creative Festival"

2008
Renovation of OCT North initiated

2008
Factory conversion: **Building B10**
New OCAT Museum

2009
Relocation of Shenzhen Huali PackagingTrade Co., Ltd.
Building C1 + C2 + C3 Vacant

2011
4th UABB
Architecture creates cities. Cities create architecture.
OCT Loft

2011
November 14th 2011
OCT North - Opening

1996
Shenzhen Fifteen-years Urban Plan
Nanshan District specified as a Cultural Centre of Shenzhen

2003
Shenzhen Government Strategy
"Cultural and Ecological City"

2004
Shenzhen Propaganda
"Cultural and Creative Industries"

2004
OCT Managed by SASAC

2006
Shenzhen Municipal Office
Cultural Industries Development Office

2007
Shenzhen Industrial Land Use Study and Plan
From 'made in Shenzhen' to 'created in Shenzhen'

2008
Shenzhen Urban Planning Bureau
Letter on the Nature of the Construction of
OCT Creative Cultural Park
Agreement

2008
"Three Olds Conversions"
by Wang Yang
(former Guangdong Secretary)

2009
Shenzhen Unesco City of Design nomination

2009
Ministry of Culture's Cultural Industries Revitalisation Plan

2011 - 2015
Shenzhen Cultural and Creative Industries Revitalisation and Development Plan

2001 - 2006
10th Five Year Plan - Promotion of Creativity and Cultural Industries

1985

1999

2005 / 2007

2007 / 2010

Industrial Plants
Vacant Spaces
Regenerated spaces Creativity/Culture
Regenerated spaces Offices
Expansions
UABB 2005
UABB 2007

OCT North
OCT South

4.2.3 Activation: the Southern Park

When the first 2005 Shenzhen Biennale kicked off on 6 December, the comprehensive transformation plan was barely initiated: at that time, the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal was the only guest of the yet-to-be creative district.

The aggregation of two new cultural institutions - the OCAT and the Biennale - leaning on powerful public and corporate actors marked the inception of a first, tentative creative cluster around the newly created Art Terminal: the South area represented the spatial core of both the first phase of the renovation and the event. The Biennale occupied buildings F1, F3 and E6, which will be later the first sites affected by URBANUS's regeneration project. OCT Group provided the venues for the event, which occupied an area of 12.380 square meters. The main exhibition space (6940 square meters) was housed in the F1 building, the former Huasheng Furniture factory and Ya Shilong Badminton Hall sports venue. The F3 and the E6 buildings housed respectively 2640 square meters and 2800 square meters exhibition spaces[13]. The exhibition plan elaborated for the event presented a functional articulation which anticipated the future direction of OCT-Loft development: the spatial imprint of the Biennale housed some shops, a cafe and offices besides the cultural exhibition spaces[14]. Mirroring the then fashionable trend of other creative districts and mega-exhibitions mushrooming in China and worldwide, the spatial imprint of the Biennale in the post-industrial venue followed a light approach. The architectural interventions made for the exhibitions did not substantially transform the abandoned industrial spaces: curator Yung Ho Chang decided to prioritise a lightweight, temporary exhibition set up focusing on the conceptual framework of disciplinary discourse[15].

Although being at its first edition, the Biennale gathered 30,000 visitors. After the closing, the master plan project started, following a 'filling-up' of the South area spaces, which were developed to house design, photography, animation, and fine art spaces. URBANUS undertook a 'light' spatial attitude - similar to the Biennale approach - mainly drafting the overall functional program and, designing landscape and public spaces, without specifically envisioning massive building renovations[16]. New functions have been housed in the existing structures to implement the function of the art centre, progressively filling vacant buildings with galleries, bookshops, cafes, bars, artist ateliers and design shops: these new additions aimed at setting up "new

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13   From the 2005 Shenzhen Biennale exhibition plan. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

14   The same attitude appeared again in 2007, when Du Juan and Nicola-Borg-Pisani designed a bar and a bookstore within the project "ISBN+BARcode", to implement a bookstore and a coffee shop for the Biennale". Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (Ed.) (2008) *City of Expiration and Regeneration. 2007 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen)*. Shenzhen: Shenzhen Press Group Publishing House, p. 75.

15   The exhibits 'colonized' the post-industrial ruin, which acted as a background: its unfinished character emphasized the experimental and provisional character of the newborn exhibition. The Media Release of 2005 UABB reports that during a tour to the exhibition space on 4 September 2005, Japanese architect Arata Isozaki -one of the participants to the edition, at that time in charge to design the Shenzhen Cultural Centre in Futian - made some considerations on the general layout of the exhibition venue, notably the suggestion to "keep a venue simple rather than excessively decorate it". From 2005 Shenzhen Biennale Media Release, 10 September 2005. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

16   The only architectural intervention was the steel gate at the entrance of the Southern Park: URBANUS' partner Meng Yang designed the structure taking inspiration from the vernacular door structures in one of Shenzhen's urban villages, repurposing a traditional symbol in an abstract interpretation. Interview with Wendy Wu. 28 October 2018.

relationships between buildings by wrapping and penetrating the existing urban fabric"[17]. The architectural interventions mainly concerned the design of the ground public spaces and the realisation of a system of second-layer corridors. A connective circulation framework was designed to serve the creative industries incubators without interfering with the circulation of commercial programs[18].

The lightweight approach and the high grade of flexibility in transforming the existing buildings followed a double-edged strategy. On the one hand, it addressed the preservation of a 'post-industrial' aesthetics; on the other hand, it was functional to the entrepreneurial strategy of OCT Group in setting up a flexible framework able to adapt itself to changing market conditions[19]. Single entrepreneurs and tenants began to flock in the compound: when the Loft officially inaugurated on 28 January 2007, it housed more than 20 new companies and institutions (O' Donnell 2012; Sonn et al. 2017; O' Connor and Liu 2014).

As Yuan (2020, 62) underlines, positive reactions welcomed Southern Park's official opening. In 2006, it received the title of "Best 10 National Cultural Industry Demonstration Parks" by the Ministry of Culture and the honour of "annual excellent cultural and creative parks" in Shenzhen. The South Park inauguration date embraced the Biennale's second edition, which took place again in OCT- Loft from 9 December to 9 February 2007. 2007 was a pivotal year for both the event and the creative cluster: the 2007 Biennale was the first "Bi-City" edition, directly involving neighbouring Hong Kong.

The choice of OCT-Loft as a venue drew on a multi-faceted interdependence. Being the first Biennale edition involving Hong Kong, the choice of OCT was somehow consistent and celebratory of the connections between the two cities: OCT Group had important capitals coming from Hong Kong and the former industrial site housed packaging factories related to the former British colony; the cross-border creative connection between the young creative cluster and the neighbouring city was further reinforced in May 2006, when the renowned Hong Kong designer GaoWenAn set a branch in OCT-Loft[20].

For the Biennale, happening again in the most successful creative district in Shenzhen represented the opportunity to affirm the newborn exhibition as a pre-eminent event in the city's cultural landscape, contextually meeting the curatorial stances of the exhibition theme *City of Expiration and Regeneration*. For OCT Group, it represented the occasion to show the company's competitive approach in entering the cultural economy, capitalising on the event by shedding lights on the newly transformed spaces. Moreover, in 2006, the Shenzhen Planning Bureau endorsed the Shenzhen Industrial Land Use Study and Plan, which aimed at creating new technology and innovation bases through the transformation of industrial land use (O' Connor and Liu, 2014): this paved the way for the second wave of transformation.

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17   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/projects/oct-loft/?lang=en. Accessed 27 June 2020.

18   The most remarkable intervention was the creation a public passage through factory building F1 to establish a connection between the southern and the northern part of the industrial area. Interview with Wendy Wu. 28 October 2018.

19   The project business approach was based on the creativity of the individual economic players: a coordinated architectural design of the whole complex was thus not needed. Urbanus defined the outlook of the public area, while private areas were managed by private tenants. The appearance of these areas came from the agency of the single entrepreneurs and the tenants of the Loft, which were in charge of the buildings' renovations (which resulted in most cases in interior design interventions). Interview with Wendy Wu. 28 October 2018.

20   http://www.octloft.cn/about/oct-loft/. Accessed 13 June 2020.

Figure 4.10_OCT-Loft transformation: the North Park. ©URBANUS.

Figure 4.11_OCT-Loft transformation: the North Park. ©URBANUS

Figure 4.12_OCT-Loft transformation: the South Park. ©URBANUS

Figure 4.13_OCT-Loft transformation: the South Park and the OCAT entrance. ©URBANUS

4.2.4 Affirmation: the Northern Park

Contextually to the official launch of OCT-Loft South Park, the 2007 Biennale informally marked the North Park ignition by occupying three vacant buildings of the area: A5, B10 and C6. B10, which housed the Guangming Overseas Chinese Electronics Factory and then the Konka Group, acted as the main exhibition space with a surface of 5,000 sqm21.

The North Park welcomed the growing ambitions of both the Biennale and OCT Group. In 2007, the event needed to affirm its position as a powerful cultural institution, nurturing its aspiration by doubling the event with Hong Kong. Contextually, OCT Group intended to expand the creative district. In 2008, moreover, the Shenzhen Planning Bureau released a "Letter on the Nature of the Construction of the OCT Creative Cultural Park", which allowed the use of industrial land - and thus its transformation - as "a creative cultural park" [22]. In the same period, shortly after South Park's completion, the North Park's development was officially announced. Although maintaining the same lightweight approach on public spaces and connections, North Park's transformation showed a bolder programmatic articulation and a more ambitious architectural character through a system of glass and wooden connections. This attitude was clearly stated in the 2007 Biennale's intent, which defined the Loft as an "Urban Art Gallery"[23].

North District officially opened on 14 May 2011. The total area of OCT-Loft amounted to 150,000 square meters of land area and 200,000 square meters of construction area. While the South Park mixed cultural production and consumption with amenities, the North Park focused on creative design industries such as exhibition spaces, artists' and designers' workshops and galleries (Yuan 2020, Sonn et al. 2017).

4.2.5 Interlocking

With its vibrant atmosphere and post-industrial aesthetics, OCT is now the "must-go" place for the local art community and cultural tourists in Shenzhen by producing a "cultural agglomeration" (Yuan 2020, 62). Throughout time, the relationship between the Biennale and OCT-Loft's activation acted on two interlocked lines following a mutual interdependent pattern. Shenzhen Urban Planning Bureau and OCT Group saw the event as a tool to kick-start the first cultural district in Shenzhen and convey a cosmopolitan image, nurturing the city's worlding cultural ambitions. On the one hand, the Biennale exploited the successful case of OCT-Loft, the spaces and sponsorship provided by OCT Group. By capitalising on the district's transformation and aesthetic appeal, and leaning on a powerful developer, the event gradually forged its image as a 'catalyst', affirming its position as a cultural institution in Shenzhen and the global scenario of recurrent exhibitions. On the other hand, OCT Group conveniently exploited the symbolic character of the aspiring international event in two phases: in an initial phase, as

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21   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (Ed) (2008) *City of Expiration and Regeneration. 2007 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen)*. Shenzhen: Shenzhen Press Group Publishing House, p. 121.

22   Exhibition *A Journey of Rebirth: From Industrial Zone to Creative Cultural Park*, curated by Shi Jian from 14 May to 30 June 2011.

23   From the Guerrilla Forum "Urban Regeneration" transcripts, 15 December 2007. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

a test-bed to investigate the potential transformation of the yet-to-be creative district; later, as a powerful branding and promotional tool to keep nurturing the creative appeal of the district - and legitimise further spatial transformations. The Biennale's setting up was not intended to bring direct, high economic profits to the Loft; nevertheless, it was clear to organisers that such event could "surely help promote tertiary industries around [the area], including the rooting of a design industry, which can be a new economic model"[24].

These moves should be contextualised in the constitutive business framework of OCT Group as a powerful State-Owned "key enterprise"[25] (under the direct dependence of the Central Government) that owns tourism, real estate, and electronics manufacturing businesses (Sonn et al. 2017). OCT is a powerful brand name in the Chinese tourism industry and one of the largest real estate developers in China. Tourism is among its main business: the company has gradually developed a successful business model based on Cultural Tourism, combining the creation of cultural facilities and real estate expansion (Chen, 2017). The spatial configuration of OCT area witnesses the success of such approach: large theme parks, such as Window of the World, Happy Valley and China Folk Splendid Village, shape the area surrounded by high-end housing developments[26].

4.2.6 Creatively-branded spaces: culture, consumption and tourism

The transformation of OCT-Loft followed the company's re-orientation and mirrored Shenzhen's ambitious creative policies - of which the Biennale is a relevant by-product. Between 1995 and 1996, OCT Group adopted a strategy to reduce industrial manufacturing and increase investments in tourism and real estate development. The second urban planning outline for the Overseas Chinese Town, issued in 1998, stated that "the scale of industrial development should be controlled and the proportion of cultural tourism industry should be expanded" Yuan (2020, 60): in this framework, cultural entertainment, theme parks and real estate operations turned out to be a profitable business for the company. During the last two decades, Shenzhen has pushed forward the ambitions of becoming a cultural world-class city: OCT Group promptly intercepted this shift by adding a creative district to its wide offer of spectacular cultural amenities.

OCT-Loft transformation was an ambitious operation[27], leaning on strong national and local governmental support. At the national level, the development of the Loft positioned itself in the policies of promotion of creativity and cultural industries by the central government, as manifested in the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001–2006) and the Ministry of Culture's Cultural Industries Revitalisation Plan in 2009 (Wen 2012 in Sonn et al. 2017). At the local level, it

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24 Liu Yuyang, Guerrilla Forum "Urban Regeneration" transcripts, 15 December 2007. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

25 A "key enterprise" is a "status given to some of the largest and most important state-owned firms in China", whose status is "higher than the status of the municipality" (Sonn et al. 2017, 309). OCT Group's status allows it to operate directly under the Central Government, having a great autonomy in negotiating and planning with municipal actors (In 2004, it was managed by a new state agency – the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council - SASAC) (O' Connor and Liu 2014, Chen 2017; Coase and Wang 2013)

26   For an extensive account of the historical spatial evolution of OCT Area since the early 1980s, see Chen (2017).

27   The total cost of OCT Loft's initial construction approached 30 million yuan, while the construction costs for the Contemporary Art Centre alone amounted to 20 million Yuan (Sonn et al. 2017).

Figure 4.14_OCT-Loft transformation: the North Park. ©URBANUS

Figure 4.15_OCT-Loft transformation: the South Park and the new E6 Building entrance. ©URBANUS

*Figure 4.16_OCT-Loft transformation: the North Park and the wooden slope.
Picture by the author.*

Figure 4.17_OCT-Loft: bars and cafes. Picture by the author.

followed the municipal government's emphasis on creative industries, through which Shenzhen labeled itself a 'city of design'. Shenzhen Government - the Shenzhen Biennale's main organiser - provided both formal and informal support to the Loft through financial support and tax cuts to design firms renting spaces in the Loft. Moreover, the city instituted informal zoning changes by allowing OCT to use lands for different uses within the industrial zone[28].

The realisation of attractive urban spaces responding to international standards (Chen 2017) has been a leitmotif for the OCT company since the beginning of its activity: with OCT-Loft, the setting up of a cultural, attractive symbolic capital paved the ground to the progressive layering of consumption facilities and business. As O' Connor and Liu (2014, 134) observe, the symbolic character of the operation is evident. The name OCT-Loft itself triggers a transnational imagery: it refers to the overseas artistic lifestyle in the loft apartments (Zukin 1982), linked to the creativity and innovation imagined by OCT managers for the conversion of their factory buildings[29]. The creation of OCT-Loft represented an experimental project still unseen in Shenzhen at that time. The introduction of the Biennale became a flagship event that further encouraged the transformative uses of the space for what is now widely celebrated as an attractive cultural hotspot in Shenzhen and which played a pivotal role in materialising the city's creative ambitions[30].

In its transformations throughout time, the physical space of the Loft reflected the power of symbolic capital in creating eventful and spectacular sites. As the district increasingly gained celebrity and the Biennale became a consolidated cultural institution, the spatial character of the place progressively acquired distinction and complexity. The post-industrial, neglected atmosphere gradually left the floor to a more aesthetically orchestrated spatial configuration. The glass and metal corridors and the wooden slope designed by URBANUS in the North Park, as well as the graffiti paintings on walls, have become popular spots for touristic photo shooting[31].

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28   In 2007, the Shenzhen Industrial Land Use Study and Plan (issued by Shenzhen Planning Bureau) promoted the shift from "made in Shenzhen" to "created in Shenzhen" through the conversion of manufacturing industries into more value-added ones (Wu 2010 in O' Connor and Liu 2014, 135). Since then, creative clusters started popping-up in the city. The mechanism of regeneration was based on attracting "high-rent tenants whilst – under 'creative industry' rubric – keeping [...] industrial land use designation". The policy suggested three different ways to operate the conversion of former industrial districts: the complete conversion in other uses: "residential, commercial, green or cultural facilities; the combination of industrial uses and trading activities; the upgrading of built environment to house new industrial uses" (O' Connor and Liu 2014, 135). While "cultural industrial" use was considered acceptable in a former industrial zone, the numerous shops and stores could have potentially represented a contradictory presence in the Loft. Nevertheless, the local government informally overlook their use "as long as the shops nominally comply with the document's zoning regulations (Sonn et al. 2017, 310).

29   In the early 2000s, the concept of "Loft" had spread widely due to the vast media coverage around the Beijing 798 creative cluster. OCT Group led researches on Beijing 798 case and other creative districts worldwide, taking inspiration from international cases rather than domestic ones: Yaletown creative district in Vancouver "offered the most transferrable model". 'Design' represented for OCT a convenient concept to theme the district, because it was a field where Shenzhen "had a competitive advantage (Sonn et al. 2017, 310).

30   The impact of the Loft has been variously investigated. Sonn et al. (2017) underscore that Its success derives both from the job opportunities and GDP growth that the district has created - an output of 11.2 billion RMB and 2000 employment opportunities in 2015 - and from its capacity to build a stable, strong reputation in the design industry.

31   The spectacularisation and consumption of OCT-Loft's spaces passes through some selected commercial and public "landmarks". The commercial spaces are mainly shops like Starbucks Coffee, HeyTea and other franchises populated by the local and international middle class. Other commercial spaces, like the New Heaven Bookstore and the Coffee 231 are some independent spots which mirror the taste of a more educated class. Among the public spaces, the wooden slope which represents the kernel of the Northern Park development has become the symbol of the project. Besides URBANUS' initial intervention, single tenants have begun injecting their transformations. Starbucks Coffee, for instance, realized a metal shed out of the shop aesthetically mimicking the metal portal designed by URBANUS' partner Meng Yan.

Figure 4.18_OCT-Loft: the creative area and the real estate developments surrounding the former industrial site. Picture by the author.

Figure 4.19_OCT-Loft: the creative area and the real estate developments surrounding the former industrial site. On the right, the B10 Building renovation in progress. Picture by the author.

An increasing number of design, advertising, fashion and graphic companies moved to OCT-Loft, nurturing the appeal of the area[32]. Hotels, high and mid-range restaurants and bars, design and art-related shops and galleries represent the spatial and functional pattern of the site: the Loft is considered a fancy, cultural space in the city attracting young people, local consumers, tourists, professionals belonging to the well-educated middle class, leaders of the local creative intellectual milieu[33] and affluent expats. 'Coolness' plays a pivotal role in nurturing the area through a combination of cultural and consumption facilities. Most shops and bars in the Loft are run by designers, presenting "sophisticated décor and unique features" (Sonn et al. 2017). Events, as well, play a crucial role in featuring the spatial spectacularization of the place. After the Biennale injection, the Loft began to regularly house high-profile art and design-related activities such as exhibitions, lectures, seminars, and fairs[34] (Sonn et al. 2017; Yuan 2020).

The creative park has become a visual and spatial representation of local, cosmopolitan middle-class tastes and culture. Even though - according to OCT Group - the set up of Loft did not intend to make an immediate profit, the group managed to gradually capitalise on the area. Commercial and cultural spaces, events like the Biennale, flea markets, jazz festivals, and the agglomeration of design companies add 'flavour' to the site and lay the bases to constantly update the existing economic, profitable infrastructures (Sonn et al. 2017). The constant turnover of activities and spatial reconfiguration within and around the district epitomise this interlocking of symbolic and economic capital. The area is in constant re-layering and re-definition: B10 building (which was temporarily occupied during the 2007 Biennale and in 2008 housed the "OCT-Loft 08 Creative Festival") is undergoing a transformation process: OCT Group commissioned URBANUS a project to turn the former tape and disk factory into a cultural space housing "a library, lecture halls, restaurants, art shops, offices and storages"[35].

A further development coincided with another interlocking between OCT-Loft and the Biennale in 2013. At that time, the event had already reached a stable international profile and its main venue was located in another former industrial area, the Guangdong Float Glass Factory. Although in the 2013 edition OCT-Loft creative park was intended as a sub-venue for the exhibition, another major restructuring was initiated out by OCT Group, coinciding with the fourth edition of the event. By 2013 District C, consisting of three factory buildings in the North Park, had been developed with 35,000 square meters of construction area. C1 building, a former package factory, was still in function in 2009 and it was emptied in 2010 to undertake the renovation process[36]. The C2 space has been transformed into a multifunctional space for

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32   The business model undertaken by OCT in OCT-Loft is broadly studied. In order to attract investments, OCT accorded incentives and special rents for the first group of tenants who moved in the Loft. Later, a strict process of selection and monitoring of the tenants has been set up in order to guarantee a high-level offer. Sonn et al. (2017) report that, according to the official statistics of OCT Loft in 2015, there are seven exhibition halls, 129 design-related firms, and 27 non-design businesses in the area. The design-related firms include architectural design studios, furniture design studios, cartoon firms, entertainment businesses, industrial design studios, fine art studios, art agencies, bookstores, galleries, animation studios, fashion houses, food companies, magazine publishers, and other creative agencies.

33   Among them: URBANUS, NODE - Nanshan Original Design, Fengchang Design, PAO - who will have a role in Biennale editions (See this chapter, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6).

34   Besides the Biennale, some of the most high-profile activities held in OCT Loft include the International Jazz Festival, the T-Street Creative Fair, and the Shenzhen Biennales of Independent Motion Pictures (Sonn et al. 2017, Yuan 2020).

35   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/projects/ocat-b10-renovation/?lang=en&map=s. Accessed 10 March 2021.

36   Interview with Wendy Wu. 28 October 2018.

showroom or concert halls and has been described by the company as the "latest masterpiece in the upgrading of [...] OCT-Loft, aiming to further develop the park into an incubating platform for creative ideas, and innovation testing ground and a public art and cultural area" (Yuan 2020, 62).

Real estate market represents, undeniably, another facet of the picture where cultural attractions interlock with the rise of property values (O'Connor and Liu, 2014). The OCT Loft Company, in charge the Loft's management, is a subsidiary of OCT Real Estate, which earns 60 million RMB in rental income from the Loft each year. Another part of the income comes from the subsidy by OCT Real Estate (Sonn et al., 2017). The Loft is often depicted as the 'sophisticated showpiece' of the OCT Group, whose value exceeds its income. This appeal further adds value to OCT's brand name's prestige, making OCT's projects - such as residential development - more profitable.

Although the original project for the Loft included residential functions, they have never been realised in the executive phase: OCT Group prioritised to keep cultural and consumption services within the Loft while realising residential development in the adjacent areas. Sonn et al. (2017, 311) point out that "the area immediately adjacent to the Loft experienced about a 100% increase in rents over the past ten years". This attitude can also be perceived in the moves undertaken by OCT Group in "urging the municipal government to raise the building density around the area" (O' Connor and Liu, 2014, 136) in order to undertake massive real estate operations[37]. The former Konka area, close to South Park, recently undertook a transformation process through a housing compound development with an average price of about 60.000 RMB/sqm[38]. Similarly, the OCT Group recently completed the New Swan Stone Castle of OCT, designed by CUBE Design, a luxury residential compound close to the Loft, whose description directly refers to the high-end experiences of "Upper East Side of New York, the Champs Elysees in Paris, Tokyo's Ginza, Causeway Bay in Hong Kong"[39]. Such a trend couples with the growing presence of creative activities in the precinct: although the rents in OCT Loft is constantly rising, creative firms still prefer to stay in the area rather than relocating in cheaper sites[40].

Moreover, the Loft experiment paved the way for a further expansion of OCT Group culture-led business. The company has expanded its network by building more galleries in other cities across China, including Shanghai, Beijing, and Chengdu. The successful partnership with the Biennale paved the way for another experiment: in 2017, OCT Group patronised the first edition of the newborn Anren Biennale in the historical old town of Anren, where the Group is leading a vast project to realise the development of "Anren China Museum Town"[41]. As O' Connor

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37   After the exhibition *A Journey of Rebirth: From Industrial Zone to Creative Cultural Park*, OCT Group organised the event *Upgrade Strategy: International Invitational Exhibition on OCT-LOFT Concept Design*: five international architects were asked to propose future visions for OCT-Loft. The increase in the floor space ratio was part of the brief to the architects (O' Connor and Liu 2014).

38   Interview with Wendy Wu. 28 October 2018.

39   https://www.archdaily.com/884926/the-new-swan-stone-castle-of-oct-cube-design?ad_medium=gallery. Accessed 18 October 2020.

40   The rent for spaces in OCT-Loft is increasing every year. For URBANUS company, the rent is 110/120 RMB/sqm. For a company who moved later in the loft, in the same building, it is 160 RMB/sqm. Even though it represents a high rent, it is still cheaper than the rents in typical office tower (around 200 RMB/sqm). Interview with Wendy Wu. October 2018.

41   http://www.china-anren.com/en/show-3-20-1.html. Accessed 18 October 2020.

Figure 4.20_Poster of the 2013 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

and Liu (2014, 137) point out, "support of art and cultural activities is often associated with adjacent real estate development or theme parks". Again this backdrop, some questions may arise: whether the operation could stem new ways to accommodate small creative businesses, or simply a new kind of real estate development model by nurturing a creative hub's cosmopolitan imagination.

4.3 Re-Pioneering Shekou: the Value Factory

The Biennale crossed again Shekou Shenzhen's post-industrial memory in 2013. The edition themed *Urban Border* kicked off on 6 December 2013 in two venues: the Value Factory and the Old Ferry terminal[42]. The Opening Ceremony pictures portrayed a big, colourful cosmopolitan crowd strolling in a newly renovated industrial complex, the former Guangdong Float Glass Factory in Shekou - re-branded as the "Value Factory" for the occasion.

2013 was a pivotal edition for the Biennale, which really got 'big', fulfilling its aspiration to become a well-established global event able to negotiate its position in the -ennials elite. The hiring - through an international Open Call - of Dutch German historian, writer and curator Ole Bouman as Creative Director further projects the event in an international context and marked a shift in the curatorial approach[43].

In 2013, the Biennale's pioneering desire flocked into an ambitious project to make the exhibition a double-edged device, pursuing both the set up of a critical discursive platform and triggering the production of physical space. The event pushed further the governmental affiliation with the Urban Planning Bureau by affirming its position as an urban actor in Shenzhen's cityscape. At its 5th edition, the event occupied again a neglected industrial area, the then dismissed Guangdong Float Glass Factory: the Value Factory transformation both initiated and consecrated the "urban catalyst" narrative surrounding the event's agency in Shenzhen's urban cultural policies.

In OCT-Loft, the Biennale had a temporary nature. In the Value Factory case, both the event's organising apparatus and the developer cooperated to trigger site-specific, long-term spatial transformation - already embedded in the exhibition's intentions. OCT-Loft cultural and creative cluster's success was arguably an inspiration for the transformative operations undertaken in Shekou area under the Biennale cultural brand, attempting to create a new cultural hub in Shenzhen by upgrading a dismissed industrial area. At that time, the trend was consolidating elsewhere in the country. The - first provincial, then national - "Three Olds Policy" and the shift from "Made in China" to "Created in China" (Keane 2006; Yuen 2013) help to

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42   Two curators' teams worked in the two different venues of the Biennale. Ole Bouman (Curator and Creative Director), Jorn Konjin, Lei Liu (Co-Curators) and Vivian Zuidhof (project Co-ordinator) were the apponinted curators for the Value Factory in the former Guangdong Float Glass factory; Li Xiangning and Jeffrey Johnson (Curators and Academic Directors), Ye Zhu, GuoChuan Fung, Lou Yongqi, Young Zhang, Du Qingchun (Co-Curators), Sabrina Minqing Ni, Zoe Florence (Assistant Curators) were in charge of the curation of the exhibition in the Shekou Old Ferry Terminal.

43   Bouman's curation established connections with different partners: among them, the Museum of Modern Art, the Sao Paulo Architecture Biennale, the MIT Center for Advanced Urbanism, the MAXXI Architettura, the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, the Het Niewe Instituut, the Berlage Laboratorium, OMA-Office for Metropolitan Architecture, the Chinese University of Hong Kong & the University of Hong Kong, the Museum of Finnish Architecture, the Victoria & Albert Museum. See Oosterman (2014).

Figure 4.21_Overall view of the Guangdong Float Glass Factory before the transformation. Source: O-Office Architects. © O-Office Architects.

Figure 4.22_The Guangdong Float Glass Factory before the transformation: site entrance. Source: O-Office Architects. © O-Office Architects.

contextualise some initiatives involving other biennials "with Chinese Characteristics" leaning on the combination of culture and urban transformation. The 2013 Biennale almost paralleled the 2013 Shanghai Biennale for Architecture and Contemporary Art, curated by Yung Ho Chang (who already led the 2005 Shenzhen Biennale), which experimented spatial transformations in the West Bund area: as Zhou (2017, 404) points out, "the West Bund Biennale was one of key parts of the publicity campaign for making the West Bund Shanghai's own 'Rive Gauche' or 'South Bank' and was the prelude to a series of openings by a number of cultural institutions".

4.3.1 Placing Shekou

The 2013 Biennale opened under the theme *Urban Border*. Ole Bouman's reiterated slogan surrounding the exhibition, "biennale as a risk"[44], was arguably not chosen by chance. Bouman purposely used "border" and "risk" to both underline the ambitious character of the operation and establish a powerful narrative association with the Biennale venue.

A giant billboard in the Machine Hall welcomed the visitors with the motto "Welcome to the Special Culture Zone". The whole display and transformation operation revealed a strong symbolic meaning in re-enacting Shenzhen's past, inextricably linked to Shekou's history. Shekou Special Industrial Zone - portrayed in one of the earliest maps of Shenzhen as the "circle" drawn by China Merchants representative Yuang Geng in 1979 (Du 2019, 39) - was one of the first development areas of the newly created Special Economic Zone. The area was considered a forerunner and the real "test bed" of the "Reforms and Opening Up" initiative, able to initiate a "Shekou Mode" as an inspiring reference for national policies (Oosterman 2014, 22). Notably, China Merchants Group was the first State-Owned Enterprise to operate in the area by injecting industrial transformations and real estate operations unprecedented at that time[45]. Shekou's bold experiment epitomised the pioneering character of Shenzhen both in terms of industrialisation and urbanisation; it also represented the only sea point of connection with Hong Kong, which was provided by the Shekou Ferry Terminal.

4.3.2 Heritage, memory and value

The choice of the former Guangdong Glass Factory as one of the exhibition's main venues came from a decisional process involving Nanshan District, Shenzhen Urban Planning Bureau, the Biennale Organizing Committee and China Merchants Group[46]. After two thriving decades, the area experienced a de-industrialisation phase that triggered a broader reflection about its future potential urban transformation processes. After the progressive relocation of industries, China Merchants developers, which managed the area, decided to invest in the refurbishment of the buildings and figure as one of the main sponsors of the 2013 Biennale. Creative Director Ole Bouman and the Biennale Organizing Committee reached an agreement with landowners to explore a long-term investment for the area's development.

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44 From 2013 Shenzhen Biennale Press Release, 22 December 2013. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

45 For an extensive account of Shekou's history, see O' Donnell, Wong and Bach (2017); Chen (2017); Du (2019).

46 Interview with Ole Bouman, 3 November 2018; interwiew with Huang Weiwen, 5 November 2018.

The abandoned industrial site represented a symbolic location: the factory ceased its activity in 2009 (Schuldenfrei 2019), and its history reflects the story of contemporary Chinese industrial development[47]. The glass factory embedded the utopian ideal of modernisation of the whole country through the creation of monumental industrial objects, instruments and buildings[48]. Zheng Yulong - the former general manager of Department of planning and Land Development of China Merchants Shekou Industrial Zone Co., LTD - explained the choice to transform the old factory: with its 30 years of history, its "amazing spatial power and unforgettable venue spirit", it embodied the memory of the first urbanisation and industrialisation of Shenzhen and "Reforms and Opening Up". This move consolidated the trend injected by the "Three Olds Policy" in the whole country; nevertheless, a more pragmatical side of the coin explained the choice to revitalise the area to drive industrial transformation and promote urban vitality (Zheng 2014, 22-23).

Zhang Yuxing (2014, 11), President of the Shenzhen Biennale Organizing Committee, underscored how the successful experience of OCT-Loft between 2004 and 2011 somehow influenced the transformative intentions expressed by China Merchants Group for the Value Factory in a preparatory workshop held by the developers and the Biennale Organizing Committee. Nevertheless, OCT-Loft operation was labelled as "commercial". In the Value Factory transformation, both the Biennale and developer's intentions focused instead on the creation of another kind of relationship between the venue and the city: rather than setting up a mono-functional venue, the project aimed at opening flexible perspectives through spatial freedom, "integrating" the city. Unlike OCT-Loft operation, the original project for the 2013 Biennale envisioned the transformation of the exhibition into a "public education platform about the built environment and the city-making" (Huang 2014, 7), making explicit the 'urban catalyst' narrative that will accompany the event. According to Bouman, the notion of 'value' (which acted as a thread for the whole conceptual and spatial curatorial process) was embedded in the transformation and restoration of both the identity of the building and the peculiar features of the existing architecture. Contrasting the well-rehearsed architectural *tabula rasa* approach in creating new spatial configurations, in Bouman's vision "value" is attained by respecting "what is already good", through the coexistence of old and new[49]. Creating 'value', in the curatorial intentions, "is not about imposing a new reality on top of the old. It is about mutating, modifying, shading. It is also a very creative act, but coming out of a different mentality [...]. Creating value now means to transform existing value, to turn it into new value" (Bouman 2014c, 76). In the curatorial intentions, besides the spatial transformation, the future Value Factory would have represented the infrastructure to establish a new creative, social and educational urban space for Shekou.

4.3.3 Negotiating the transformation

After the first site survey in February 2013, the idea gradually emerged to direct economic

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47   (1997) *The Glass Road*. Carmenate: Luigi Massoni Editore. Printed for Inglen Group.

48   Interview with He Jianxiang, founder and partner at O-Office Architects. 15 October 2018.

49   From the *Venue A Preface* "Towards a Value Factory for Shenzhen". Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.
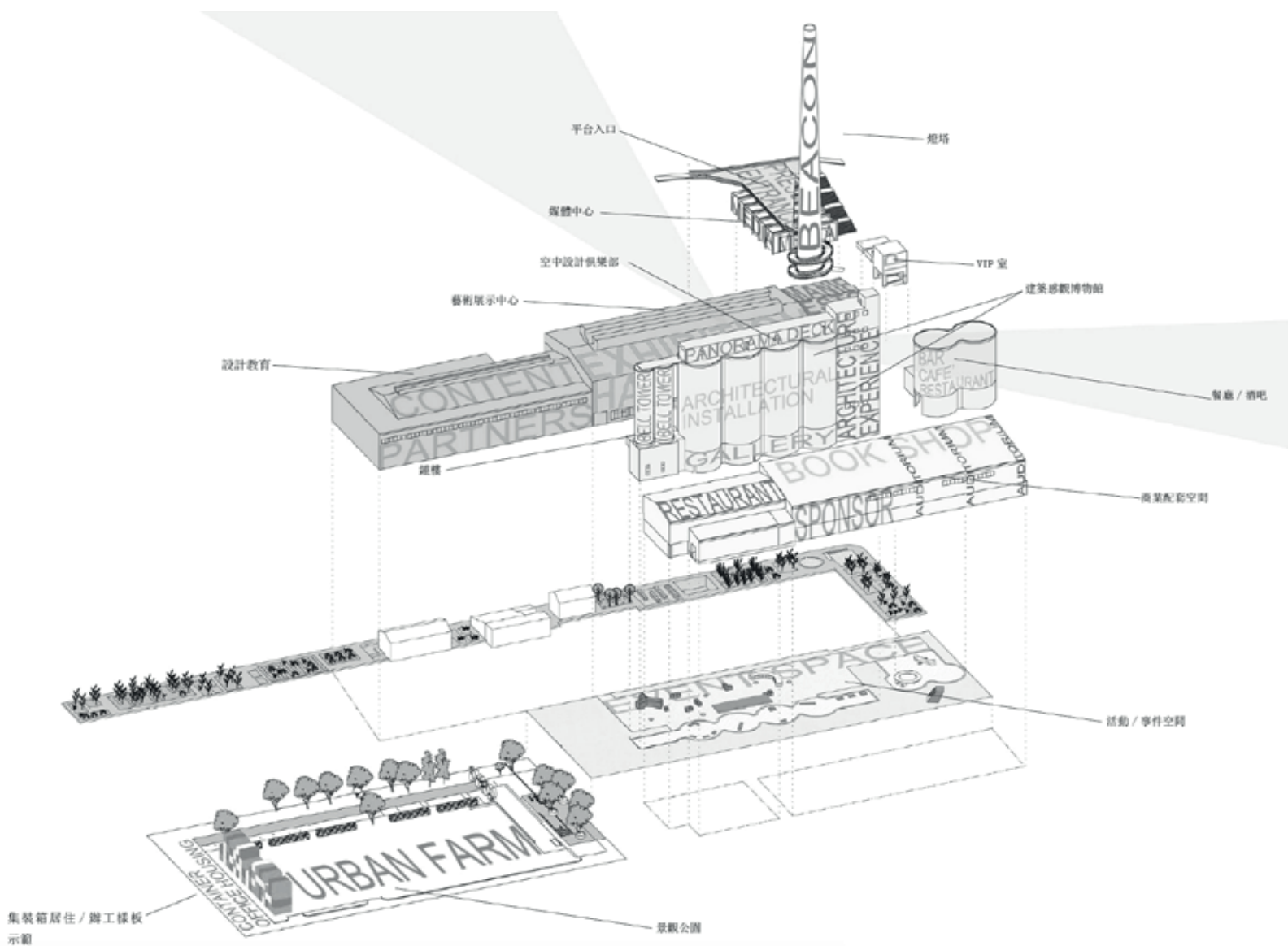
Figure 4.23_The "Value Factory" master plan. Source: O-Office Architects.© O-Office Architects.

and branding investments for the 5th Biennale as "a stage in long term development" (Bouman 2014c, 75) by creating a triangular negotiation between the public sector, corporate developers and the curatorial team. Accordingly, Bouman rejected the conventional role of 'curator' in favour of a "Creative Director" one, mediating between the owner/investor and the event's organisers. Contextually, the curatorial side leant on the Biennale as a public cultural institution explicitly positioned in an urban actor's double-edged role linked to the developers' stances.

According to Huang (2014), one of the primary purposes of the 2013 Biennale was to raise developers' awareness of the inner value of their building. Besides the concern for industrial heritage preservation, in both Biennale Organizing Committee's and curators' intentions another primary scope was to set up a broad physical and conceptual space for reflection and education in (and about) the city.

While a purely top-down corporate initiative characterised the OCT-Loft experience, the Biennale Committee was looking for a public-private partnership for the Value Factory. On the

Figure 4.24_Silo Building before the transformation: site visit of the design team for the Shenzhen Biennale 2013. Source: O-Office Architects.© O-Office Architects.

Figure 4.25_Silo Building before the transformation: site visit of the curatorial team for the Shenzhen Biennale 2013. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee.

one hand, Shenzhen Planning Department endorsed the re-use of the old plants in Shekou's area, persuading China Merchants to collaborate with the Biennale Committee. On the other hand, China Merchants Group arguably exploited the project's broad scope and the Biennale cultural brand to inject a highly distinctive spatial transformation, placing the area at the centre of future development. Zheng Yulong (2014a, 73) pointed out that the transformation project injected through the Biennale was functional both to the revitalisation/protection of old buildings and to explore new functions for the area, mixing consultations with curators and the planning of economical investments. Besides the extensive storytelling around the cultural value embedded in the transformation, a pragmatist attitude was clearly expressed by Bouman: "China Merchants invests in the Biennale, but also in themselves. And we think that this will make it possible to turn this factory into a school, an academy, an incubator" (Bouman 2014a, 15).

Similarly to the beginning of OCT-Loft transformation, China Merchants' intentions on the area's development were flexible: according to Zheng (2014b), the transformation of the factory in an 'Academy' or in a 'School' seemed in line with the developers' intentions. Nevertheless, a strong grade of indeterminacy characterised the project since the beginning; China Merchants Group's intentions aimed to keep different options open, due to the significant financial resources requested both by the venue transformation[50].

4.3.4 Transforming the Guangdong Float Glass Factory

The curatorial team's experimental ambitions presented a further layer in the transformation process, represented by the group of architects selected to design the Value Factory site: several local and international designers were involved in the negotiation process between curators, designers and developers (Bouman 2014c). The 2013 Biennale was intended as a process. Over two months, the Guangzhou-based architectural practice O-Office and Creative Director Ole Bouman worked together: a ten-days workshop took place inside the factory together with fifteen young offices to gather ideas for the building's renovation and elaborate the masterplan.

The transformation of the exhibition site monopolized the 2013 Biennale narrative. The curatorial stance propelled a tight relationship between the building's productive past in Shekou Industrial Area and the Biennale as a device producing culture. Space and architecture represented the thread leading this overall narrative, evoking what Jones (2017, 216) refers to as "the relation of aesthetic experience to labour". As expressed in the curatorial statement, the Biennale was "a vehicle for change, for real change [producing] leverage for alternative histories and a new future"[51]. The curatorial description depicted the original building as a "machine" whose transformation process triggered a shift from industrial production to cultural contents. The transformation aimed at reinterpreting the industrial legacy through a non-interventionist strategy. The manipulation of space was reduced to some basic moves, in "doing almost nothing" (Bouman 2014b, 130): the re-layering of new circulation systems, new openings and some architectural elements, evoking a sort of "architectural voyeurism" (Schuldenfrei 2019).

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50   Zheng (2014b, 23) underlined that different activities - triggering different forms of knowledge and development for the area - could be housed in the cluster: "think tank, museum space, or a studio [...] performing societal services to cope with certain problems we encountered, about providing inspiration and technical support for the development of Shekou".

51   Shenzhen Biennale 2013 Press Release. Source: Shenzhen Biennale Archives.

The whole project revolved around the notions of 'experience' and 'scale', which are often associated to global biennials worldwide - where real-scale installations colonise the exhibition space offering an "aesthetic of experience" to the visitors (Jones 2017).

Three of the fifteen architecture offices involved in the process were local Chinese architects. O-Office was in charge of the coordination of the general master plan for the site. The spatial programme did not envision specific functions for each building: in contrast with the pure functionalism of the original complex, the transformation of the industrial area was conceived as an open platform, where "the buildings served as containers of nothing" (Schuldenfrei 2019)[52]. Contextually, O-Office carried out the transformation of the Silo building[53]. At that time, the office had completed the refurbishment of a silo warehouse in Guangzhou. The Biennale project was carried out shortly before to the conversion of a derelict industrial area in the outskirts of Shenzhen, ID-Town: the 2013 Biennale intervention affirmed their approach to contemporary industrial legacy.

The transformation of the Machine Hall, conceived by Shenzhen-based FangCheng Design (FCHA)[54], was another prominent intervention in the master plan. Bouman's vision defined the vast industrial building not just as an architectural artefact but rather as a 'machine' evoking the glorious industrial past of Shekou - and of Shenzhen at large. A strong narrative permeated the whole design, where the overwhelming presence of red lights evoked the original function of the former furnace, re-enacting the building's historical past.

The notion of experience extensively permeated the project: through a dialectical interplay between space, matter, shadow, light, curves and linearity, outdoor and indoor environments, the transformation of the site underlined its monumentality through a sequence of spaces and a *promenade architecturale:* like a giant, fragmented relic belonging to the past but acting as a bridge between past and future.

The project also triggered a reflection on scale. The architectural interventions realised for the 2013 Biennale aimed at enhancing a new human relationship with space, in contrast with the massive dimension of the derelict productive buildings. This feature is apparent both in the Silo building (with the insertion of glass catwalks and steel ramps) and in the realisation of the floating Entrance Pavilion carried out by the Shenzhen-based practice NODE - Nanshan Original Design.

Although being a temporary event whose set up was strongly affected by the frantic time-span typical of a recurrent exhibition[55], the 2013 Biennale tried to attain an a-temporal dimension by setting up the basis for a long-term perspective. In this perspective, Bouman (2014a, 15) underlines the passage from concept to strategy and strategy to "real plan". The Value Factory was not envisioned as a space to showcase architecture but an "address to work from". The curatorial vision aimed at pursuing the strategic functional plan envisioned for the Biennale, where future institutions (Value Factory Studio, Value Factory Academy, Value Factory Public Program) could play a role in creating a critical context of reflection on urban

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52   As He Jianxiang underscores, the masterplan was conceived not envisioning a specific functional program but thinking about "the possible activities that could happen" in the factory. The masterplan privileged the processing approach, rejecting the idea of housing fixed functions. Interview with He Jianxiang. 15 October 2018.

53   http://www.o-officearch.com. Accessed 10 October 2020.

54   http://fcharchi.com. Accessed 10 October 2020.

55   All the transformations were carried out in four months. Interview with He Jianxiang. 15 October 2018.

Figure 4.26_View of the Guangdong Float Glass Factory transformation into the "Value Factory" for the 2013 Shenzhen Biennale. Picture by Zeus Photography. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 4.27_The Guangdong Float Glass Factory transformation: the Machine Hall designed by FangCheng Design. Picture by Zeus Photography. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 4.28_The Guangdong Float Glass Factory transformation into the "Value Factory": site entrance. Picture by Zeus Photography. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 4.29_The Guangdong Float Glass Factory transformation into the "Value Factory": the "Floating Pavillion" designed by NODE. Picture by Zeus Photography. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

issues. In order to make this process explicit, Bouman elaborated a "manifesto", where the spatial and programmatic steps undertaken to realise the Value Factory set up the basis to inject future perspectives, notably the infrastructural connection with the Shekou Industry Park and the strategic partnership with international partners (Bouman 2014b).

It is possible to observe how curatorial intentions aimed at creating a physical and conceptual space for reflection on the city, conveniently combining with the growing ambitions of the Biennale, which in 2013 made apparent its role of cultural and urban actor. The spatial interventions undertaken on the former Guangdong Float Glass Factory represented the *trait d'union* between curatorial statements and governmental agenda. The emphasis on light material interventions, on flexibility, and the aesthetics of the 'relic' were functional to inject new reflections on approaching the post-industrial legacy. Moreover, they arguably helped to position the 2013 Biennale in line with the great international biennials by recalling a well-rehearsed international language shared by a vast cosmopolitan public. On the other hand, real estate developers' role should not be overlooked: China Merchants Group took advantage of the same flexibility and openness to explore (and arguably exploit) the potential of future transformation plans that overcome the Value Factory's spatial imprint.

4.3.5 The role of China Merchants Group

The interconnection between developers represented by Zheng Yulong, the Biennale Organizing Committee and the curatorial team configured China Merchants Group - who still manages today a relevant part of the Shekou Area - not just as a sponsor, but as a real stakeholder with a long-term perspective[56] in the Value Factory project. A public-private partnership was initiated: as the managers of the area, China Merchants provided the spaces and financed the transformation project while the District of Nanshan financed the infrastructure connecting the site, with a consistent investment. (Bouman 2014a, 15).

The Biennale represented an occasion for China Merchants Group, who toyed with the idea of replicating the 'creative' spaces of OCT-Loft in Shekou in order to shed lights on the future development area. Since its foundation, Shekou was considered a 'special' zone inside the Special Economic Zone (Du 2019). In 2010, the transformation plan for the "Reconstruction of New Shekou" was announced, envisioning strategies of urban renewal and industrial upgrading. Yang Tianping (2014, 16), General Manager of China Merchants Shekou Industrial Zone Co.,LTD, defined the initiative as a "systematic project" aimed at transforming Shekou "into a new coastal town" and at enhancing its position "as a benchmark for China's regional industrial transformation upgrading": the Value Factory and its future development conveniently fitted in this frame, since cultural and creative industries were listed among the highlights of the project.

The project leaned on three strategic development goals (Yang 2014, 15). Shekou was part of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Innovation Corporation Pioneering Zone: the intention of the "Two Zones and Two Bases" plan was to position the area as a high-end service, science & technology and cultural & creative industry base. Through the transformation of old industries, the "Two Belts and Three Centers" initiative aimed at creating a technology industry and network information belt running along Yanshan Road Area in Shekou. The Shekou Net Valley project epitomised the initiative: labelled as an excellent project in the context of the "12th Five-Year

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56   Interview with Ole Bouman. 3 November 2018.

Plan" and located in a former low-tech manufacturing area, now it covers an area of 420,000 square meters and it is a recognised hi-tech hub housing branches and headquarters of over 400 world-renowned enterprises (Yang 2020)[57]. In this frame, a cultural and creative industry belt[58] would ideally stretch along the former industrial port area "to former Sanyo industrial site via Shekou Sea World" by contextually developing three high-end commercial and business centres (Garden City, Shekou Sea World and Taizi Bay). A network of "Six Projects" ("Smart Shekou", "Low Carbon Shekou", "Cultural Shekou", "Accessible Shekou", "Safe Shekou" and "Happy Shekou"), moreover, was envisioned as an integrative supportive system for the new urban zone (Yang 2014, 15).

China Merchants' representative Yang Tianping (2014, 17) pointed out that the project for the refurbishment of the old industrial areas (including the Value factory) envisioned a broader scope through guiding "new industries to replace traditional industries" following long-term planning and to "promote urban development". Commenting on the project, Zheng (2014b, 23) recognised the "technical, and economic problems" related to the venue's transformation: nevertheless, with its 180,000 visitors, the Value Factory was highly instrumental in this frame. A plethora of initiatives and events was arranged in the footsteps of the Biennale to revitalise the area. Design workshops - patronised by developers - contributed to bringing attention to relevant urban issues in the "Relaunch Shekou" initiative. Among them, a design workshop called "Shekou setting out again" aimed at gathering ideas to envision future developments for the area (Zheng 2014a, 72). The results of the workshop were presented on 26 February 2014, focusing the attention on the future scenarios of transformation of the Dacheng Flour Factory, the future 2015 Biennale Venue , which will be later involved in the Taizi Bay development (Zheng 2014a, 73).

4.3.6. A suspended legacy: 'value' for whom?

Bouman's curatorial vision and the Biennale Organizing Committee's plans envisioned the Value Factory not as a place of (cultural and commercial) consumption but rather as a place of cultural production. Nevertheless, the legacy left by the the event tells a different story, somehow contrasting with the persuasive narrative which permeated the whole operation during promotional campaigns and the making of the exhibition.

The 2013 Biennale was defined as a "starting point". After March 2014, China Merchants was supposed to develop a mid-term strategic plan for the Value Factory within the frame of the "Re-Launch Shekou" initiative whose "research results in urban construction projects in Shekou [would] be demonstrated at the next [2015] Biennale" (Zheng 2014b, 23). In this framework, Shekou's transformation would have proceeded through "short, middle and long-term development plans" (Zheng 2014a, 73). In the short and mid-term, Shekou port and a wharf would have been implemented "to extend the vitality of the biennale exhibition", together with the development of a design industry hub by using existing spaces and the planning of the areas surrounding the Value Factory to address transportational, functional and logistic issues. In the

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57   The set of enterprises include "Apple Inc., IBM, the Perceptions Group, Siecom, UGO, HKSTV, Feng. com, and SXIT". The hub represents also a valuable real estate operation: according to Yang (2020) "the output value per unit area exceeds 60,000 yuan per square meter, most of which involves innovative Internet services".

58   Including the areas of "Creative Shekou Island", "Nanhai E-COOL", "Tide Dock" and "Industrial Design Port" are the main projects of the belt.

Figure 4.30_View of the "Tasting Fest" in the "Value Farm" installation designed by Thomas Chung. Picture by Thomas Chung. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 4.31_Entrance to the Machine Hall during the 2013 Shenzhen Biennale . Picture by Zeus Photography. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

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Figure 4.32_Entrance to the "I-Factory" site today. Picture by the author.

Unfinished office building   **Korean restaurant**
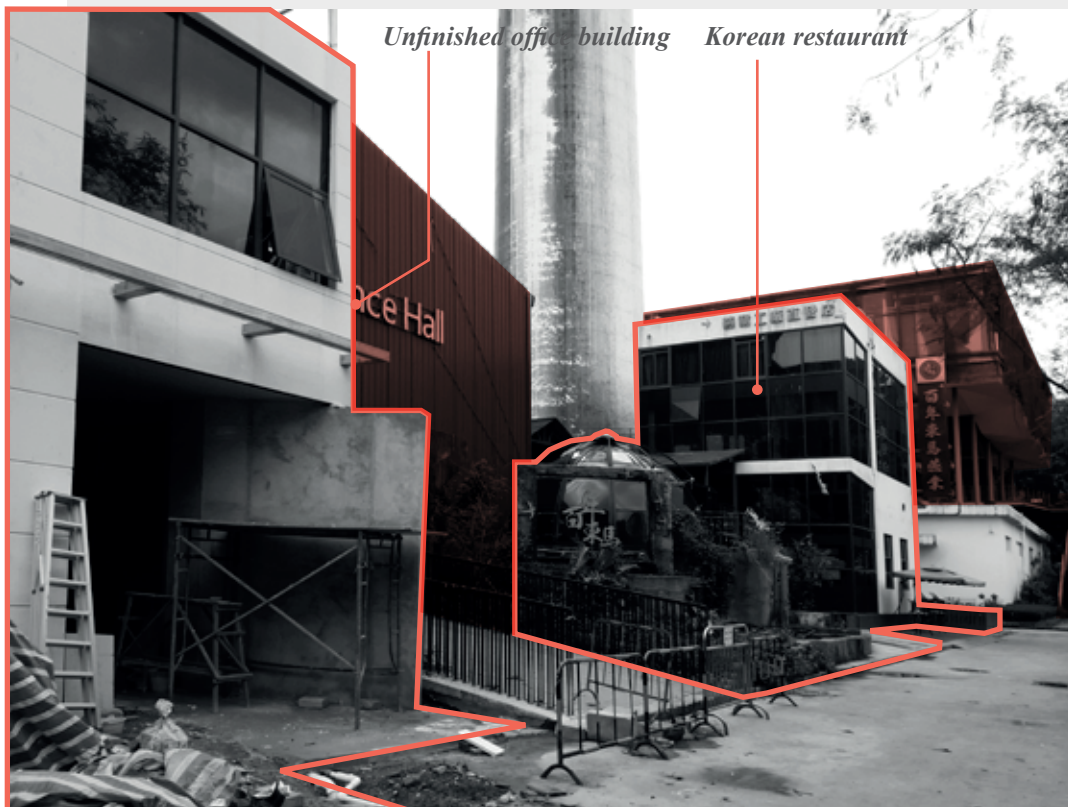
Figure 4.33_Hybridization of the 2013 Shenzhen Biennale legacy: the former Machine Hall entrance with the new constructions. Picture by the author.

Figure 4.34_The Silo Building and the Warehouse today. Picture by the author.

Figure 4.35_Portion of the "Re-value Factory" project by FangCheng Design realised: the Brand Studios. Picture by the author.

long term, the developers envisioned the transformation of the Dacheng Flour Factory - after one year of planning through the exhibition - in a "cultural landmark in Taizi Bay". The declared intention of the operation was to develop an *avant-garde* centre with an "international cultural atmosphere". Contextually to the physical transformation of space, a vast array of cultural institutions, design institutes and art museums were contacted to set educational programs in the area.

After the 2013 UABB, the future of the Value Factory was at stake. Bouman envisioned the project of educational spaces and a design school (the "Value Academy"), Li Xiangning proposed a museum to celebrate Shekou industrial history, while other proposals aimed at exploring the possibility to develop the realisation of a creative park and public art facilities. A project called "I-Factory" was initiated shortly after the exhibition. China Merchants Group appointed FangCheng Design (FCHA) - who carried out the Machine Hall's design during the Biennale process - to design the future development of the Value Factory, labelled "Re-Value Factory". The project of implementation is still visible on a billboard on the walls of the Machine Hall. The master plan, which was supposed to be completed in 2015, envisioned the realisation of a research and development industrial park and a mixed-use compound with exhibition spaces, workshops, housing and offices for an overall surface of 47,600 square meters. In the project, the original Machine Hall maintained the function of an exhibition site and the Silo building would host a design museum. Other functions joined the project: a "School of Design" and a "Innovation Research Institute" represented the cores of the new master plan, which would have led the hub "to a higher-end integrated design park", while a "high-rise space on the north side" would host corporate office spaces[59].

The overall design tried to engulf and reinforce the original 2013 Biennale interventions in a spatially segmented and modern 'industrial atmosphere' expansion, defined by the designers as a "perfect layout that takes into account efficiency and function, and meets the needs of industrial design companies"[60] - negating de facto the freedom, flexibility and 'value' which Bouman's curatorial statements acknowledged to the memory of place.

Despite developers' ambitions, today the process seems frozen - or at least far from promotional images of the branded yet-to-be development: what passers-by can see looks like a suspended environment whose vitality seems bound to the fragmented presence of temporary events. The material legacy of the Value Factory seems to be suspended, and it seems to have become part of the venue's industrial past. Local tourists and young people stroll in the area, using the architectural fragments left by the Biennale (notably, the cor-ten doors of the Silo building) and the graffiti on the walls as backgrounds for photo shooting. At the entrance of the site, a couple of grill bars and restaurants welcome the visitors. The 'Value Farm', one of the most photographed installations of the 2013 Biennale designed by Hong-Kong based Thomas Chung, has been replaced by a concrete slab housing a parking lot. The Silo building is currently closed, as well as the floating entrance designed by NODE. The entrance stairway and the catwalk are not accessible to the public and a couple of new buildings - one still empty and one housing a Korean restaurant - have been realised backed against the Machine Hall[61]. The

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59   http://fcharchi.com/?portfolio=蛇口工业设计港-industrial-design-port-of-shekou.   Accessed   6 May 2020.

60   http://fcharchi.com/?portfolio=蛇口工业设计港-industrial-design-port-of-shekou. Translated from Chinese. Accessed 6 May 2020.

61   Site surveys made by the author. 10 October 2018 and 3 May 2019.

Floating Pavillion
2013 Biennale
Re-Value Factory
New Expansion 2014
Property management offices

Re-Value Factory
New Expansion 2014
Innovation research institute

Re-Value Factory
New Expansion 2014
Corporate buildings

Silo Building
2013 Biennale
Re-Value Factory
New Expansion 2014
Design Museum
Offices
Book Cafe

Re-Value Factory
New Expansion 2014
Temporary commercial
facilities

Re-Value Factory
New Expansion 2014
Brand Studios

XXXXX
2013 Biennale
Re-Value Factory
New Expansion 2014
Design Academy

Chimney Lighthouse
+
Machine Hall
2013 Biennale
Re-Value Factory
New Expansion 2014
Exhibition Hall

Figure 4.36_Axonometric view of the "Re-value Factory" project by FangCheng Design. Source: FangCheng Design. © FangCheng Design. Re-elaboration by the author.

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former Machine Hall space is now mainly used as a temporary exhibition site: the First Shenzen Design Week opening ceremony was held in I-Factory on 21 April 2017[62].

The narrative of architectural and functional openness praised by Bouman and Zheng Yulong throughout all the 2013 Biennale process has left the floor to a fenced, guarded and secluded area regulated by opening times and surrounded by other industrial sites. New spatial interventions have been realised, including the set up of container-style buildings which host offices and housing functions for design sector workers - arguably, the inception for the ambitious 'Re-Value Factory' plan - but they look currently underused and lacking an exact function[63].

Although the I-Factory is still running, labelled as a "creative district", the site is still waiting for developers' future decisions. Some reasons can be arguably found in the site's strategic position, considering future urban development patterns of the area. Shekou is located in a decentralised position and is recently expanding westwards towards the Qianhai area. The development of Qianhai is a key node both in the Greater Bay Strategy - labelled as the "Qianhai Shenzhen-Hong Kong Modern Service Industry Cooperation Zone"[64] - and in Shenzhen's urban scenario development, since it represents the connection with Dongguang, the new airport and the High-Speed Railway connection with Hong Kong. Moreover, the area bordering the Bay is a Free Trade Zone: the connection with the recent urban development of the city arguably plays a role in shaping the developers' intentions[65]. Contextually to the area's development, it is relevant to note how in 2014 - one year after the Biennale event - real estate values significantly increased in Shekou, passing from 1200 to 30000 RMB/sqm (Yang 2014, 15). Arguably, setting up of a Free Trade Zone and the increase of real estate values - combined with the ongoing massive Taizi Bay development - played a crucial role in the current deadlock of the I-Factory master plan, pushing developers to adopt a 'wait and see' strategy to better position a future transformation of the site.

Reading further the interlocking of China Merchants' intentions, curatorial ambitions, the Biennale 'temporariness' and recent spatial transformations in Shekou, arguably the most apparent legacy of the 2013 Biennale - and of Bouman's Value Factory- can be retraced outside the venue's boundaries. The partnership established between China Merchants Group, artistic director Ole Bouman and the Victoria and Albert Museum during the Biennale turned out to be crucial in shaping what is widely praised as one of the most relevant cultural centres in Shenzhen, the "Design Society". On his side, Bouman successfully negotiated with the developers his role as director of the newly born cultural institution[66]. The brand new white sculptural building, designed by Fumihko Maki and Associates, and proclaimed as "China's First dedicated Culture&Design centre", stands as a spectacular highlight in the commercial and entertainment "Sea World" compound (Lynch 2017). Although the great emphasis put on the preservation of the Shekou's industrial memory, value and relic, the setting up of such shiny iconic space leans more on the pursue of a well-rehearsed 'Bilbao Effect' rather than on the experimental ambitions which featured the initial statements of the Value Factory.

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62   http://2017.en.sz.design/article?id=97&cid=4. Accessed 5 May 2019. No more accessible.

63   Site surveys conducted by the author. 10 October 2018 and 3 May 2019.

64   http://www.szqh.com.cn and https://www.bayarea.gov.hk/en/about/shenzhen.html. Accessed 15 November 2020.

65   Interview with Huang Weiwen. 5 November 2018.

66   According to the latest update, Ole Bouman left his role as the Design Society Director in December 2020. http://www.designsociety.cn/en/category/news-list/detail!OleBoumanRetires. Accessed 8 April 2021.

Figure 4.37_Poster of the 2015 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

4.4 Dacheng Flour Factory and Prince Bay

Walking westwards along Gangwan Avenue from Shekou Port Station - the last metro stop of Line 2 - a passer-by may step into a curious array of objects: a sparkling building with winking curved shapes in the middle of a well-kept English lawn, a long series of fences, and large construction site with glazed towers. In the background, a building looks like a mix between a wave and a shark's fin. At the edge of the large Shekou Port area, four tall industrial silos enclosed within a fenced site seem to resist the advance of the new surrounding urban development: the silos are what remains of the former Dacheng Flour Factory and the most representative legacy of the Biennale's 5th edition.

4.4.1 Shekou redux

Arguably in the wake of the 2013 experience, the 2015 Biennale encountered Shenzhen's post-industrial legacy for the third time and, for the second time in a row, Shekou - representing also the second cooperation between the Biennale and China Merchants Group.

In 2011 China Merchants Group already envisioned some plans for the area within the "China Merchants 2011-2020" strategy (China Merchants Group 2011). The *trait d'union* between the 2013 and 2015 editions can be individuated in the "Shekou Re-Launch" strategy as a frame to contextualise the area's future transformation. According to Zheng Yulong, China Merchants aimed at exploring new ways to face Shekou's urban redevelopment that can "represent the direction of China's industrial upgrading and urban renewal": in this framework, the Biennale intended to "catalyse chain reaction in urban development". The narrative propelled by the developer portrayed "Shekou Relaunch" both as a consequence of the 2013 Biennale and as a catalyst for the 2015 event: since March 2014 (coinciding with the closing of the 2013 Biennale), seven work-packages (among which architectural planning works and diverse artistic activities) were activated, arguably to extend the Biennale agency to the next edition (Zheng 2014a, 72).

Former Biennale's Executive Director Huang Weiwen (2014, 8) already expressed in 2013 the idea of housing in Shekou the following edition of the event : the initial idea was to host the Biennale again into the Value Factory. As he declared, the Biennale Organizing Committee aimed at "having the next [...] two or three Biennales in this location [to] push for the transformation of the site into a design school", thus making Bouman's vision effective. Contrary to the event's Organizing Committee expectations, nevertheless, the stage for the 2015 Biennale was the abandoned Dacheng Flour Factory site, located 500 meters far from the Value Factory. The process leading to the choice (and to the transformation) of Dacheng Flour Factory somehow interlocked the 2013 former Biennale Venue: during the 2013 Biennale, China Merchants promoted a workshop in the Dacheng Flour Factory, named "Rebuilding project of Shekou Dacheng Flour Factory" (Yang 2014, 17). Besides the workshop, a series of activities called "Restart of Shekou" animated the site to "emphasise the experience of space by the participants". Four renowned architecture offices took part in the workshop: NODE, Archi-Union Architects, J.Mayer H.Architects and Ryue Nishizawa. The outcomes were presented on 26 February 2014 to gather ideas for the Dacheng Flour Factory future development into a "new humanistic landmark of Shekou and a vanguard art and cultural centre" (Zheng 2014a, 73).

Both China Merchants and the Biennale Organizing Committee ambitions mirrored the

Figure 4.38_The Dacheng Flour Factory site during the conversion for the 2015 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 4.39_The Dacheng Flour Factory site during the conversion for the 2015 Shenzhen Biennale: Silo building and Warehouse no.8. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

growing cosmopolitan appeal of the 2015 event. The international Open Call for curators resulted in a mixed curatorial team of domestic and international components: Aaron Betsky, Alfredo Brillembourg, Hubert Klumpner and Doreen Heng Liu[67]. Contextually, the consolidation of the partnership with China Merchants in Shekou - and the Biennale's affirmation as a mediator between curatorial stances and developers - aimed at making the 2013 intentions to build a long-term relationship between the event and the cityscape even more effective.

4.4.2 Re-living the factory

As happened in 2013, the spatial *mise en scène* of the Biennale was inextricably connected to the site's transformation. Again, the intervention's spatial and theoretical nodes revolved around the rediscovery of Shekou's industrial memory. Differently from 2013, nevertheless, the architectural project explicitly matched the 2015 Biennale overarching theme, *Re-Living the City*. As curator Aaron Betsky (2016, 25) underscored, "we have enough stuff. [...] What we need to do is to reuse, rethink and reimagine what we already have". Thus, the selection of the site and its transformation represented a literal, physical manifestation of both the event's theme and curatorial statement. Dacheng Flour Mills in Shekou - realised in the 1980s and shut down in 2010 as result of Shekou's industrial upgrading - were defined as "a historical memorial for Shenzhen people"[68]. Doreen Heng Liu was one of the four Chinese architects who managed the Guangdong Glass Factory transformation in 2013: two years later, her architectural practice NODE, based in OCT-Loft in Shenzhen, was in charge of the whole venue design.

The 're-activation' principle proposed by NODE aimed to "adapt to and give full play to the existing conditions and maximise the reuse of objects"[69]. The project insisted on the re-functionalisation of three main areas - the 'Interconnected Silos', Building #3 and Building #8 - and on newly created additions - the 'Auditorium' and the 'Staircase'. The project acted both as an exhibition space and a full-scale mock-up of the site's potential transformation scenario after the event. The resemblance with the 2013 operation is just seemingly apparent. Differently from what happened in the Value Factory - where design emphasised the monumentality of space - the 2015 project shed light on the interaction with the contemporary, 'generic' features of existing industrial ruins to be enhanced through a re-layering of objects and spaces: the focus was less on the strategic development programme, than on reimagining functions and space for the area and its future development.

The transformation of Building 3#, for instance, envisioned the implantation of new functions in what was defined as "a mediocre shell", a "quite ordinary frame-structured building of least feature". The new spatial combination orchestrated a functional mix to define "a micro complex

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67   The curators team was staffed by: Aaron Betsky, Alfredo Brillembourg & Hubert Klumpner, Doreen Heng Liu (Curators); Renny Ramakers, Jason Hilgefort & Merve Bedir, Benjamin Ward (Co-Curators) (Shapiro 2016).

68   DaChan Flour Mills can be dated to 1980. In October, 1990, Taiwan-based DaChan Food Limited absorbed it with the name "DaChan Food (Shekou) Company". The company managed the production and distribution the production of baking flour, which sold in the brand names of DaChan (for overseas market) and Ironman (for domestic market) in Hong Kong, the Pearl River Delta and other regions. http://www.nodeoffice.com/show/?id=412 and http://www.nodeoffice.com/show/?id=413. Accessed 18 June 2020.

69   http://www.nodeoffice.com/show/?id=413. Accessed 18 June 2020.

for public education". The plan envisioned the realisation of an education hall (and concurrently badminton court), a cafeteria and offices. A youth hostel was planned in the former employee dormitory spaces, while a shared kitchen and laundry rooms were functional to complement the layout together with a rooftop garden farm[70].

The intervention on the ten former grain storage Silo Buildings - the landmark of the whole venue - mainly leaned on preserving the existing spatial attributes of the structure. In the designer's intention, "the solid appearance [was] retained to highlight the indoor experiences on time, space and texture". At the same time, a newly created visitor circulation would have enhanced each building's different atmosphere to create "diverse and overwhelming spiritual experiences". While the spatial intervention on the silos in the Biennale context was limited, their future development plan revealed the event's ambitions. The 'permanent' renovation plan, to be realised after the Biennale, envisioned the realisation of an art museum. The project consisted in the creation of a transparent "cloud-like profile" on the top floor of the building, hosting offices spaces, a central steel stair acting as a connector to define visitors' circulation, and in the functional implementation of the spaces with libraries and "full-height meditation rooms"[71].

Besides the refurbishment of existing spaces, new architectural objects were realised for the event. A brand new steel frame auditorium was realised "to bring in [..] attractive views" and to "create a [...] transparent performance space against the urban backdrop". Separated from the old building, the new structure - a door-type steel frame - appeared like a glass box "placed on the half-grid platform", setting up a dialectic between the new structure and the old grinder building through materiality and texture. Besides hosting a section of the exhibition, the functional programme was enriched with meeting rooms, a VIP Lounge, a bar and a small conference complex[72].

The "Urban Kitchen" represented another intervention realised for the Biennale. Oscillating between the architectural dimension and the installation scale, the slope-roofed insertion aimed at representing an open space for "urban dwellers and their informal interaction" to "create a mixed-use small town and provoke the rethinking over the fast-growing industry and cities"[73]. This space was completed by the award-winning and worldwide photographed installation "Floating City", conceived by Thomas Chung (the same author of the "Floating Farm" installation in the 2013 Biennale), which aimed at re-evoking a sense of community and enhancing reflections on the relationship between nature and fast urban development.

Interventions on Building #8, which housed the main section of the exhibition, were probably the most significant ones considering the relation between the temporary event and its legacy. While the Silos embodied the potential of legacy conservation, Building #8 aimed at injecting a critical reflection on the challenges and precarious balances brought about by Shenzhen's frantic urban development. The former concrete warehouse was bound to demolition since the beginning of the Biennale operation: a grand boulevard was envisioned to cut through the building in the area's future development. Though keeping the original structure untouched, NODE's design represented an ephemeral reflection on the interlocking of time, legacy, and

70 http://www.nodeoffice.com/show/?id=410. Accessed 18 June 2020.

71 http://www.nodeoffice.com/show/?id=412. Accessed 18 June 2020.

72 http://www.nodeoffice.com/show/?id=411. Accessed 18 June 2020.

73 http://www.nodeoffice.com/show/?id=410. Accessed 18 June 2020.

transformation speed. Unlike the other interventions on the site, which aimed to establish a productive relationship between new and old, the critical reflection operated on Building #8 architectural epitomised the "conflict between the future and the present" expressed in the curatorial statement. The future road was "collaged onto the existing façade" as "a jokingly gesture", as well as the addition of a monumental and provisional steel escape stair which aims at creating "a continuous [...] circulation in the whole façade along the city's trunk road"[74].

4.4.3 Between 'catalyst' and 'side effect'

A few years after the event, curator Doreen Heng Liu defined the 2015 Biennale legacy "a sad story"[75]. Paradoxically clashing with curatorial statements - aimed at injecting a reflection on the reuse of urban spaces - the material legacy belonging to the exhibition has been partially erased and partially "frozen". The former factory site was supposed to become a cultural landscape in Taizi Bay Zone: today, the Dacheng site is inaccessible, surrounded by the construction site of a new massive real estate development.

The brand new China Merchants Group Exhibition Centre in Shekou designed by AECOM tells the story of the plan surrounding the Dacheng Flour Factory, now engulfed in the Prince Bay master plan[76]. The main hall of the exhibition centre displays a vast model miniaturising the whole Shekou area and highlighting the two main strategic transformation zones: Sea World (the mixed-use area where many of Shekou's landmark buildings are currently under construction, such as China Merchants Group Headquarters, a brand new tower designed by OMA, and the above-mentioned Design Society) and Prince Bay.

Prince Bay, whose area encircles the 2015 Biennale site, is the object of an ambitious urban development plan which is expected to be completed by 2025[77]. The highly distinctive aspirational status of the initiative is evident, since the China Merchants Group appointed Dutch firm Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) to draft the overall master plan[78]. The storytelling around the future development is powerful: as stated in OMA's website, "Prince Bay is seeking to reposition itself as a vibrant and interconnected destination within Shekou". The plan will be carried on by Hong Kong-based practice Rocco Architects[79], who envisioned a functional mix (including an International Cruise Pier, the new Hong Kong-Macao ferry terminal, a coastal commercial district, offices and luxury housing) and a "seamless connection" urban planning concept leaning on the three key points "living culture, leisure culture and the green culture".

The project involves different actors. Hong Kong property conglomerate New World Development Company Limited - through subsidiary New World China Land and a wholly-owned unit of China Merchants Shekou Industrial Zone Holdings Co Ltd - has formed an

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74   http://www.nodeoffice.com/show/?id=409. Accessed 18 June 2020.

75   Interview with Doreen Heng Liu, 16 October 2018.

76   Site visit to China Merchants Exhibition Centre. 25 May 2019.

77   Interview with China Merchants Exhibition Centre guide. 25 May 2019.

78   https://oma.eu/projects/prince-bay. Accessed 25 May 2019.

79   https://www.rocco.hk/?lang=en&view=projects,typology,master-layout-plan&p=prince-bay-urban-planning-and-mixed-use-development. Accessed 25 May 2019.

Figure 4.40_Warehouse no.8 new entrance. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 4.41_The 2015 Shenzhen Biennale curatorial team at the Opening Ceremony. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 4.42_The Dacheng Flour Factory site before the conversion for the 2015 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. ©Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 4.43_The Dacheng Flour Factory site during the renovation for the 2015 Shenzhen Biennale, with the steel frame auditorium under construction. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

offshore joint venture arrangement and an onshore joint venture scheme to participate in the public tenders and acquisition of land parcels in Prince Bay (namely GL Land, ER Land, SD Land and LW Land). The investments in the initiative are consistent: according to South China Morning Post (Perez 2016), New World Development has committed to invest 14.52 billion RMB (HK$16.34 billion) in fueling the initiative. Prince Bay is defined as "a starting point of the development masterplan of the area of Shenzhen Shekou Free Trade Zone". According to developers, the plan combined "the National strategy of 'One Belt One Road' and the concepts of world-class cruise home-port, and will develop into the ocean gateway for Shenzhen connecting Hong Kong and facing the world" (New World Development Company Limited 2016). Considering the relevance of the plan, focusing the attention on the area was arguably crucial to promote and nurture the project. As a well-established domestic event with an international appeal, the Biennale matched the investor's intentions.

Today, the whole area is a vast open-air building site, representing a bright promise for the future: "You'll See", as stated on the promotional billboard located close to the former Biennale site. According to the plans, an underground infrastructure would connect Prince Bay with Sea World and connections will be further implemented in the future. The area will be served by three metro lines: the existing line 2 (which will be enhanced), line 5 and line 12 (which will directly reach the Ferry Pier). The functional mix of the new development will combine what is defined as "lifestyle" (such as luxury residences with shops, restaurants and bars for the upper-middle class), trade, commerce (shopping mall and international duty-free), infrastructure and communications (the Ferry Pier designed by Denis Laming)[80], business functions and an International School (Nan 2016).

Another big model in China Merchants Group Exhibition Centre shows in detail the "Prince Bay" plan. In its bright, colourful and led-lit narration, Prince Bay represents an ideal, utopian city designed for an international and cosmopolitan upper-middle class. The area occupied by Dachen Flour Factory is visible and labelled as a "new museum". The industrial buildings (except for Building #8, whose demolition was already envisioned during the 2015 Biennale) are still in the plan, inserted in a new design with new architectural volumes popping up in the site. Their preservation, nevertheless, seems to be conceived selectively according to their symbolic and representational power. Notably, the ten silos represent a landmark of the history of the place: although the overall uncertain plans for the future of Dacheng Flour Factory[81], their presence in the project is more likely to be carried out.

Differently from OCT-Loft and Value Factory cases, the Biennale in Dacheng arguably acted more a 'side effect' of a significant urban catalyst, represented by the developers' transformation plan: it was a device to shed light on the Prince Bay initiative. Place nostalgia and the constant re-enactment of Shekou's glorious industrial past acted as a means of concealing and distracting from real urban changes. Through a process of 'effacement and distraction', the Biennale and its architectures have been used by the State Owned Enterprise developers to build a "nest" to attract "phoenixes" (Chen 2017, 46)[82]: the post-industrial past has been fully exploited to draw

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80   https://www.rocco.hk/?lang=en&view=projects,typology,featured-project&p=office-development-shekou-shenzhen. Accessed 19 June 2019.

81   Interview with China Merchants Group Exhibition Centre Guide. 3 May 2019.

82   The motto "building nests to attract phoenixes" (*zhu chao yin feng*) has characterised China's period of Reforms and Opening Up. It was originally used to describe the construction of industrial areas to attract foreign companies and investments. Today, it can be applied to the tendency to "building new properties to attract high

Figure 4.44_The Dacheng Flour Factory site during the renovation for the 2015 Shenzhen Biennale: Building no.3 and the installation "Urban Kitchen". Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 4.45_The Dacheng Flour Factory site during the renovation for the 2015 Shenzhen Biennale: Warehouse no.8. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Prince Bay Development Exhibition Centre
AECOM

Prince Bay Development Shekou Ferry Pier
Denis Laming Architecte

Silo Building 2015 Biennale
NODE Architects

Prince Bay Development
Various architects

Figure 4.46_View of the Prince Bay development with the 2015 Biennale site engulfed in the new urban expansion. Source: Skyscrapercity. Re-elaboration by the author.

Figure 4.47_Commercial billboard promoting the Prince Bay development. Picture by the author.
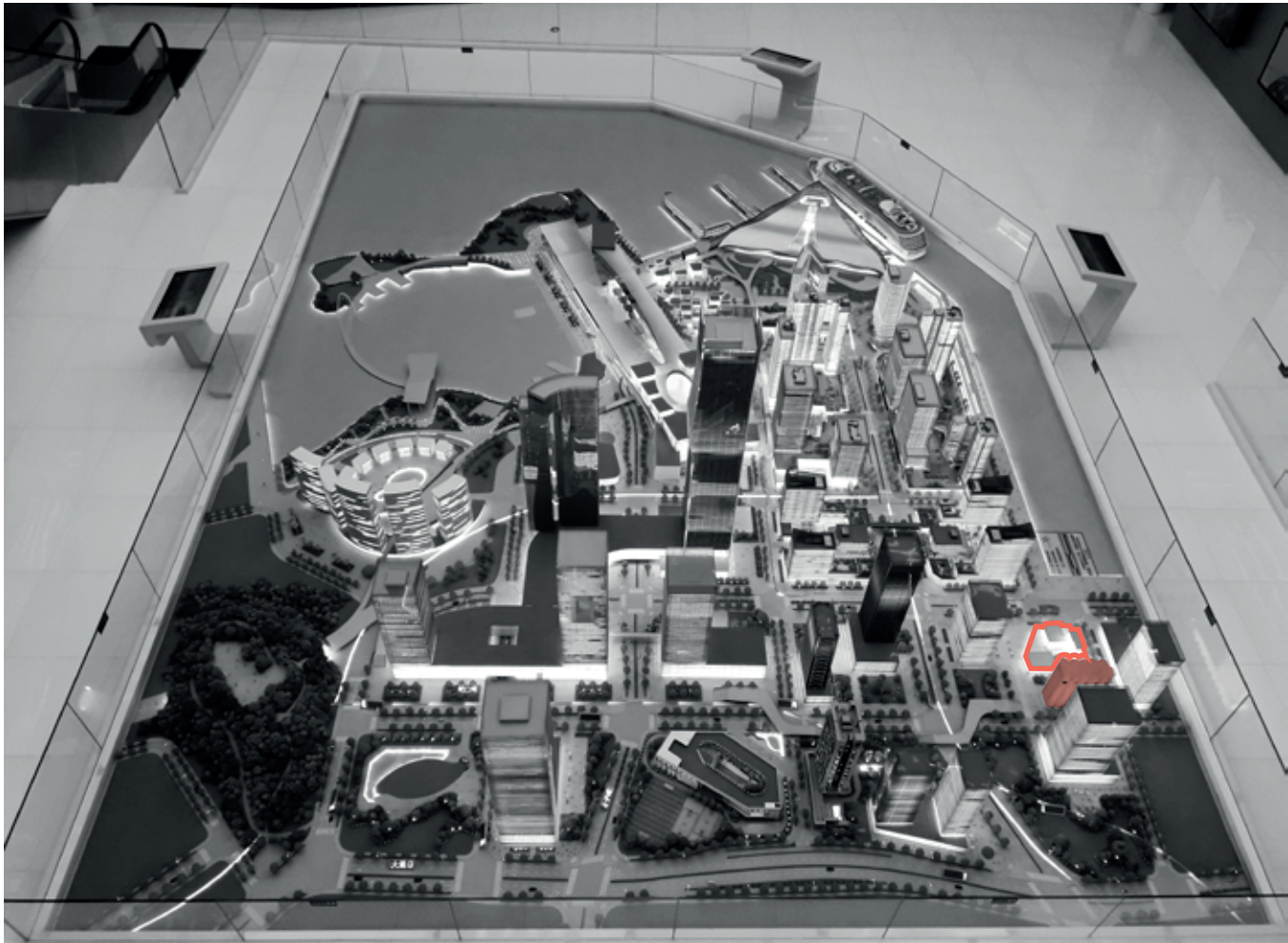
Figure 4.48_Model of the Prince Bay development in the China Merchants Group Exhibition Centre. Picture by the author.

Figure 4.49_Building site of the Prince Bay development. Picture by the author.
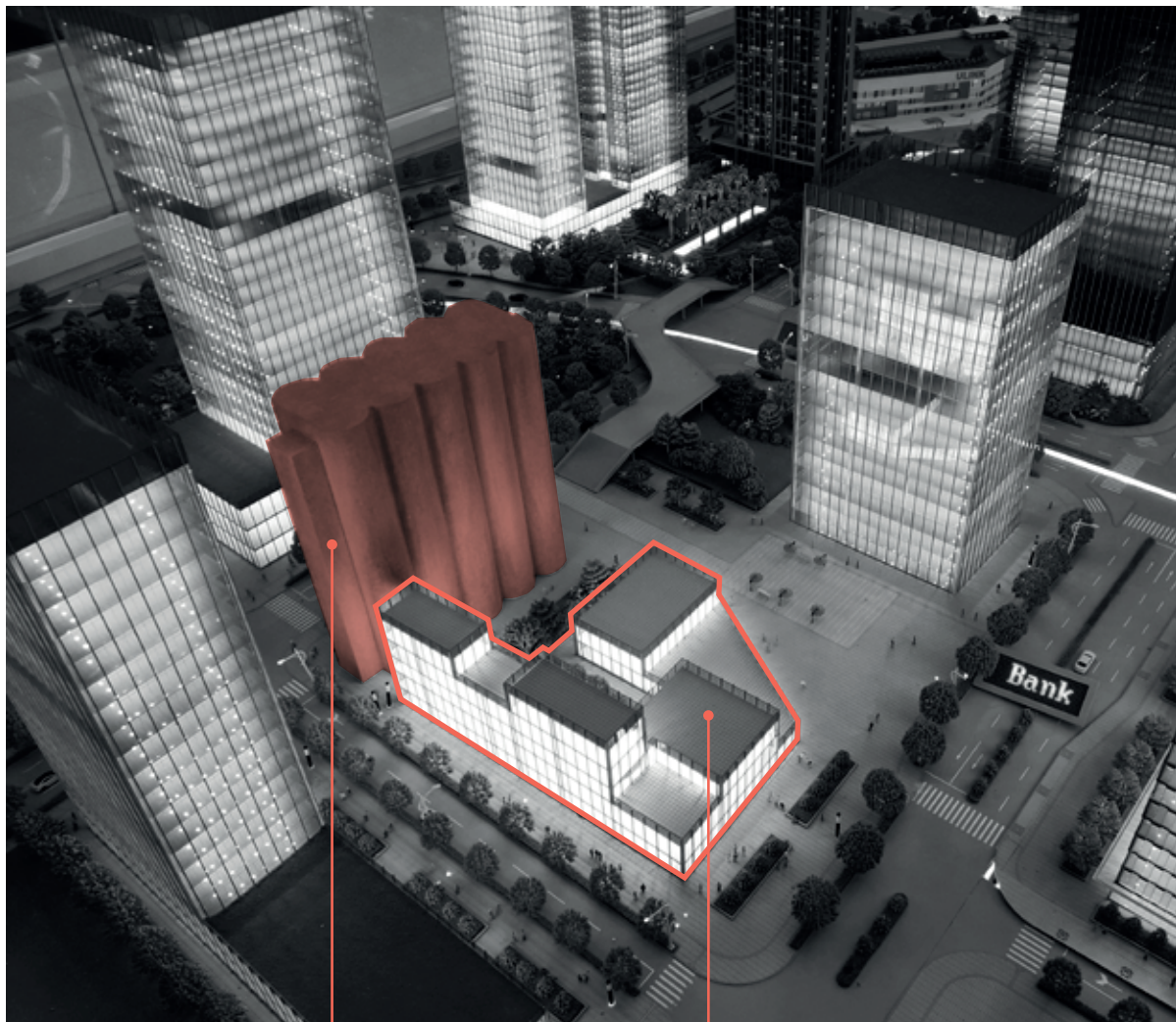
Silo Building 2015 Biennale
NODE Archotects

Prince Bay Development 2019
Dacheng Flour Factory area transformation

Figure 4.50_Detail of the Prince Bay development model in the China Merchants Group Exhibition Centre, with the envisioned transformation for the Dacheng Flour Factory area. Picture by the author.

attention on, re-enact and display the memory of area that a new driven-profit transformation will arguably replace.

4.5 Symbolic and real (estate) capital: an interlocking

The Biennale's interaction with Shenzhen's post-industrial spaces reveals the tight interlocking of two different lines.

On the one hand, the Biennale as a public cultural institution - in both Organizing Committee's and curators' intentions - has repeatedly tried to establish a critical approach to understand and transform Shenzhen's post-industrial legacy. The affirmation of such an event, mirrored

value-added economies" (Chen 2017, 46).

in its interaction with the dismissed industrial spaces, arguably addresses the willingness to set up a 'creative' culture framed in the reshaping of Shenzhen's urban policies. The adoption of the 'creative district' trope as a peculiar spatial configuration epitomises the 'cultural and creative city' ambitions: the explicit spatial and aesthetic references were the well-rehearsed experiences of Beijing 798, of Xi'An Textile City and of Shanghai Sculpture Space, which already figured as case studies in the 2005 and 2007 Biennale exhibitions. The overwhelming narrative of the Biennale as an intellectual showcase propelled the relevance of architectural and spatial interventions - and the potential virtuous outcomes of the event - in triggering a new modes of interactions with the past of the city: referring to OCT-Loft, Lars Lerup (2005, 35) affirms that "the Old is smiling again [..] in its crude utilitarianism[...] to serve a purpose again. In this frame, a consistent array of young architectural practices and designers (among which URBANUS, O-Office and NODE) have explored the possibility of experimenting with an unconventional approach to architectural and spatial issues affirming their position both in the domestic and international scenario. These professionals have become a stable presence throughout the different Biennale editions, establishing a cultural milieu pivoting around the event and creating a critical mass in the disciplinary domain.

On the other hand, when the Biennale's lights switched off, the interaction with 'big players' such as real estate developers has often revealed the other side of the coin - a strongly top-down and corporate one, which has affected the legacy left by the event.

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) defines three forms - economic, cultural and social (relational) - of capital, underlining the transition from cultural to economic capital. The manipulation of spaces epitomizes the Biennale's dualism, swinging between the production of symbolic and economic capital: it underlines the interlocking of "state and capital, government officials and enterprises" in Chinese cultural industries (Shan 2014, 119), mirroring the discursive deployment of the creative city idea as a political (and corporate) strategy to "celebrate culture and embrace growth at the same time" (Peck 2011, 465).

As Zukin (1995, 21) points out, the presence of art-related activities in contemporary cities documents the ambition to affirm their status "in the global hierarchy": in this perspective, "the display of art, for public improvement or private gain, represents an abstraction of economic and social power". The adoption of a Biennale marked the entrance of the symbolic economy in Shenzhen's entrepreneurial scenario of the entrepreneurial city, which is now fully projected towards the 'cultural city' imagery. According to Zukin (1995, 24), "the symbolic economy features two parallel production systems that are crucial to a city's material life: the production of space, with its synergy of capital investment and cultural meanings, and the production of symbols, which constructs both a currency of commercial exchange and a language of social identity". State-Owned Enterprises' massive interventions among the Biennale sponsors and developers epitomizes this tendency: by patronizing the event, they emphasize "their prominence in the city's symbolic economy" (Zukin, 1995, 21). The material side of this symbolic production can be retraced in the massive real estate operations involving OCT-Loft, the Value Factory the Dacheng Flour Factory: cultural industries are often used as a pretext to inject real estate interventions due to the consistent incentives promoted by the central government.

As Yuan (2020) and Huang (2017) point out, the real estate business is still a leading sector in Shenzhen. Real estate prices have been rising, paralleling the city's status, and the average price soared by at least 50% in 2016. State-Owned Enterprises (notably, Overseas Chinese Town

and China Merchants Group) keep affirming their position as powerful actors in Shenzhen, experimenting with different modes of "city making" (Chen 2017, 31). In this frame, as Law (1993 in Hannigan 1998, 52) underlines, festival market places as the Biennale constituted a "structured urban revitalization package" which could be aggressively marketed as part of a city's re-imaging efforts.

As observed, all the post-industrial sites touched by the Biennale ended up into commercial spaces or real estate development areas, conveniently mixing (although in different proportions) cultural and material consumption. In most cases, the legacy left by the Biennale interventions has clashed with curatorial statements and Organizing Committee ambitions, leaving to the city corporate and secluded, semi-public spaces with perceived isolation of the areas that may lead, as O' Connor and Liu (2014, 137) underscore for OCT-Loft, to a lack of connections with surrounding urban communities and "eventually to urban segregation".

The realization of such secluded spaces was clearly stated in OCT-Loft as the developers' strategy to create a corporate creative district. Nevertheless, despite the 2013 and 2015 curatorial intentions, the gradual hybridization of the legacy in the former Guangdong Glass Factory and in the Dacheng Flour factory under the 'urban catalyst' storytelling has marked the Biennale architectural interventions as spectacular objects, temporary formal exercises with a short-term perspective whose primary role has been setting the stage for more consistent (and profitable) transformations. In this framework, Shenzhen's post-industrial ruins act then as a 'pop-up' stage where the notion of creativity becomes a vehicular idea of neo-liberal urbanism, appropriating urban creative culture as an "exploitable selling point within the broader global city competition for status and capital" (Lindner and Meissner 2015, 6).

Years after the event, as Langhorst (2015, 2-3) points out, it seems that "the main agency of post-industrial sites, whether in their redeveloped/redesigned or abandoned state, might not lie primarily in their actual and potential ecological functions and performances, but more in their aesthetic and representational function". Despite the ambitious curatorial statements - which in 2013 and 2015 advocated for the involvement of local communities in a mid and long-term perspective - it is possible to retrace what Lindner and Meissner (2015, 7) define as a "commodification", a consumption of "the feeling of place as an event - that is, as an experience of manufactured authenticity [...] without social bonds or responsibilities".

As Belinda Yuen (2014, 133) points out the mushrooming of the so-called 'creative districts' in China reveals "a pattern [...] of mono-cultural leisure consumption. The urban culture that is increasingly being re-imagined has more to do with global consumption, much less to do with local heritage and tradition". By commodifying culture and urban regeneration programs, State-Owned enterprises operations seems to turn culture into a means to reach a diversified set of purposes, rather than an end.

Nantou OId Town
UABB 2017 - Main Venue

Da Meisha Village
UABB 2017 - Sub Venue

Figure 5.1_The two urban villages object of research. Source: Google Maps.

Chapter 5

Staging Urban Villages

This chapter explores the Biennale's agency in urban villages, the 'informal' areas of the city. The decoding of the spatial narratives triggered by the exhibition unpacks its disposition as a discursive platform for urban debate and spatial device. The focus of the show is no longer represented by dismissed post-industrial sites: in 2017, the exhibition deals with vibrant inhabited socio-spatial fabrics, representing the 'other' reality of Shenzhen, its cultural memory - which parallels the broadly promoted 'world city' imagery.

The spaces of the informal, living city merge thus with the spaces of representation: through a theatrical 'suspension of disbelief' mechanism, the Biennale aspires to act not only as an exhibition but also as an agent to redirect ongoing urban processes. In the event's space-time compression, urban villages function as a theatre where both real life and its idealised - and future - self coexist. Different actors cross this stage: local inhabitants, curators, artists and designers, Biennale organisers, local governments, private investors and developers. Their interaction on the stage generate tensions that exacerbate the contrast between the alleged social intent of the Biennale device and its - explicit and implicit - corporate outcomes.

5.1 Re-imagining and re-negotiating the 'frontier'

2017 marked a paradigmatic shift for the Shenzhen Biennale. Curated by Shenzhen-based architectural practice URBANUS founders Liu Xiaodu and Meng Yang, and by art curator and critic Hou Hanru, the exhibition landed in Nantou Old Town and other four venues[1], directly exploring one of the most representative urban fabrics of the city - and tackling a highly sensitive

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1   Nantou Old Town was the main venue of the exhibition, accompanied by four sub-venues in Luohu, Yantian, Guangming, Longhua Dalang, Longhua Shangwei. http://2017.szhkbiennale.org.cn/En/Venues/default. aspx?top=2. Accessed 15 May 2020.

Figure 5.2_Poster of the 2015 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

urban theme.

Shenzhen's narrative seems uniform in portraying a megalopolis characterised by top-down interventions and big transformation plans, eager to affirm its position as a civilized, modern and neat world-class city. Nevertheless, at a closer gaze, different socio-spatial urban scenarios coexist and overlap beyond high-rise buildings' shining skylines, unveiling the city's multi-faceted identity (Du 2019). The most apparent urban 'exceptions' in the overwhelming narrative are the so-called 'villages-in-the-city' (*chengzhongcun*), otherwise known as 'urban villages'. Urban villages are "a major feature of Chinese urban landscapes in the post-Mao era" (Buckingham and Chan 2018, 584), representing a consistent portion of Shenzhen and currently undertaking ceaseless metamorphoses (Al et al. 2014).

The relationship between urban and rural areas - of which the villages are today the tangible witness - has marked the spatial conformation of Shenzhen (Bach 2017b) since the establishment of the Special Economic Zone in 1980: these villages "go back hundreds of years and were organised under Mao into collective farms prior to the establishment of the SEZ" (Bach 2017b, 140). The city's accelerating pace of urbanisation gradually engulfed the rural villages scattered in Bao'an County. During the early 1980s, and notably with the 1982 State Constitution - that officially distinguished 'urban' from 'rural' land, thus regulating the related land-uses and property rights - rural collectives maintained advantageous privileges (which were inheritable, and could be exploited to produce food and build houses in autonomy) on the lands that they owned (O'Donnell, Wong and Bach 2017; Chen 2017)[2].

This framework gradually changed in 1986, with the issue of the *Law on Land Management* which aimed at limiting the autonomy of rural landowners in construction building sizes, standards and land uses (Chen 2017) and represented a step forward towards the conversion of rural land into urban. 1992 marked a pivotal year in this sense: Shenzhen Government made explicit its efforts in 'urbanizing' the - then still rural - areas by formally expropriating rural lands and incorporating them in the SEZ administrative boundaries: the villages became "fully 'urbanized'" (Bach 2017b, 140) and their land's status changed from 'collective' to 'state-owned'. This transition ideally imposed some restrictions to rural collectives, like the limitation for each household "to keep a residence base (homestead) of 120mq" (Chen 2017, XVIII). Nevertheless, despite the formal changing in status, urban villages have established an often contested relationship with their surrounding urban and administrative framework (Pu, Sliuzas and Geertman, 2011; Al et al. 2014; Wang 2016; Bach 2017b; O'Donnell 2017). Since 1992, village collectives have been gradually forced to turn into "shareholders' corporations", a "new form of administrative entity" with former village leaders as board members (Chen 2017, XVIII). Quite paradoxically, these new actors have gained increasing autonomy in managing the land belonging to former rural villages, whole value has frantically arisen due to their 'overnignt' engulfment in urban administrative - end economic - framework. The property rights on the land - previously inheritable - have been converted in a 70 years land-use right, which still

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2   Chen (2017, XVI) makes an account of the distinction between 'rural' and 'urban' land, observing how 1982 represented a pivotal year in formal the definition of this dichotomy: the issue of the State Constitution officially declared the territories inside urban administrative boundaries as owned by municipalities. Private property rights do not exist in urban lands: municipalities can only concede 'lease' rights for a limited time span (20, 30, 50 years). The 1982 act established also that what is referred to as 'rural land' (territories managed by rural collectives inside urban/suburban areas or outside the city's administrative boundaries) is owned by rural collectives. In Shenzhen's case - where vast areas were not urbanised when the State Constitution was issued), rural collectives had possession of big sites which would have been engulfed by the rapid urbanisation phenomenon - and would have been revealed valuable key sites during the city's economic development.

grants the collectives a high grade of freedom: shareholders' power of negotiations land uses with both private and public actors brought to massive spatial transformations and building operations inside the villages' precincts (O'Donnell 2017).

The relationship between urban villages and the city has become a heated topic of debate. In the Biennale framework, the issue is not new: since its foundation, the exhibition has tried to explore and take position concerning the villages's situation in Shenzhen's public urban debate. In 2005, the section entitled *Urban Village* adopted an engaged gaze on the issue. It presented an "experimental research and design approach" oriented to conceive real spatial transformations, embedding the potential to influence future urban policies (Shi 2007, 85). Researches on display emphasised the Biennale's character as a proactive exhibition elaborating spatial solutions to re-establish connections between the city's and the villages' fabrics. The main reflections revolved around urban villages' socio-spatial reality, underlining their intrinsic opportunities - rather than obstacles - in urbanisation processes. In the 2007 edition Juan Du, a Chinese-American architect and principal of the Hong Kong-based office IDU, presented the project *One City, Two systems*. the research explored *chengzhongcun* as a "constitutive component of the city", "presenting a rich variety of informal modes of urbanisation"[3].

As mentioned above, despite being officially urban lands, chengzhoncun managed to keep their spatial configuration also after their official incorporation in Shenzhen's urban pattern. The village's land "remained under the control of village committees, [...] turned into shareholding corporations", (Bach 2017b, 143) able to negotiate their rights on the land. Taking advantage from the ambiguity of their status, many of the founding villagers became *de facto* landlords. They could implement the storeys of their constructions - giving rise to the phenomenon of spatial accumulation known as "handshake buildings"[4] -, rent houses to rural migrants, develop different kinds of commercial and entrepreneurial activities, and negotiate with public authorities and developers to undertake real estate and commercial operations.

Urban villages represent today a rich social and spatial resource for the city: they have been - and still are - arrival spots for migrant workers, the "floating population" without an urban *hukou*[5], looking for jobs opportunities, affordable accommodation and a diversified range of

3   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (Ed). 2008. *City of Expiration and Regeneration.* 2007 *Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen).* Shenzhen: Shenzhen Press Group Publishing House, p.71

4   The land controlled by rural collectives could easily escape municipal and governmental constrains concerning city building. Rural collective had a high grade of freedom in implementing the height of the constructions inside the village's perimeter. Buildings have thus rapidly risen "leading to the literal extrusion of the village's narrow buildings lots from low-rise to high-rise": the density of the street pattern exacerbates the visual impact of this phenomena where "buildings stand so close to one another" that they as referred to as "kissing" or "handshake" buildings where "you can literally reach out from one building and shake hands with your neighbor" (Al 2014, 1).

5   The term *houkou* literary means 'household registration'. It refers to the citizens' registration system inaugurated in the 1950s (Chen 2017). During the 'Great Leap Forward' (1958-1962) agricultural production significantly decreased, making difficult for cities' administrations to cover the production of food and services for their residents. The *hukou* system was engineered to operate a formal distinction between 'urban' and 'rural' population. Such a bureaucratic distinction implied a substantial differentiation in accessing public services. The Government was not forced to provide food or basic services for people settled in rural administrated land: as a consequence, many people inhabiting the cities were encouraged to move towards rural areas and rural residents were encouraged to stay in rural precincts. The distinction of 'urban' and 'rural' *hukou* thus differentiated people in 'urban' and 'rural' residents, defining their different rights in accessing "public facilities and services". Moreover, the distinction operated a further discrimination. City residents with a 'urban' *hukou* could enjoy state-provided food, instruction and health services strictly tied to their "registered town of residence" (Chen 2017, XVII). People registered as official residents in a municipality can't get access to basic public services in a different urban administrative system.

support facilities; they function as filters towards the glittering urban promises of the world-class city, providing a social and economic structure that could meet the needs and the economic means of newcomers (Wang 2016, Bach 2017b, O' Donell 2017).

According to O'Donnell and Wan (2016, 45), "the expression 'urban village' functioned synonymously with 'slum'". The municipal government often considered their uneven and often unregulated expansion with anxiety, comparing them to a 'cancer'. Public concerns about illegal construction, population density and ensuing social problems - together with the increased land values in urban areas - brought to the definition of a Municipal Plan for their urban renewal in 2007. At that time, urban villages were considered "dirty, chaotic, and substandard" (O' Donnell and Wan 2016, 45). The 2007 plan ended up with the razing of some of the original settlements and with the construction of real estate compounds following the 'demolition and reconstruction' (also referred to as *tabula rasa*) approach: some *chengzhongcun* have been transformed, while others remained in a suspended state, still awaiting transformation or demolition.

The processes of transformations and the rising rental prices involving urban villages often imply migrant residents' displacement, forced relocations and evictions (Haack 2018). The demolitions in Caiwuwei and Gangxia villages displaced around 100,000 people per village from Luohu and Futian: as O'Donnell and Wan (2016, 45) underscore, these operations have destroyed "not only inexpensive housing options but also low capital venues for start-up, small-scale companies and 'mom-and-pop' stores". Baishizhou, one of the biggest and most densely populated urban villages in Shenzhen, housing an estimate population of 140,000 (Bolchover 2018, Backholm 2019), is currently undertaking a massive transformation led by the real estate company LVGEM (O' Donnell 2016; Sturm 2020)[6].

Already the 2005 Biennale edition presented a reflection on the relocation and eviction phenomena that have interested *chengzhoncun* residents - which will have a relevant role in introducing urban villages as complex spatial and socio-political systems. In this frame, a Joint Studio project between different academic institutions[7] gathered proposals for "rehabilitating leftover islands of the older urban fabric rather than razing them […] in order to avoid relocation and maintain low-cost housing for their tightly bound community" (Lefaivre 2007, 54).

In the Biennale's framework, architectural practice URBANUS began diffusing and consolidating its research on Urban Villages, which will acquire a growing relevance throughout the following editions: these researches have extensively treated *chengzhongcun* as a system and network, emphasising the notions of 'difference' and 'fragmentation' which will later constitute the Biennale 2017 *leitmotiv*.

URBANUS took part at the 2005 Biennale with *Village/City, City/Village*, a proposal to rethink the interaction patterns in Gangxia, Tianmian e Xinzhou villages; the research triggered a reflection on public space and modes of inhabiting and living inside the villages' fabric (Lefaivre 2007, 54). As a conceptual and spatial speculation, the research broadly investigated

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The policy, as Chen (2017) underlines, is still active and object of debate. Notably in Shenzhen - a city whose economic growth heavily relied on migration phenomena and where the majority of residents is not native of the city, only 3 million over a total 16 million population are local residents with a registered *hukou*. The consequences of the *hukou* registration system still permeate today the composition of urban villages' social fabric: the inhabitants of the villages are mostly migrants without an official *hukou*, which thus suffer from precarious work, economic and basic welfare services.

6   https://www.kpf.com/projects/nanshan-center. Accessed 18 February 2021.

7   Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Peking University, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Princeton University, Tongji University and Shenzhen University.

the notion of 'density', emphasising the "experience of the entire neighbourhood complex by upgrading and spatialising its public dimensions" (Lerup 2007, 37): URBANUS' approach involved spatial experimentation considering both broad urban issues and the use of architecture, using modern attributes to parallel traditional Chinese socio-spatial paradigms.

The researches presented throughout all the Biennale editions are uniform in portraying the villages as a unique urban phenomenon which "contains valuable dynamic processes and sustainable strategies" able to constitute a new paradigm for "new models of urban theory and tools of implementation that encourage open and flexible urbanism" (Du 2008, 71). The representation of villages as socio-spatial disruptive elements is overwhelming both in the Biennale narrative and in public debate: as underlined by URBANUS, "aesthetically, the [villages] are seen as a scar on the city" while "politically [they are] regarded as a sort of time-bomb"[8]. In a in-depth study of Shenzhen's urban villages, Wang (2016, 170-171) underlines that such areas are complex and multi-dimensional dynamic systems, whose cultural richness embeds potentials for triggering urban processes and tourism, and questioning the notion of Shenzhen as a 'city without culture': "urban villages have preserved the local traditions to great detail [where] both tangible and intangible cultural heritage can be found".

Undeniably, the Shenzhen Biennale strongly contributed to shape and consolidate the narratives around urban villages, re-imagining their identities as cultural systems and enhancing their visual consumption. It is possible to retrace the co-existence of a highly mediatised and globalised notion of 'culture' conveyed by the event - as an aspiring international institution - and the emphasis on the different 'cultures' of the city represented by *chengzhoncun*, capitalising on the intersection between the local and the global in observing and making 'spectacular' the informal side of Shenzhen.

In *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, Smith (1996) conceptualised the notion of "frontier", underlining how gentrification processes usually interest marginal areas of the cities. It is possible to retrace such notion both in the recent urban phenomena involving urban villages and in the Biennale's narrative: with their co-existence of heritage and informal dynamics, they act as a 'territorial line' and as a 'frontier', entailing social and spatial manipulations.

The Biennale has investigated the transformation phenomena happening in the informal city shedding light on two leading attitudes. On the one hand, it has critically observed the *tabula rasa* operations and the related replacement of spatial and social layers. On the other side, as the 2017 Biennale emphasised, the researches on display have explored possible future alternative approaches to preserve the co-existence of different urban realities and spatial transformations. The event intersected two dimensions, swinging between the adoption of an engaged position and the setting up of an urban spectacle: on the one hand, the exhibition investigates an urban condition that calls for a change in paradigm and a spatial re-conceptualisation; on the other, its eventful framework needs a constant renovation of its media exposure in Shenzhen's urban scene, choosing the 'frontier' areas of the city as a stage.

What is relevant to note is the instrumental use of the *chengzhongcun* operated by the event. The exhibition device appropriated the local reality of urban villages (what Shenzhen's municipality most rejected, because they are supposed to move the city away from its aspirational global status), transforming them into a key point of Shenzhen's urban identity as a cutting-edge

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8   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/uprd/main-research-topics/urban-villages/?lang=en. Accessed 10 October 2020.

world city where multiple urban realities coexist, superimposing local and global imagery. Past and present memories of urban villages, once cause of shame for the city, have been proudly re-enacted, re-shaped and exhibited through the Biennale: *villages* has become spectacular test-beds for new modes of spatial manipulations in the informal enclaves of the city. This approach belongs to a broader framework: a global trend towards 'staged' and 'reconstructed' authenticity, where "traditional crafts, dances, foods [...] are artificially preserved and reconstructed for the benefit of international leisure-seekers and historical memory is utilised primarily for sensory effect" (MacCannell 1976 and Lee 1994 in Hannigan 1998, 174). Spatial transformations operated in the four urban villages during the exhibition represented the consecration of the Biennale 'catalyst' leitmotiv, as well as the extensive diffusion and mediatisation of the notion of 'urban curation' prompted by the event.

Nevertheless, the exhibition's spatial imprint and legacy had a role in underlining a contrast between the transformation of the space and its narrated self, between the 'exhibitionary' and the 'real'. Different curators[9] adopted different spatial approaches in each venue: what bridged such heterogeneous approaches was the theatricalisation of the *chengzhongcun* space in conveying the notion of heritage as a manufactured image. The overlap of two dimensions - the villages' local setting and the event's aspirational globalism - can be observed both in spatial manipulations and in the Biennale legacy. Operating in urban villages pushed curators and exhibitors to establish a theoretical and formal dialogue with the local setting, modulating the exhibitionary language accordingly. Nevertheless, the co-existence of such informal storytelling and the Biennale's institutional framework - together with the pervasive presence of corporate interventions - brought to a friction that shows "complex tactics of social disciplining and a tightening of the social control apparatus" (Broudehoux 2004, 150).

Albeit in different modes, the Biennale put on stage a spectacularisation of the urban villages' everyday environment as tourist sites, intersecting the visual aestheticisation of the informal settlements and the social anesthetisation of their contested environment "where real people live and where real conflicts may arise" (Alsayaad 2001, 22). In this perspective, the staging of what New York Times architecture critic Herbert Muschamp (1995 in Hannigan 1998, 71) called "sanitised razzmatazz" parallels Goldberger's (1996, 136–7 in Hannigan 1998, 68) reflections about tourists' experiences in combining the "benefits of traditional cities—energy, variety, visual stimulation, cultural opportunities, the fruits of a consumerist culture —without exposing themselves to the problems that accompany urban life: poverty, crime, racial conflict".

5.2 Grow(ing) Differences in Nantou Ancient Town

5.2.1 Nantou as a stage

Gathering over 550,000 visitors, the 2017 Biennale aimed at being a unique event: its overarching theme *Cities, Grow in Difference* affirmed the aspirations to create a unique

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9   Each Sub-Venue, located in different administrative districts of the city, was curated by an independent curatorial team, appointed by the District.

"platform for finding new theories, new experiments and new practice models [....] that focuses on 'discovery' rather than pre-set"[10]. The governmental cultural institution's intervention in one of the informal enclaves of the city was officially welcomed as an opportunity: it symbolised the encounter between the spontaneous, bottom-up "self-organisation" of urban villages and the top-down urban planning practices[11].

The choice of URBANUS (represented by Liu Xiaodu and Meng Yan) and Hou Hanru as chief curators did not seem fortuitous[12]: tackling a strictly local topic, the whole curatorial team was Chinese again - although with a clear, recognizable international profile. Having curated the transformation of OCT-Loft and being regular guests in the Biennale since its inception, URBANUS was well positioned within Shenzhen's creative *milieu*: the office's involvement in the 2017 Biennale in Nantou can be considered the consecration of a multiannual research on *chengzhongcun*, which started in 2005 and has progressed through different spatial analysis, projects, workshop and international exhibitions[13]. On his side, Hou Hanru, a Chinese art critic and curator and artistic director of MAXXI in Rome, represented a well-established cosmopolitan cultural figure in domestic and international debates revolving around art practices and the

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10   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/events/committee-presentation-01/. Only in Chinese. Accessed 15 June 2020.

11   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/events/committee-presentation-01/. Only in Chinese. Accessed 15 June 2020.

12   In 2006, URBANUS was commissioned by a public organisation in Shenzhen (one of the directors of the association was the leader of OCT Group, which in 2004 appointed URBANUS for OCT-Loft renovation master plan) to explore some possibilities of intervention in Nantou. URBANUS presented the design to the district mayor and got approval. At the beginning of 2016, URBANUS started to become involved in the Nantou Preservation and Regeneration Project. Later on, yet, the association "abandoned the project due to the complexity of the approval process". When the architectural firm applied to the Biennale's Open Call for curators, they proposed Nantou as the main venue for the exhibition by virtue of their previous design and research activity in the village. Interview with Wendy Wu. October 2018.

13   URBANUS research activity on Urban Villages intersected different national exhibitions:

_   2005 Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture, "City / Village section" (Gangxia, Fuxin)

_   2005 The sixth Brazil St Paul international architecture and design Biennale (Study on four Shenzhen's Urban Villages)

_   2007 The 2nd Guangzhou Triennial of Art (Dafen)

_   2010 China International Mural Exhibition, Dafen, Shenzhen

_   2010 Shanghai Expo 2010 Shenzhen Case Pavilion (Dafen)

_   2013 Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture, Collateral Exhibition (Baishizhou)

_   2015 Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture, Collateral Exhibition "New heritage, new value" (Baishizhou)

_   2015 Shanghai Urban Space Art Season (Shenzhen Urban Regeneration)

_   2016 "The Old Hubei 120" Design Workshop, "Dialogue Hubei" Discussion

_   2016 Rural-Urban Re-inventions (Exhibition of Hubei Old Village Urban Regeneration Research)

_   2016 The First Chinese Ancient Villages and New Countries Theme Exhibition (The Old Hubei 120 Public City Plan)

    http://www.urbanus.com.cn/. Accessed 13 June 2020.

Figure 5.4_Nantou Old Town, the South Gate. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 5.5_Baode Square area before the transformation injected by the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 5.6_Nantou Old Town, view of the Nort-South Zhongshang Street axis. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

urban[14].

5.2.2 Locating the ancient city

Housing the event in Nantou Old Town in Nanshan District as Main Venue did not arguably happen by chance, as well. Due to the presence of ancient ruins, the old city gained the "provincial-level cultural protection unit" status - which prevented the area from being completely demolished through big transformation plans - and it is a renowned historical and cultural tourist attraction.

Spatial transformations, moreover, have characterised - and continously reshaped - the area over the centuries. Nanotu's history is significant: as the neglected disused industrial sites in Shekou reflected the productive memory of the Special Economic Zone and its pivotal role in setting the economic basis of contemporary China, Nantou's ancient roots mirror the historical past of the city, representing a tangible proof in countering the 'city without history' stigma.

Nantou epitomises the intersection of different historical layers, from Ming and Qing Dynasty to contemporary times. Founded over 1,700 years ago during the Jin Dynasty, the old city represented the "political, economic and military core for the Shenzhen-Hong Kong area"[15], administrating an area corresponding to modern-day Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Zhuhai and Macao. Throughout the centuries, Nantou area grew in size and became an increasingly pivotal political governmental center. During the Ming Dinasty, Nantou was also a military key point for Guangdong's Southern coast. Moreover, the presence a local flourishing industry of salt making, fisheries, farming and trade granted the city a prosperous growth (Du 2019, 103).

Du (2019, 104) underscores that "over the course of a millennium, Nantou City was subject to continuous transformation". In 1573 the city became the major reference of Xin'an County, adding civic functions (schools, temples, clinics and markets) to its military role. In 17th century, the rise of Qing Dinasty marked a crisis in the coastal economy, which caused Nantou's gradual depopulation. Starting from 1668, a slow recovery process began with the restoration of Nantou as the administrative center of Xin'an County. The structure of Nantou's inner wall urban fabric started acquiring the actual shape starting 1672, with the realisation of the central North-South street connecting the Southern Gate (which is still today the main access to the area) to the northern border of the village. Contextually, five North-South and three Eas-West parallel streets were set up, forming a urban grid.

Nantou experienced a renaissance as "important political, commercial and cultural center" (Du 2019, 113). Further spatial layers overlapped to the pre-existing urban pattern from Ming dinasty: the city "was referred to as the 'City of Nine Streets'". At the beginning of 19th century, Nantou was again a bustling area filled with "shops, administrative halls, temples, shrines, markets, and schools" (Du 2019, 113-114). It also housed the renowned Fenggang Academy (later Fenggang School), one the most influential educational institution in Xin'an county.

In 1911 the Wuchang Uprising uprising led by Cantonese intellectual Sung Yat-sen "initiated

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14   As pointed out by Green and Gardner (2016, 246) Hou Hanru "recurred frequently in the chronicles of Asian Biennials": he was co-director of the 2000 Third Shanghai Biennale; director of the 2000 Gwangju Biennale, the 2005 2nd Guangzhou Triennial, the 2007 10th Istanbul Biennial.

15   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/projects/nantou-old-town/?lang=en. Accessed 12 February 2021.

a national movement to overthrow Qing regime" (Du 2019, 119): as a consequence, Nantou experienced a population growth, which brought to the demolition of consistent portions of its walled perimeter. In 1914, with the liberation of the county led by the Nationalist army, Xin'an was renamed Bao'an county. The 1937 Japanese occupation also left significant traces on the city, and relevant demolitions and spatial manipulations affected Nantou until the 1949 process of rebuilding: by the 1950s, many portions of the fence walls were demolished. 1953, marked then the end of Nantou's administrative role: in 1958, the Old City and the surrounding villages formed a commune. During the Cultural revolution (1966-76), the city undertook further transformations through the demolition of many ancient symbolic buildings (notably Buddhist and Taoist temples).

The most relevant portion of Nantou Old Town come from the 1980s and 1990s, when many original buildings have been demolished to leave floor to denser and multi-storey constructions. Nantou became a "village surrounded by an old city wall": due to the growth in economy and population, the village expanded out from its ancient border. The construction of new buildings paralleled the scattered preservation of historical relics: "the Old Town continued to disappear as the village grew"[16]. As Du (2019) underlines, yet, it is possible to observe how the spatial configuration undertaken during original Ming and Qing dynasties still rules the city's structure (notably the courtyard buildings known as "Lingnang Bamboo Houses", which represented a diffused residential typology in Shenzhen's territory before 1979).

Nantou represents a network where different spatial and historical layers co-exist. As Meng (2018) stated, although with dramatic changes, "Nantou Village has preserved its main street pattern after decades of development". The ancient southern and eastern gates, ancestral halls, temples, old houses and historical buildings - together with the presence of underground archaeological sites - define the area as a "symbiosis of an old town [...] and a modern urbanised village"[17]. The multi-storey buildings house temporary accommodation for migrant workers. The North-South and East-West axes - Zhongshan Street South and Zhongshang Street East are vibrant streets housing a vast array of small businesses and commercial activities like barbershops, pharmacies, street food shops, butcher shops, bookstores, hair salons, hardware stores, grocers, a post office, telecom centers (Meng 2018; Du 2019).

As happened in other areas of Shenzhen, recent urbanisation processes surrounded (and gradually affected) Nantou's historical fabric, where landowners started to build their own multi-storey houses forming the stypical *chengzhongcun* pattern (Qian 2017). As a result, Nantou hosts today a spatial layering of different activities and buildings. Historical sites, dwellings, shops, schools, marketplaces, and public services populate the site's dense urban fabric, characterising the area as "a special alternative urban typology, an economic and social ecosystem" (Meng 2018).

"Scattered preservation and renovation" actions "inside and outside of the city walls" have characterised Nantou's recent history (Meng 2018): the co-existence of diverse layers has positioned local government in an ambiguous 'dilemma', swinging between the preservation of historical heritage (enhancing its tourist potential by exploiting cultural resources) and the redevelopment of its urban fabric. Over the last decade, different proposals and plans concerning

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16   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/writings/nantou/?lang=en. Accessed 12 February 2021. For a deeper historical account of Nantou Old Town - contextualised in Shenzhen's history - see also Du (2019).

17   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/writings/nantou/?lang=en. Accessed 12 February 2021.

the "protection, use, and transformation" of the old city followed in Nantou. In 2013, the Urban Planning, Land and Resources commission proposed a renovation strategy based on the preservation of the street layout and the introduction of "art, culture, tourism, and commerce, to promote historical, cultural, and commercial values of the Old Town". In 2016, Nanshan District Government - with the cooperation of the State-Owned developer Shum Yip Group Limited and Shenzhen Investment Limited - signed a "strategic framework agreement [...] in Nanshan's economic and infrastructural development, including the protection of Nantou Old Town" Yu (2018, 50-51). The 2017 Biennale righteously addressed a vivid interest in the area as a potential hotspot for art and culture-driven tourism.

5.2.3 Curating Nantou: "exhibition as a practice"

The spatial, social and historical resources of Nantou represented an ideal basis for the exhibition. They epitomised and expanded the notion of *chengzhongcun* as an urban exception, characterised both by continuous transformation processes and the presence of relevant historical roots. The speed of the transformations investing the city and its villages triggered a reflection to investigate potential future possibilities for such an urban area, of which the Biennale was the self-proclaimed mouthpiece.

The choice to set the event in the ancient city turned out to be instrumental to legitimate Shenzhen as a 'cultural city'. It affirmed the presence of a historical and tangible cultural heritage in Shenzhen; it also presented urban villages as a complex cultural and socio-spatial systems calling for interpretation and transformation approaches alternative to the 'standardised' urban developments flourishing in current Shenzhen's urban plans.

The Biennale intervention in Nantou intersected such dimensions. Curatorial stances emphasised the exhibition's definition as a "practice" (Meng 2018) able to trigger effective transformations in layered urban spaces. Such an approach was summarised in the notion of "urban curation" broadly diffused in public statements, which further conveyed the Biennale's role as an activator. In Meng Yan's (2018) words, "urban curation" was presented as "a long-term strategy for the incremental improvement of urban spaces and the quality of urban life", in contrast "to the current urban renewal process".

During the 2017 Biennale first Press Conference, the curatorial group and the event's Organising Committee presented the Nantou main venue concept and exhibition plan. Xu Zhongguang, the then Deputy Director of the Biennale and Deputy Secretary-General of the Shenzhen Municipal Government, defined the Biennale as a "platform" holding the potential to "activate the city" and to bring "more opportunities for [its] development"[18]. Expanding the 2013 and 2015 experiences, the 2017 Biennale was intended as a device for an engaged intervention in the city by interlocking temporary, exhibitionary paraphernalia and long-term urban regeneration strategies with a manifest social outcome. Nantou Old Town, as an exemplary urban village, served not only as the physical venue of the exhibition encapsulating historical relics and renovated buildings (Kaiser 2019): it was reconstructed in itself through the aspiring, frictionless overlapping of staged and real spaces.

As Meng declared, the "real exhibition" was represented by the "vibrant city life" (Sacchetti 2018): in the curatorial purpose, spatial interventions triggered through the event aimed at

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18   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/events/news-release-01/. Only in Chinese. Accessed 27 July 2020.

"establishing seamless connections" with the urban space[19]. Using Nantou as a test-bed, the Biennale aimed at differentiating itself from previous editions in building a direct relationship with the "vitality", "dynamism" and "unfinished status" of *chengzhongcun* spaces[20].

Differently from the processes undertaken in 2013 and 2015 Biennale venues, interventions in Nantou showed the close intertwining between the everyday spaces lived by local dwellers and the event's heterotopic framework. They staged the co-existence of (and contrast between) both permanent and temporary elements: architectural interventions put in tension two different souls of the village, oscillating between the preservation of historical memory and the re-creation of a new, contemporary one.

Meng Yang and Liu Xiaodu were already familiar with Nantou context: at the beginning of 2016, URBANUS led a research study in the frame of Nantou Preservation and Regeneration Project to "define and position both its historical and its contemporary heritage". Rather than focusing on a merely spatial renovation plan, they proposed a redevelopment model "to improve the quality of life of its residents and to rejuvenate the local culture" based on the introduction of cultural events and coordinated strategies: six plans[21] leaned upon an incremental intervention combining preservation and regeneration (Meng 2018). Drawing on previous experiences, they proposed for the Biennale a strategy focused on the "renovation of key public spaces and the introduction of public activities as part of the process of activating and promoting the regeneration of the Old Town"[22]. URBANUS interpreted the double-sided role of curators and urban designers of Nantou Renovation, while the Biennale organisation was the contact point between the District Government and the designers/curators[23].

The whole exhibition narrative revolved around preservation and regeneration in *chengzhongcun* as articulated urban systems, projecting international exhibitors in a local dimension[24]. Overlapping the exhibitionary system and the transformation of the village's spaces in an "exhibition route", the project "sought to reconstruct a public open space system"[25] pervading Nantou's streets, following a South-North progression along Zhongshang South Street and intersecting the Zhongshan East-West Street axis (Meng, Lin and Rao 2018). Under the overwhelming keyword 'co-existence', the project touched different spatial and architectural typologies by preserving historical sites, renovating existing buildings, connecting public and semi-public spaces and realising punctual architectural interventions.

The regeneration plan aimed at enhancing the co-existence of different areas in the village through architectural design and art interventions. It realised a succession of public facilities,

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19   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/events/committee-presentation-01/. Only in Chinese. Accessed 15 June 2020.

20   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/news/2017-uabb-sz-161017/. Only in Chinese. Accessed 27 July 2020.

21   Parks and Gardens Revival Plan, City Boundary Redefinition Plan, Historical Building Preservation Plan, Main Street Navigation Plan, Creative Factory Plan and Inner City Dynamic Regeneration Plan (Meng 2018).

22   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/projects/nantou-old-town/?lang=en. Accessed 12 February 2021.

23   Interview with Wendy Wu. 28 October 2018.

24   Various international designers participated in the exhibition: among them, Chinese architect Yung-Ho Chang, Dutch architectural firm MVRDV, Hungarian designer Yona Friedman, Spanish design collective Boa Mistura, Tokyo-based office Atelier Bow-Wow, American architectural firm NADAA.

25   The exhibition venues articulated in five zones following a North - South and East - West path: A. Factory Zone, B. Cross Road Zone, C. Southern Gate Zone, D.Historic Buildings Zone, and Chunjing Street Zone.

Figure 5.7_Axonometric overviev of the incremental regeneration plan for Nantou Old Town, conceived by URBANUS for the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. © URBANUS. Re-elaboration by the author.

social and green spaces and establish a productive tension between history and present and between "spatial heritage and humanistic lifestyle" (Meng 2018).

The storytelling aimed at setting up a dialectic tension between high brow references and the emphasis on the village's everyday life, elevating art and architecture as key driving factors in Nantou's 're-activation'. Such a stance is expressed in the exhibition's spatial narrative, which revolved around seven interlocking 'themes' evoking the structure of Chinese literary drama[26]. The master plan was divided into three sections, corresponding to three different areas of the Old Town (the South Gate Zone, the Old Town Zone, the Factory Zone). The proposal - negotiated with the village enterprises - tried to create a layering of spaces inside Nantou's urban fabric[27], staging the *chengzhongcun* 'authenticity' through different languages according to the intervention areas. The role of architecture turned out to be instrumental in two ways: on one side, by establishing a seemingly frictionless relationship with the village's historical past; on the other, by re-shaping the contemporary identity of spaces.

5.2.4 Complexities (and contradictions) on display

Architectural interventions aimed at establishing a pacification with the village's past, triggering both a dialogue and a re-enactment of Nantou's historical and cultural heritage. The entrance pavilion designed by Beijing-based architect Yung Ho Chang (Atelier FCJZ) - together with the temporary "Barbican" (*Weng Cheng*) structure designed by the curators - served such a purpose. They marked the prelude of the urban regeneration and exhibition experience before entering the Old Town, setting a connection between the newly regenerated park and the 600 years old Southern Gate. Echoing traditional Chinese buildings, the bricks and concrete kiosk design visually bridged the stone walls of the ancient city and the of Old Town's village buildings. The use of concrete - a common construction material in China - aimed also at injecting critical reflections about the massive urbanisation phenomena which have invested the country during the last decades. The 'Barbican' structure re-evoked in a full-scale installation the defensive apparatus which characterised Nantou's military past. Along the North-South axis, the preservation of some Lingnan traditional architectures expressed the curators' position in seeking an aesthetic balance with the context[28], denouncing a more conservative approach.

Nevertheless, some tensions emerged when the exhibition interacted with Nantou's contemporary fabric - which does not enjoy any privileged, official 'historical' status. According to curators, URBANUS adopted selected and diversified renovation strategies - instead of a complete demolition - for a large number of illegal buildings and structures, following feedback from the residents[29]: in the curatorial statement, "the basic principle of renovation [was] to

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26   The seven sections were: Introduction (Southern Gate Park), Elucidation (Ancient Academy Square), Transition(Cross Road Square), Conclusion (Baode Square), Agglomeration (Creative Lab and Market Square), Seclusion (Urban Oasis), Urban Curation (The Beginning of a Long-term Plan) Meng (2018).

27   Interview with Wendy Wu. 28 October 2018.

28   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/uabb/uabb2017/exhibition-venue-design-concept/?lang=en. Accessed 18 January 2021.

29   https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1944099. In Chinese. Accessed 12 February 2019.

Yet, according to Wendy Wu, URBANUS did not talk to the villagers directly, but was mainly in touch with the client (the local government), the developer, and the company formed by the village's collective. Interview with Wendy Wu. October 2018.

make the most of the current situation" (Meng 2018).

The case of Baode Square - probably the most photographed among the 2017 Biennale interventions and the key spatial node of the whole 'urban curation' operation - is representative of the event's approach and frictions embedded in such an approach. Surrounded by dense residential and historical buildings[30], the area - which marks the crossroads between North-South and West-East Zhongshan Road - used to be a small open space in the old town centre. The site was used as a threshing floor in the 1970s, and a basketball court was built in the 1990s. Curatorial statements defined the area in contrasting terms: "empty and unwelcoming in the daytime because of the hot weather, and [...] vibrant after dark when children are chasing each other and adults are sitting around barbecuing and drinking beer" (Meng 2018). The square has been the object of a functional and aesthetic spatial transformation by URBANUS: the office designed two new pavilions - B4 and B3 buildings - which functioned as the Biennale's information centre, bookstore and exhibition/event spaces, enclosing the basketball court. On an aesthetic and spatial side, the pavilions interacted with the adjacent buildings' scale and profile, aiming at enhancing the potential of the square's public spaces and creating a "three-dimensional urban theatre [to enjoy] the daily occurrence of colorful, lively urban drama"[31]. The sloping roofs with slanting steps formed a seamless interface, ideally allowing people to walk from the square to the top of the buildings, contextually serving as audience seating for games or performances in the court - or as temporary stages. The pavillions' custom-made pottery tile cladding also explicitly evoked colours and patterns of surrounding buildings. Despite the manifested intentions, nevertheless, some frictions emerged when the new architectural interventions interlocked the existing socio-spatial context: while officially preserving the existing basketball court, the two new pavilions replaced two metal sheds serving as temporary markets (for clothing, fruits, and groceries), which have been demolished to leave the floor to the Biennale's interventions[32]. Albeit Liu Xiaodu and Meng Yan underlined that the pavilions had been designed "after coordination with local residents" (Meng 2018), Li (2017) reports that many vendors were still waiting for a proper location for their displaced activities after the closing of the exhibition - and some of them had been forced to stop their businesses.

A similar case of displacement involved the area near Zhongshan Park, where URBANUS designed a stage for the Biennale. A semi-open-air theatre was already on the site since the late 1980s. In curators' words, the stage represented a relevant part of migrant workers' culture strongly characterising Nantou, as it hosted amateur performances and community activities for local dwellers[33]. During the Biennale, the stage was transformed into a multi-function hall to host lectures, seminars, stage performance, events and projections. The stage's social and spatial memory was re-shaped by URBANUS through architectural moves which aspired to enhance and spectacularise the "atmosphere of an informal theatrical space" (Meng 2018). The layout of the new raised audience seating evoked "scattered rocks", while the lifting fabric curtain

30   Historic County Government ruins, the Baode Ancestral Hall, and other historic buildings are in the vicinity (Meng 2018).

31   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/projects/nantou-old-town/?lang=en. Only in Chinese. Accessed 12 February 2021.

32   Interview with Wendy Wu. 28 October 2018.

33   In the framework of the rapid industrialisation of the city and the diffusion of Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) (O' Donnell 2017), public stages were built throughout the city to meet the leisure and recreational demands of the population of migrant workers. This kind of facilities have gradually disappeared with the city growth and the progressive relocation of industries.

Figure 5.8_Aerial view of Nantou Old Town after the transformation injected by the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 5.9_The concrete, brick and glass information pavillion designed by Yung Ho Chang (Atelier FCJZ) at the Southern entrance of Nantou Old Town. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 5.10_Aerial view of Baode Square area before the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale transformation. Picture by Zhang Chao. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee. Re-elaboration by the author.

Figure 5.11_Aerial view of Baode Square area after the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale transformation. Picture by Zhang Chao. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee. Re-elaboration by the author.

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Figure 5.12_Baode Square area after the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale transformation: building B3, designed by URBANUS. Picture by Zhang Chao. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 5.13_Baode Square area after the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale transformation: the basket court and the playground, the building B4 in the background. Picture by Zhang Chao. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee.
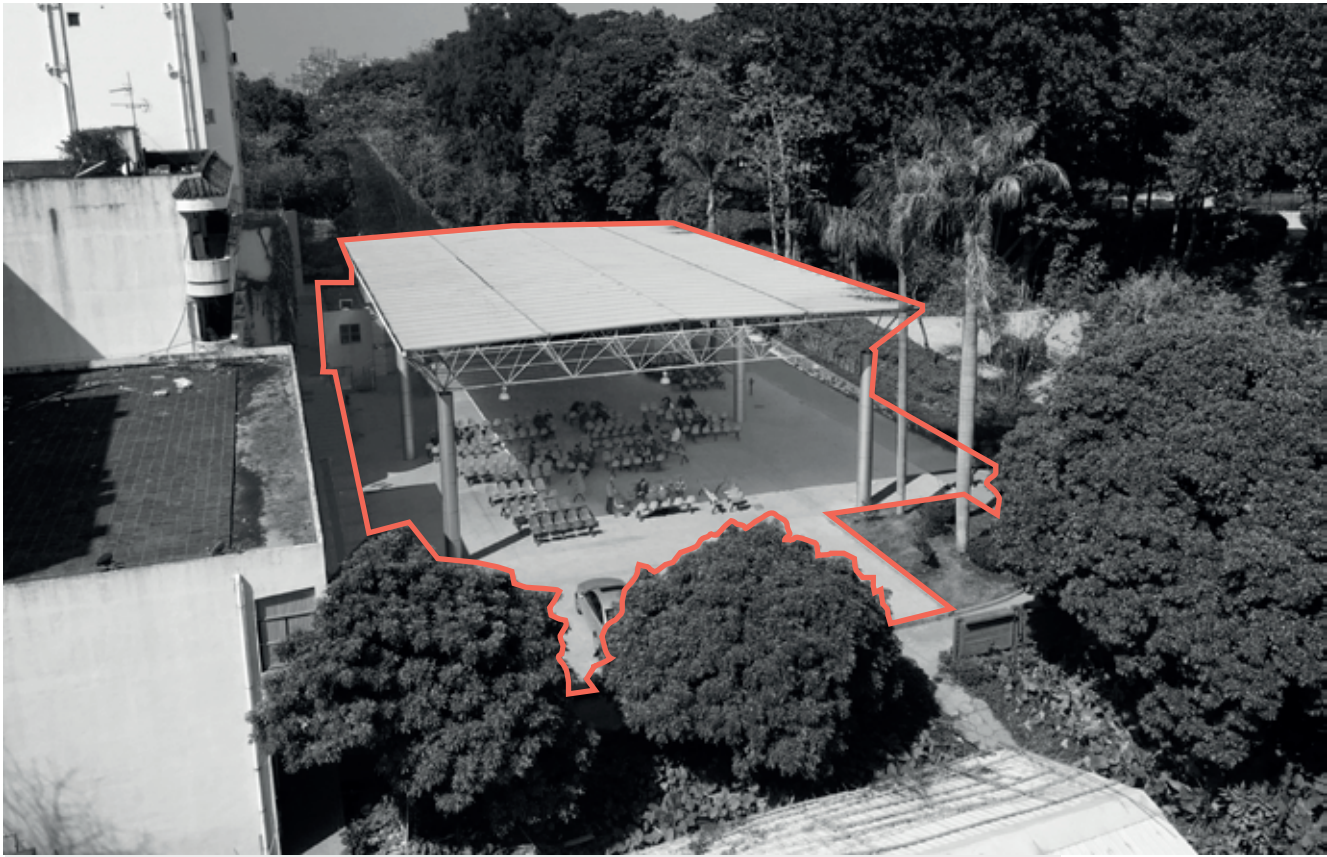
Figure 5.14_Zhongshan Park stage before the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale transformation. Picture by Zhang Chao. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee. Re-elaboration by the author.

Figure 5.15_Zhongshan Park stage after the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale transformation. Picture by Zhang Chao. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee. Re-elaboration by the author.

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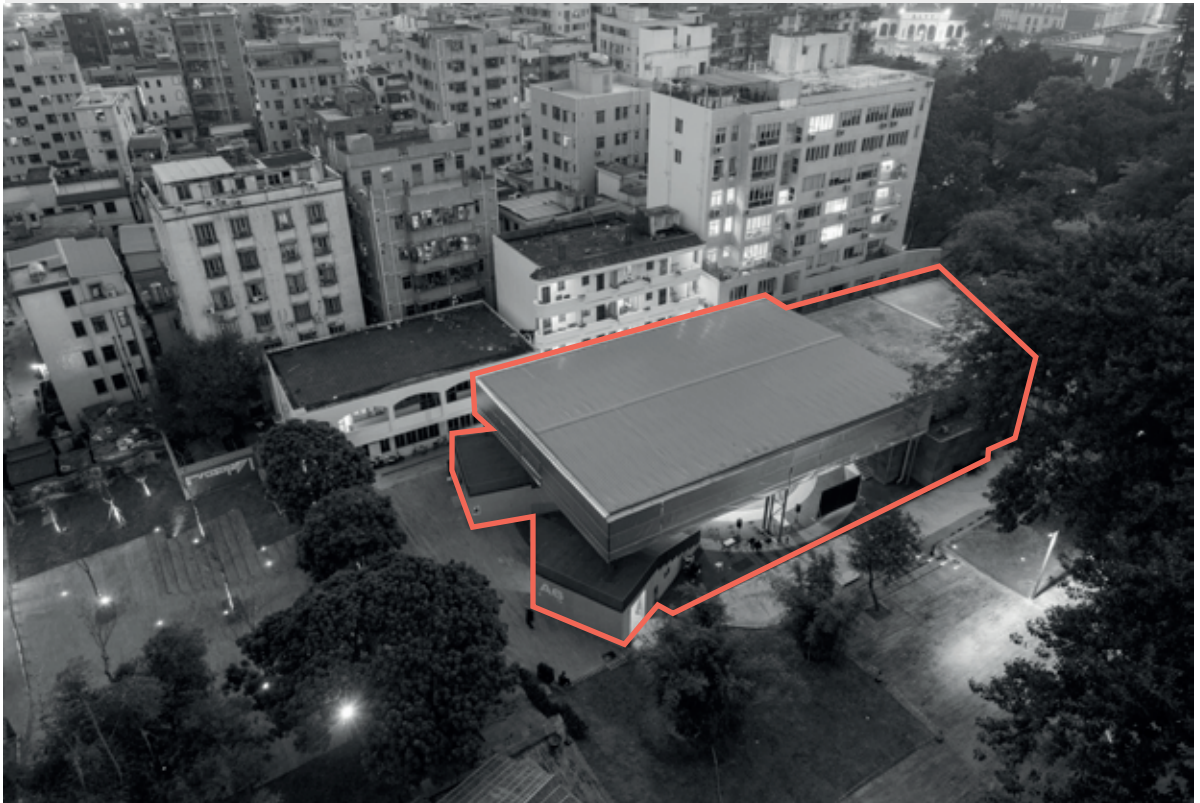
system around the roof truss aimed at re-creating the atmosphere of openness and flexibility characterising the whole Biennale's narrative[34]. After the event, the theatre returned to the owner (the Youth Communist Centre), and was supposed to be used for rehearsals, spectacles and events[35]. Nevertheless, despite the ambitious premises - aimed at preserving "its role as an informal performance venue" hosting the daily activities of residents - the building seems somehow underused.

According to Meng (2018), the Biennale intended to have "minimum interference with the daily life of local residents". Nevertheless, a relevant part of the whole curatorial process operated decisive regulatory actions on Nantou's spaces and community since its inception, transforming the *chengzhongcun* informal 'chaos' in its tamed, aestheticised version. To "maintain the order" during the Biennale, written pleas appeared on two entrances and exits of Nantou, asking the local population to "maintain the city's cleanliness". Moreover, during the exhibition daily opening time, in order to avoid traffic issues, car access to the ancient city was prohibited for all vehicles and limited for shared bikes: local dwellers had to park their cars near the entrance and walk home (Li 2017). Such operations could be easily legitimised as necessary actions to ensure order and security in the framework of a public international event; yet, they sound somehow contradictory if one considers the Biennale's initial ambition to involve the whole community in the urban carnival and to fully merge with local everyday life.

Frictions alson characterised the intersection between art interventions and urban space. In curators' view, the display of artworks in specific socio-spatial contexts like the *chengzhongcun* - renowned as lacking in public spaces - represented the occasion to create a "new public sphere through the intervention of exhibitions"[36]. Notably, wall paintings populating Nantou's urban space represented a relevant portion of the "Art Making City" section: the use of a traditionally contesting and grass-root form of artistic expression was conveniently suitable to convey the 'informal atmosphere' chasen by curators, combining high and low-brow tones. Nevertheless, in the highly controlled "semi-utopian and semi-realistic" exhibition space[37], the grass-root - and potentially politically subversive - contemporary meaning of wall artworks seemed subjected to an affirmative function. For instance, the 960 square meters wide "骞宠 *Pingheng* (balance, equilibrium): Understanding Chinese Reality" mural on the A2 factory building's façade, realised by Spanish design collective Boa Mistura[38] through the superposition of the ideograms "tradition" and "progress", optimistically - yet ambiguously - echoed the manifold controversial transformations impacting urban villages, implicitly staging a 'propaganda' atmosphere.

Such spatial overlaps aimed at setting "fruitful collisions that will trigger people to re-examine the role of the public sphere"[39]. Although in a different sense, the episode of the work realised by Sino-French artist Hu Jiamin and by his French wife Marine Brossard was probably

34   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/uabb/uabb2017/exhibition-venue-design-concept/?lang=en. Accessed 18 January 2021.

35   Interview with Wendy Wu. 28 October 2018.

36   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/uabb/uabb2017/about-the-structure-and-sections/?lang=en. Accessed 12 August 2020.

37   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/uabb/uabb2017/about-the-structure-and-sections/?lang=en. Accessed 12 August 2020.

38   https://www.boamistura.com/en/proyecto/平衡-pingheng-equilibrio/. Accessed 12 August 2020.

39   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/uabb/uabb2017/about-the-structure-and-sections/?lang=en. Accessed 12 August 2020.

the most representative case of such collisions. The mural "Time Discrepancy" - painted on the outer wall of Lord Guan Yu Temple, close to Nantou's South Gate - portrayed an interior scene, with "an empty blue chair inside a room with a barred window" at its centre (Wei 2018). On 15 December 2017, the work was covered and the wall painted. Arguably, governmental officers interpreted the scene as evoking the controversial detention of Liu Xiaobo, the imprisoned Chinese dissident and Nobel peace prize laureate (Wei 2018). The artist declared that the artwork was not a public political statement but contained a "personal commemoration and grief towards Mr Liu". Nevertheless, according to the artist, both Hu and his wife were imprisoned for a few days without any reported comment by the Biennale Organizing Committee nor by the curatorial team[40].

Albeit in a much softer way, the installation "Fire Foodies Club" witnessed the friction between the exhibition's idealistic space and Nantou's real-life regulatory restrictions. Tokyo based practice Atelier Bow-Wow designed an installation formed by three chimneys suspended from a steel frame, evoking the outdoor kitchens commonly diffused among *chengzhongcun* residents. In line with the curatorial statement, the work aimed at enhancing social relationships in the village; nevertheless, as Yu (2018) reports, the original idea of welcoming locals to on-site barbecue on-site "was compromised due to Shenzhen's fire regulations", ending up in the complete disuse of the installation after the event.

5.2.5 A brand new Nantou between public and corporate interests

As Smith (1996, 19) observes, "good art and good locations become fused. And good location means money". These words well summarise the increasingly diffused gentrification phenomena generated by the expansion of creative practices in contemporary urban spaces. Also Deutsche and Ryan (1984 in Smith 1996, 17) underline the connection between art and real estate, pointing out how the complicity of art and gentrification does not depend on fortuitous coincidences but "has been constructed with the aid of the entire apparatus of the art establishment". Through such processes, "hostile landscapes are regenerated, cleansed, re-infused with middle-class sensibility; real estate values soar; yuppies consume; elite gentility is democratised in mass-produced styles of distinction" (Smith 1996, 12). Nanotu Old Town proved to be a good location for the 2017 Biennale and its transformative ambitions: walking in the Ancient City streets some months after the event[41], yet, it is possible to observe the event's legacy hybrid trajectory - and unpack its disposition.

According to curators, Biennale Organising Committee and local government, the Biennale presented an alternative and more culturally sensitive model for the development of Nantou, that could avoid destruction and reconstruction operations. As mentioned, Nantou was already a prominent location in the city: what happened in the Old Town can be considered representative of Shenzhen's aspirational urban policies regarding *chengzhongcun*, exploiting the Biennale as a virtuous showcase of a city able to manage co-existence successfully.

The event has determined significant transformations in Nantou's urban fabric which is undergoing today relevant transformations. The exhibition's spatial imprint and its impact

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40   https://www.jiamin.org/time-discrepancy-statement. Accessed 12 August 2020.

41   Field research in Nantou was conducted in October 2018, December 2018, May 2019, July 2019, November 2019.

Figure 5.16_Nantou Old Town regeneration plan after the 2017 Biennale: transformations in buildings along Zhongshan Road. Picture by Daoming Chan.

Figure 5.17_Nantou Old Town regeneration plan after the 2017 Biennale: transformations in buildings along Zhongshan Road, the "Nantou Digital Pavillion". Picture by Daoming Chan.

Figure 5.18_Nantou Old Town regeneration plan after the 2017 Biennale: the "Plant Building" by CM Design. © CM Design.

Figure 5.19_Nantou Old Town regeneration plan after the 2017 Biennale: the B4 Building converted into a music restaurant. Picture by the author.

have generated spatial contaminations during and after the event, involving both private and public actors - and revealing something different from the process's alleged smoothness and engagement with local reality.

As Smith (1996, 21) asserts, "geography of gentrification is not random; developers do not just plunge into the heart of slum opportunity, but tend to take it piece by piece". A similar trajectory can be observed in Nantou, whose transformation has not followed the conventional 'demolition and reconstruction' pattern but rather a progressive gentrification phenomenon - which is prompted as a possible future paradigm for *chengzhongcun* transformation.

Besides the mentioned new architectural interventions, during the Biennale's framework some seemingly grassroot urban regeneration initiatives had been injected. Six projects for the 'beautification' of Nantou's shops have started in the framework of "Doing a lesson: Do something with UABB into the village! - Nantou Ancient City Residents Needs Investigation and Innovation Practice Course". Through two months of research, a group of students interacted with local residents investigating their needs. According to the research, shops in Nantou generally suffer from crowding, messy goods, unattractive furnishings, and lack of 'personality'. A "new store image" campaign was thus launched, recruiting various designers, which resulted in the shops' restyling (in this framework, Shum Yip Group promoted a seven-day "Revamp Project" in the stores)[42].

The public financial support of the operation provided by Nanshan District - together with the local government's engagement, made the urban transformation possible in the Biennale framework. Nevertheless, corporate investors gradually gained ground, playing a relevant role in transforming the event's legacy. The government rented the Biennale Venues for 20 years, directly negotiating with enterprises and companies to manage the future of the sites[43].

Legitimated by the cultural event's media exposure, spatial interventions that have followed the exhibition in Nantou shed lights on the direct cooperation among private stakeholders and public government in defining trajectories for *chengzhongcun* spatial restructuring. The imposing role undertaken by real estate company Vanke well represents this relationship: their "Wancun" (*wancun jihua*, 'One Thousand Villages Plan') project, advocating for a "soft" - yet substantial - spatial redevelopment of an extensive portion of Shenzhen's urban villages, was exhibited in a dedicated section during the Biennale[44]. The project kicked off in 2017, after the issue in 2016 of Shenzhen's 13th Five-Year Plan for Urban Renewal - which promoted the redevelopment one million flats in urban villages and the "comprehensive improvements in built environment and basic infrastructure" (Liu 2019).

Vanke has undertaken a leading role also in the post-Biennale phase. In March 2019, the Nanshan District Government launched a "Rebirth Plan" for Nantou Ancient Town, which brought to the overall transformation of Zhongshan North-South axis on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. In August 2020, the 330-meter-long North-South Street officially inaugurated. The renewed Nantou Old Town once again became a landmark site after the Biennale. Vanke's Urban Research Institute[45] undertook the coordination

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42   http://www.szhkbiennale.org/exhibits/details.aspx?id=10000745. Accessed 18 October 2019. No more accessible.

43   Interwiew with Wendy Wu. 28 October 2018.

44   http://2017.szhkbiennale.org.cn/En/Exhibits/details.aspx?id=10000858. Accessed 15 August 2020.

45   https://www.gooood.cn/nantou-ancient-town-in-shenzhen-by-la-design.htm. Accessed 10 January 2021.

of the whole project - collaborating with different local and international designers - in making Nantou a reference showcase for an exemplary intervention of *chengzhongchun* transformation.

Commissioned by Shenzhen Municipality (Nanshan District) Bureau of Public Works - in cooperation with Shenzhen Vanke Development Ltd. as contractor - the master plan has exploited and expanded the notion of 'urban curation' prompted during the 2017 Biennale. Shenzhen-based Bowan Architecture Studio[46] and L&A Design[47] partnered in drafting the revitalisation plan, re-interpreting the research previously led by URBANUS - which figures now as a simple 'consultant'[48] - and elaborating a project "based on the expectations of government and the local residents"[49].

While URBANUS design mostly leaned upon punctual interventions, the new plan has envisioned an extended 'beautification' involving a consistent portion of the buildings along Zhongshan street through "façade renovation strategies" which aim to "create a traditional atmosphere by controlling the selection and proportion of new materials"[50]. Differently from the Biennale's intervention - which aimed at enhancing the informal, cultural richness of the old city - the newly inaugurated renovation has been orchestrated to turn "the broken and chaotic street" into a more "coherent and unobstructed form"[51].

The design process has activated the preservation of selected cultural relics (Guandi Temple, South Gate and Xin'an County Office), but mostly brought to the insertion of new architectural interventions and functions. Some design gestures re-evokes recall on a formal/aesthetic level the stylistic imprint given by URBANUS during the 'urban curation' project developed for the Biennale (notably, the intervention in Baode Square). Nevertheless, the 'beautification' has been orchestrated to give the idea of a neat, modern yet vibrant place through the addition of new elements (bamboo and tile claddings, window frames and extruded windows, flower ponds and railings, metal panels) and the replacement of old ones. In this framework, architecture firm CM Design - appointed by a private owner - transformed a two storeys building from the 1980s into the "Plant Building", mixing commercial and residential space. The architectural intervention aimed at setting up a "mutual infiltration of indoor and outdoor spaces"[52] through a curved glass envelope at the ground floor, acting as an "interface of transparency and interactivity" with the old town's street.

The architectural objects realised during the Biennale have been heavily transformed or engulfed by the new plan. The transformations involving Baode Square several months after the event have revealed a controversial side, which clashes with the proclaimed event's intentions: many of the relocated vendors still did not have a precise, alternative location for

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46   http://www.szbowan.com. Accessed 10 January 2021.

47   http://www.aoya-hk.com. Accessed 10 January 2021.

48   Despite the previous involvement in Nantou Preservation and Regeneration Plan, the end of the 2017 Biennale also marked the end of the official cooperation between local government and URBANUS in leading Nantou's incremental plan. Interview with Wendy Wu and Liu Xiaodu. 24 May 2019.

49   https://www.gooood.cn/revitalization-and-utilization-project-of-nantou-old-town-china-by-bowan-architecture.htm. Accessed 10 January 2021.

50   https://www.gooood.cn/revitalization-and-utilization-project-of-nantou-old-town-china-by-bowan-architecture.htm. Accessed 10 January 2021.

51   https://www.gooood.cn/nantou-ancient-town-in-shenzhen-by-la-design.htm. Accessed 10 January 2021.

52   https://www.gooood.cn/renovation-of-the-plant-building-of-nantou-old-town-cm-design.htm. Accessed 5 November 2020.

Figure 5.20_The industrial A2 Building before the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale transformation. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 5.21_The industrial A2 Building before the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale transformation: view of the interior working spaces. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.
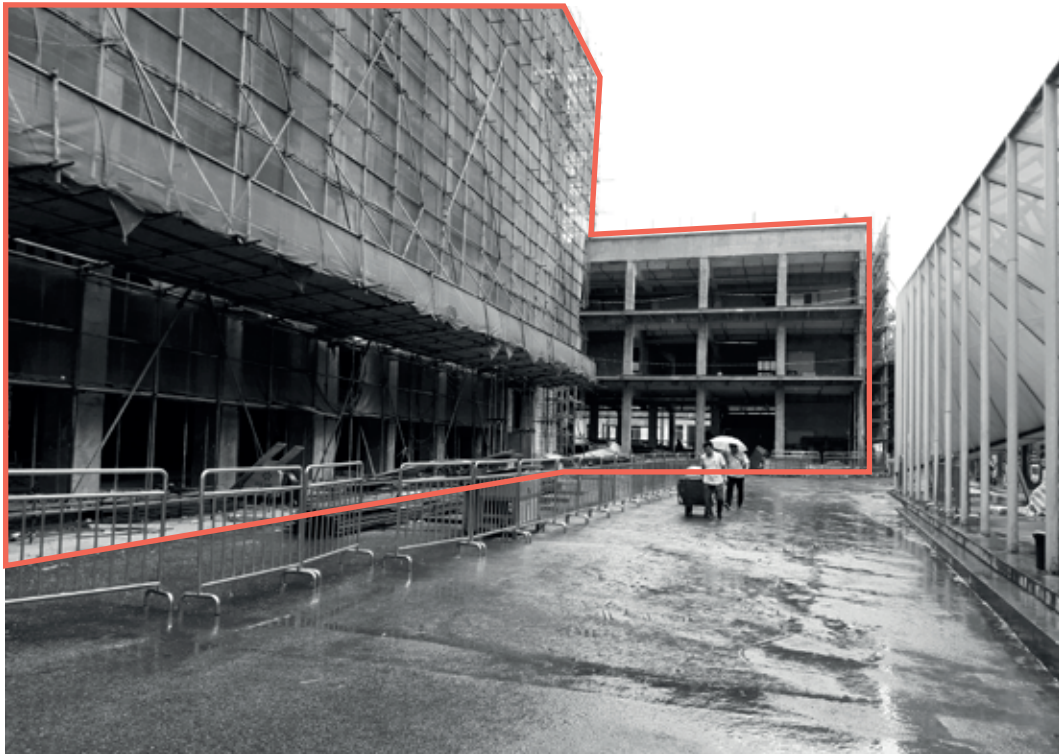
Figure 5.22_The industrial A2 Building after the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale, undergoing transformation. Picture by the author.

Figure 5.23_Nantou Old Town regeneration plan after the 2017 Biennale: commercial faux-façade covering the building site of the industrial A2 Building transformation in "If Factory", designed by MVRDV. Picture by Daoming Chang.

their business; moreover, the new pavillions designed by URBANUS - which would have ideally housed functions for the community and whose maintenance proved to be difficult for a public stakeholder[53] - have now been rented by private investors. The well-known music and food company Huatoli - also present in OCT-Loft and various other locations in the city - has entered the process, realising a restaurant and a training centre for students who will perform in the restaurant[54].

Another relevant spatial manipulation directly dealing with the Biennale's legacy is the transformation of Wanli Industrial Zone[55], a 14,000 square meters area in the northern part of the city realised in the late 1980s, whose buildings housed one of the main sections of the exhibition. The factory compound was formed by the three factories and two dormitories, which were still active before the Biennale[56]: the workers were evicted, and the curation plan engulfed the buildings (Yu 2018).

Exploiting the Biennale media exposure, in 2019 Vanke involved Dutch architecture firm MVRDV (which authored the installation "Vertical Village"[57] during the 2017 Biennale) and the local Shenzhen Bowan Architecture in the renovation plan for a portion of the Wanli factory compound - a future 11.000 m2 office building[58] which is referred to as the "If Factory". While the original plan drafted by URBANUS aimed at developing a local, grass-root creativity in the area, the new project seems to prompt a different atmosphere - closer to the corporate imagery featuring other creative areas in the city, like OCT-Loft. MVRDV's plan envisions the building's transformation into a creative factory, containing a mixture of offices for the Urban Research Institute of China Vanke and spaces for rent. The design displays a "simple cleaning and renovation" of the old building through the preservation of the concrete frame[59], the addition of perimeter balconies and a new circulation (a staircase clad in wood which carves the whole building and leads to the " Green House", a public rooftop terrace which hosts "a green bamboo landscape packed with amenities and activities"). The project aspires to "make

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53   When URBANUS proposed the project for the two public buildings in the square, some of Nantou's local inhabitants protested against tearing down the two existing shelters, underlining that tenants would have been forced to move away their activities. According to curators, yet, the creation of public spaces was seen as a priority which made acceptable the demolition of two illegal buildings and the creation of two neww pavillions with public functions. Nevertheless, although the local government was in charge of managing the buildings, what can be observed today in Baode Square is the privatisation of what the event sponsored as a public and collectively used space. Interview with Wendy Wu. October 2018.

54   Founded in 2014, Hutaoli Music Restaurant & Bar is part of the Alliance Art Group. The format "combines music, literature and art, Sichuan cuisine restaurant and red wine bar to provide a new one-stop entertainment experience with the new integration mode of bar/restaurant/cafe" embodying "a new landmark of nightlife with [a] cultural atmosphere". http://www.htaoli.com/en/brand/index.aspx. Accessed 15 August 2020.

55   As Bach (2017b) underscores, during the 1980s and the 1990s many village committees transformed into shareholding corporations. This new status allowed them to invest in different activities including manufacturing plants. Meng (2018) points how that building factories to rent out was part of the strategies set up by village collectives "to shake off poverty and to get rich, while also bringing more employment opportunities for the villages' younger generation". These factories became encircled by the villages' development as happened in Nantou's Wanli Industrial Zone, formed by three plants and two dormitories.

56   The industrial compound mainly housed small clothing factories and electronic device companies. Interview with Wendy Wu. October 2018.

57   https://www.gooood.cn/renovation-of-the-plant-building-of-nantou-old-town-cm-design.htm. Accessed 25 March 2021.

58   https://www.gooood.cn/mvrdv-to-renovate-disused-urban-factory-building-into-creative-factory-in-shenzhen.htm. Accessed 25 March 2021.

59   https://www.gooood.cn/mvrdv-to-renovate-disused-urban-factory-building-into-creative-factory-in-shenzhen.htm. Accessed 25 March 2021.

this part of Shenzhen a creative force", yet contextually remaining "in touch with the people of Nantou, their needs, and the history of the place"[60].

A special place in the master plan promotional storytelling is then dedicated to the 250 square meters wide "Vanke Nantou Gallery"[61] designed by architectural firm Various Associates and completed in August 2020, referred to as an "urban memory exhibition hall". The building functions as a "comprehensive service [and] information center that exhibits the renovation and changes of Nantou Ancient Town". The halls house a broad array of functions: a reception area, an office, a meeting room, a shared coffee area and exhibition spaces. The design employed "rustic material textures" (wood, gray bricks and concrete), low-saturation hues and contemporary materials (silver foils, concrete, glass bricks) to suggest a "low-profile yet modern Chinese-style spatial ambiance" and establish an aesthetic connection with traditional Lingnan buildings[62]. Despite the name evoking Nantou's memory, the gallery proudly displays the new projects which have transformed Zhongshan North-South axis, staging a 'recreated memory' for the old city.

An accumulation of new activities (stores, bars, restaurants, exhibition halls) have popped-up in the village since the Biennale's intervention (Yu 2018). On the one side, such renovations can be contextualised in what Meng Yang defined in a public debate as "unavoidable" gentrification (Cai 2018). On the other hand, some of the spatial operations undertaken under the Biennale vessel revealed a distinctive top-down imprint. At the opening ceremony, Xue Feng - the then Biennale's General Secretary - declared that "in a [...] vulgar way, the exhibition has not yet started and the rent has risen"[63] (Li 2017). This declaration sounds somewhat contradictory: if one of the main goals of the Biennale was to trigger reflections to inclusively tackle urban issues affecting *chengzhongcun* (and residents' relocation is one of them), the rent rising linked to the event might represent an exacerbation of the very same issues that the Biennale aimed at contrasting. The next section - tackling the spatial manipulations undergone in Dameisha's village, one of the 2017 Biennale's sub-venues - will further show the pervasiveness of real estate developer's action in manipulating the event's imagery and legacy.

5.3 Vanke is coming to Dameisha

5.3.1 Re-imagining an aspirational tourist site

Appointing the peripheral coastal village of Dameisha as one of the Biennale 2017 sub-venues might have come across as a quite unconventional move for a well established international event. Nevertheless, such a choice sounds more understandable when observed through the lens of Yantian District's aspirations, where the village is located: the district aimed

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60   https://www.gooood.cn/mvrdv-to-renovate-disused-urban-factory-building-into-creative-factory-in-shenzhen.htm. Accessed 25 March 2021.

61   https://www.gooood.cn/vanke-nantou-gallery-various-associates.htm. Accessed 25 February 2021.

62   https://www.gooood.cn/vanke-nantou-gallery-various-associates.htm. Accessed 25 February 2021.

63   Translation mine.

Figure 5.24_The "Fire Foodies Club"
installation by Atelier Bow-Wow and
Tokyo Tech. Tsukamoto Lab after the
2017 Biennale. Picture by the author.

Figure 5.25_The "Fire Foodies Club"
installation by Atelier Bow-Wow and
Tokyo Tech. Tsukamoto Lab engulfed
in the 2019 Nantou Regeneration Plan.
Picture by Daoming Chan.

Figure 5.26_2019 Nantou Regeneration Plan: the Vanke Nantou Gallery by Various Associates. ©Various Associates
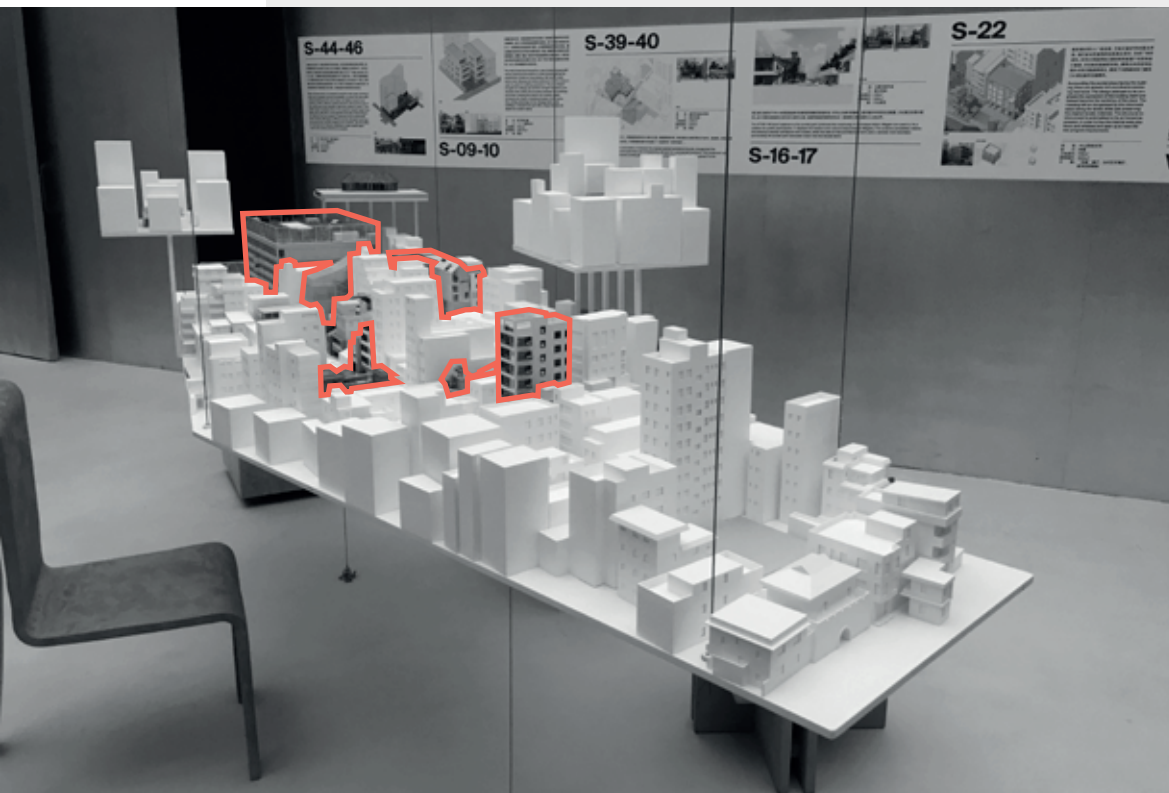
Figure 5.27_2019 Nantou Regeneration Plan: three dimensional model of the project on display in the Vanke Nantou Gallery by Various Associates. Photo by Daoming Chan. Re-elaboration by the author.

Baode Square
2019 implementation
Various architects
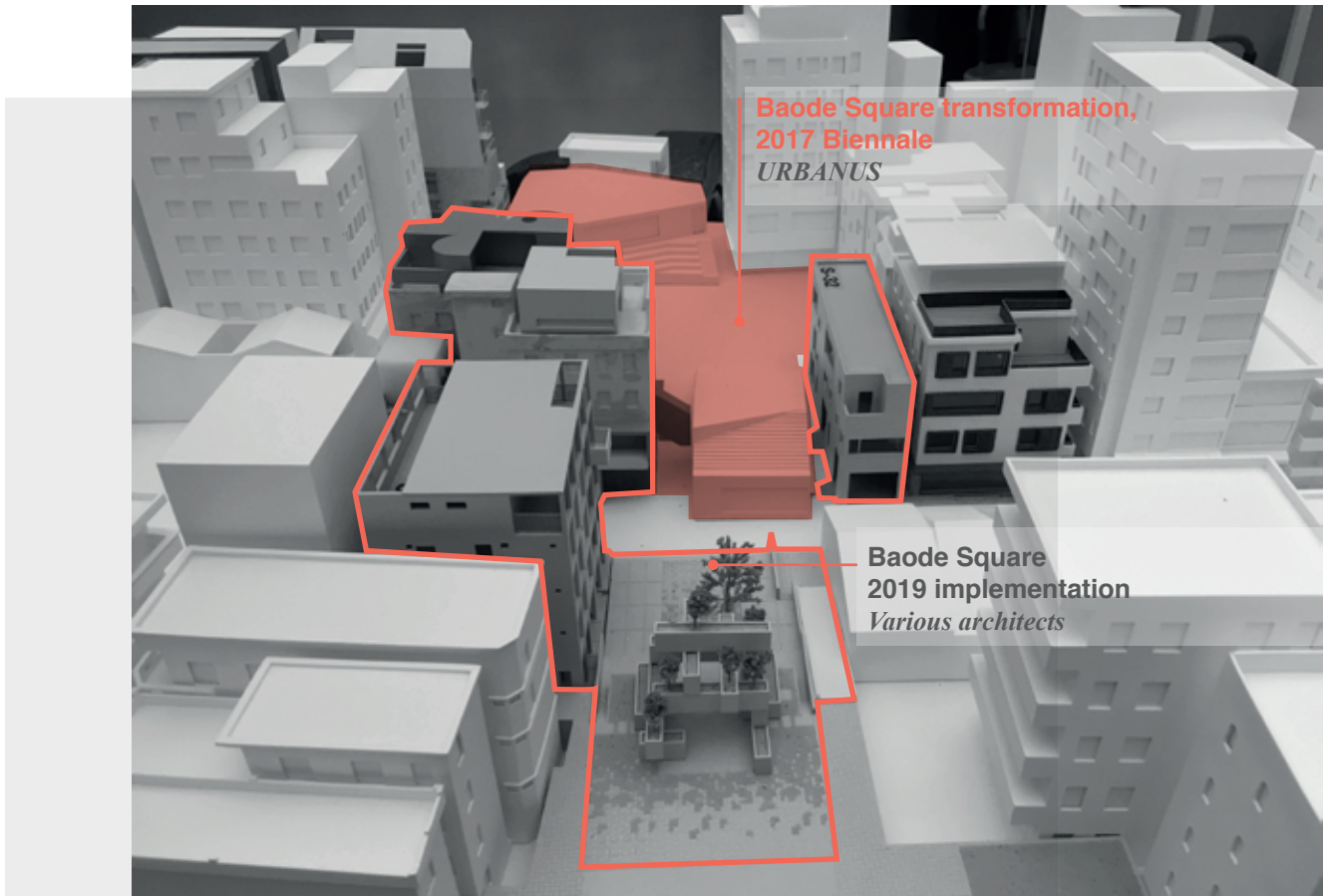
Figure 5.28_2019 Nantou Regeneration Plan:
detail of Baode Square transformation. Photo
by Daoming Chan. Re-elaboration by the
author.

BAODE SQ. AREA
报德广场片区

S-32

NT33-34

S-27-29

A2 Factory building
2019 implementation
MVRDV

Figure 5.29_2019 Nantou Regeneration Plan:
detail of A2 Building transformation. Photo by
Daoming Chan. Re-elaboration by the author.

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at exploiting its geographical location between Shenzhen and Hong Kong to diversify and strengthen its position as a touristic, technological, commercial, and infrastructural node.

In such context, the area is acquiring relevance thanks to a dense combination of business activities and natural resources: in terms of asset flows, Yantian Port represents a pivotal logistic area in eastern Shenzhen, comparable to Shekou Harbor. Moreover, the natural character of the area is reinforced by the presence of the East Ecological Restoration Zone, close to Dapeng Peninsula - housing natural and historical sites. Its touristic appeal is enhanced by the growing presence of hotels an entertainment sites, among which OCT East, Sheraton Hotel and Maluanshan Countryside Park stand out. In front of the village, Dameisha Beach houses Dameisha Seaside Park, the object of a recently completed international design competition[64].

Besides natural resources and leisure facilities, the Dameisha area is also experiencing rapid urbanisation. The proximity of real estate developer Vanke well represents such a trend: its headquarters - designed by American architect Steven Holl in 2009 - dominate the slope behind the village, epitomising the developer's ambitions.

Deriving from a Hakka settlement, Dameisha village shares the same history as many other *chengzhongcun,* as an arrival area providing a basic livelihood for low-income migrant workers in the industries and services nearby. Due to the rapid urbanisation driven by the top-down reform, high-end real estate developments started mushrooming around the village. Together with the fast-growing tourism, such phenomena have brought direct financial gains to the villages' indigenous dwellers and vast job opportunities attracting migrant populations. Despite the high demand for accommodation from the latter, however, due to the urban planning control imposed by the local authority, the urbanised pattern of the village has not resulted in the construction of highly dense clusters of apartment buildings: so far, the village thus has managed to maintained its urban pattern consisting of one-or-two-story houses (Liu and Yong 2018).

Differently from Nantou Old Town, Dameisha is not famous for its historical elements, nor it enjoys the status of protected heritage. What seems to be relevant is its location, close to natural, commercial and leisure facilities. In the words of Zhou Min, the Deputy Mayor of Yantian district, the village "adjacent to Dameisha Beach Park, the most popular tourist destination in Shenzhen [...] has not yet acquired its deserved fame among the public" (Zhou 2018, 2). The aspiration to increase "the international visibility of Yantian District" marked the debut of Dameisha as one of the Biennale's sub-venue: 2017 also represented the 20th anniversary of the establishment of Yantian District and - as the Deputy Mayor clearly stated - the opportunity for "UABB and Yantian District [...] to constitute a win-win relation"[65].

The appeal of the Biennale's cultural brand represented for the eastern part of Shenzhen - that far almost untouched by the event[66] - the occasion to exploit "the abundant resources from

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64   Dameisha Seaside Park is one of Shenzhen's major tourist attractions. The park has millions of visitors a year, until recently when Typhoon Mangkhut caused extensive damage, closing the park since September 2018. In 2019, Yantian District promoted an international design competition for the redesign of the park. https://www.mandaworks.com/dameisha-seaside-park. Accessed 18 September 2020.

65   During the Opening Forum held on 22 December 2017, Zhou Min declared that 2017 "After 20 years of development [Yantian] district has made great achievements" The local government's ambitions aim at building "a modern, international and advanced coastal city". Embracing the Biennale event represent the occasion for modernisation and internationalisation: "UABB is an internationally influential platform that enabled [Yantian] to take root, sprout and grow", in line with the District's development concept" (Liu and Yong 2018, 192).

66   The only exception was the temporary exhibition housed in Dapeng Fortress during the 2015 Biennale.

Figure 5.30_Dameisha Village before the transformation injected by the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. © NODE.

Figure 5.31_Dameisha Village before the transformation injected by the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. © NODE.

the mountain and the sea as well as the folk culture and traditions", injecting potential benefits for public welfare, local cultural industries and tourism. In this perspective, Yantian District strongly supported the project. The sub-venue was the only one in Shenzhen directly supervised by a district government: according to curators, "Secretary Du Ling and District Mayor Wu Delin led a number of surveys of the site" while Executive Deputy District Mayor Wei Gan and Deputy District Mayor Zhou Min "called a meeting every week to coordinate various exhibition-related issues, and made hands-on efforts to push every part of the project forward" (Zhou 2018, 3).

Injecting the local, folk culture of Dameisha with a 'higher' notion of culture was a pivotal point: Guo Fang, deputy to the Municipal People's Congress and director of the integrated office of Shenzhen OCT East Cultural Tourism Project[67], pointed out Dameisha's lack of "culture with depths" and thus broadly praised the potential of the initiative to "build a cultural brand for Meisha as a tourist destination embracing mountains, sea and the city" (Liu and Yong 2018, 264).

5.3.2 Displaying Dameisha's daily life

Yantian District appointed Doreen Heng Liu - founder of Shenzhen-based architectural office NODE - and artist Yang Yong as curator of the sub-venue themed *Village as Kitchen*. Both were familiar with the Biennale environment: Liu was part of the team who transformed the former Guangdong Float Glass Factory in 2013 and co-curated the 2015 Biennale designing the Flour Factory's refurbishment; Yang was also co-curating the main venue in Nantou Old Town in 2017. In conceiving Dameisha's project, Liu (2018a, 16) followed the urban renovation and renewal approach as shown in 2015 UABB" taking Dameisha "as an example [...] to explore a new idea or possibility for community renovation and city-village coexistence in Yantian District" involving artists, designers and local officers.

Curating 6000 square meters of urban space in Dameisha implied the neighbourhood's spatial renovation, insisting on the village's peculiar features. The curatorial stance put emphasis on the "daily life" of local inhabitants - exacerbated by the use of site-specific architectural and urban design elements created for the event. Architectural micro-renovations and performative artistic actions functioned both as spectacle devices and as research tools to investigate "scattered spaces in the village" and stage a show which would become "part of the everyday life of local villagers" (Liu and Yong 2018, 11). In this perspective, NODE envisioned a project based on the re-sewing of public spaces through three "visiting routes", which reconnect a series of crucial spatial nodes. The curatorial stance established a dialectic relationship between existing and newly created spaces, "highlighting the clash and fusion between modernity and tradition" and "between renewal and preservation" (Zhou 2018, 3). Two interconnected modes were adopted: on the one hand, a 'software' approach displayed the village's local identity through artistic activities involving the community; on the other, a 'hardware' set of interventions aimed at improving the village's spatial conditions of the village through the creation of new architectural elements.

Both approaches can be observed in the three main streets housing the exhibition. The rethinking of the public space network emphasised the coastal village's memory and identity

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67   State-Owned Enterprise OCT Group figured as one of the sponsors of Dameisha sub-venue.

through the symbolic use of artefacts: alongside the renewal of the existing grey brick flooring, the insertion of a blue stoned pattern aimed at evoking the Dameisha's relationship with water. Curatorial guidelines highlighted the informal appropriation of the collective space by local dwellers. One of the streets was evocatively named "Street Parlor": here, the village's identity was reconstructed and showcased through the re-use of "old-fashioned furniture [...] in different scenes". The furniture was used as a device to display the daily life of local dwellers and "placed in the public street of Dameisha Village as people-centred public facilities": the creation of informal and spontaneous - yet staged - "living rooms" for neighbours aimed at celebrating the "human touch" of the village. The emphasis on local identity was also manifested in the so-called "Street C", which staged the theme of a "daily" street. There, a modular structure acted as a design device "integrating the daily activities of villagers including sun drying, storing, planting and resting": according to curators, "the real daily life of villagers also becomes part of the exhibition." In this framework, the overall theme exhibition's theme emphasised and displayed elements of the daily life like planting and cooking as "experimental actions" and "life aesthetics activities" (Liu and Yong 2018, 137).

Contextually, public art interventions and collective activities scattered around the village made Dameisha an open exhibitionary stage: the theme *Village as Kitchen* - where food and cooking were intended as the perspective to explore the village and its social configuration - permeated the whole exhibition through community cooking workshop and dinners. In particular, the work *Foodism* di Sun Li celebrated Dameisha's food culture with urban design intents, setting coloured neon lights mixed up with the surrounding street lighting. Other public art projects staged the interaction between artists and urban space, like the coloured wall painting *Shao Yan* (Roasted Swallow) from Jiang Guoyuan and Yi Bang Cheng Art, or the two sculptures realised by Curator Yong Yang - *UABB Meisha* and *Nonlinear*, which marked the entrance and the main square of the village[68].

As a further reinforcement of Dameisha's daily life *mise en scène*, the curatorial program envisioned the renovation of nine village houses and the construction of an exhibition hall, connected by a 500 meters blue, paved path. The appropriation of daily life symbols strongly pervaded this exhibition's section. A fish lantern marked the entrance of each architectural intervention: as a symbolic artefact, the lantern originated from those used in the traditional Sha Tau Kok Fish Lantern Dancing, listed as national intangible cultural heritage[69].

The choice of the houses to be renovated was the outcome of a negotiation between curators, local government and owners: the government offered financial support and promised rental compensation for villagers who were willing to offer spaces for architects to make transformations and for artists to create artworks. As a further safeguard, it was agreed that buildings could be restored to their original state after the event "if the villagers should feel the transformation unacceptable" (Liu 2018b, 465). Several designers took part in the renovations[70],

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68 The installations evoked the building blocks in Dameisha village and the shapes containers in Yantian port.

69 The history of the dance was recorded in the exhibition "The Salt of Yantian, The Field of Yantian" curated by Feng Jiang and Ou Yuanzhen, held in Yantian Exhibition Hall during the 2017 Biennale (Liu and Yong 2018, 134).

70 Five architect offices - from Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen - took part in the exhibition together with artists (Doreen Heng LIU + NODE Architecture&Urbanism, Yu Ting + Wutopia Lab, Yang Xiaodi + Projective Architecture Office, Zhang Bin + Atelier Z+, Zang Feng & James SHEN & He Zhe + People's Architecture Office). They participated in the micro renovation within "a half-defined framework", renovating the selected

Renovation of #10 House
Doreen Heng Liu and NODE Architecture & Urbanism

Renovation of #3 House
Atelier Z+

Renovation of #7 House
Projective Architecture Office

Dameisha Exhibition Hall
Doreen Heng Liu and NODE Architecture & Urbanism

Renovation of #1 House
People's Architecture Office

Renovation of #4 and #5 House
Wutopia Lab

Renovation of #8 House
Atelier Z+

Renovation of #2 House
People's Architecture Office

Renovation of #6 House
Projective Architecture Office

Renovation of #9 House
Doreen Heng Liu and NODE Architecture & Urbanism

Figure 5.32_Aerial view of the transformations injected in Dameisha Village during the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. © NODE. Re-elaboration by the author..

Figure 5.33_View of the public space project designed by NODE. © NODE.

Figure 5.34_View of the public space project designed by NODE and detail of the "Street Living Room" installation. © NODE.

Figure 5.35_Renovation of House no.9 by NODE and the "Foodism Temple" installation by Liu Da & Jiang Yizhen. © NODE.

Figure 5.36_2017 Shenzhen Biennale renovation plan: installation "UABB Meisha" by Yang Yong. © NODE.

Figure 5.37_2017 Shenzhen Biennale renovation plan: House no.6 transformation by Projective Architecture Office. © Projective Architecture Office.

Figure 5.38_2017 Shenzhen Biennale renovation plan: House no.3 transformation by Atelier Z+. © Atelier Z+.

Figure 5.39_2017 Shenzhen Biennale renovation plan: House no.1 transformation by People's Architecture Office. © People's Architecture Office.

Figure 5.40_2017 Shenzhen Biennale renovation plan: House no.9 transformation by NODE. © NODE.

Figure 5.41_2017 Shenzhen Biennale renovation plan: Banyan Tree Square and the House no.10 transformation by NODE © NODE.

Figure 5.42_2017 Shenzhen Biennale renovation plan: the Dameisha Exhibition Hall and the "Glowing Square" designed by NODE. © NODE.

swinging between the interaction with the context's informal character and the adoption of a distinctive architectural language. Such an approach made the renovated buildings recognisable both as real architectural interventions and as follies belonging to the exhibitionary realm, reflecting different approaches to the curatorial topic.

Some of them were oriented towards the pursuit of a symbolic "spatial experience", like the renovation of House no.6 and no.7 by PAO - Projective Architecture Office, or the work "Her House and His House" led on House no.4 and no.5 by Shanghai-based Wutopia Lab. On the other hand, some designers oriented their works toward a more functionalist approach providing tangible services to trigger sharing dynamics in public spaces, like in the renovation of House no.3 and House no.8 by Shanghai-based Atelier Z+[71]. While House no.3 provided collective spaces for children, House No. 8 - a former rural residence built in the 1980s - hosted a two-story combination of an exhibition area, artists' spaces and rooms for the elderly with a shared kitchen/dining room and a tea house with a roof terrace, housing a leisure space and a public arena.

Beijing based PAO-People's Architecture Office focused their research on the improvement of the village's living conditions. The renovation of House no.1 - epitomising such an approach - presented two connected elements which could be used and installed separately both as a service module and as an extension. An "Infrastructure tower" represented a repeatable prototype to address essential living needs like indoor circulation and hygiene (Liu and Yong 2018, 23), incorporating a purification tank system connected to private toilets and sewage. Connected to the Tower, the Plugin House functioned as a residential module to meet accommodation demand during the exhibition. The installation was part of a broader research aimed at addressing housing problems in old towns, suburban and rural areas through multiple functional modules. The Biennale acted as a ground for new solutions to "solve real problems haunting the urban villages". Renovation of House no.2 - the second intervention by PAO - envisioned the realisation of a plug-in three-dimensional planting system on a family house to increase the green surface for grass-root farming activities: although it was intended to be implemented at the end of the event, it seems to have lost its function today (Liu and Yiong 2018, 41).

NODE architects' intervention directly involved the public space system formed by the three above-mentioned streets, interpreting architecture not as a formal/functional exercise in the event's framework - but as a device to construct new, expanded socio-spatial relations for the whole community. In the southern corner of the village, the interaction between the renovation of House no.9 and the new Exhibition Hall through the connection and staircase system of the "Glowing Square" explored the relationship between public and exhibitionary space. The Exhibition Hall, covering an area of 800 square meters (engulfing some abandoned houses and a 100 square meters L-shaped residential building), is the only new construction made for Biennale. The existing house was preserved, and its L-shape and dimension set the blueprint for the realisation of six interconnected interior and exterior exhibition spaces. Materials evoked Dameisha's history: the contrast between opaque and transparent elements, between fare-faced concrete, black brick wall, and glass facades aimed at establishing a dialectic relationship with

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buildings according to "the existing architectural form and local conditions" (Liu 2018a, 16).

71   The house was an Hakka residence built in the 1970s. The architectural intervention realised a common kitchen for children and a series of wooden grid flower racks in the shared courtyard. The flower racks would ideally function to grow flowers, fruits and vegetables, as a playground for children to climb and as a sitting areas for visitors.

the surrounding environment "while presenting unique features of its own"[72].

Westwards, the renovation of House no.10 - the former village's granary - tried at setting a dialogue between the old banyan tree standing on the square, and the street. The former single-floor building was renovated "based on the existing conditions and topography", keeping the existing frame structure and following the principles of "interconnection, integration and transparency". Diagonal stairways entered the existing building and intersected the new expansion, characterised by a steel frame holding semi-transparent panels. Such permeable cladding aimed at reinforcing the interconnection between outer and inner spaces, while the curved roof evoked the shape of the surrounding traditional houses: the light, transparent facade of the annex represented a contrasting element to the massiveness of the original concrete structure[73].

5.3.3 Vanke's vision for "a biennale that never ends"

Although curatorial intentions aimed at "exploring a brand-new possibility for the usually under-developed villages [...] through visible artistic changes" and setting "an example of living artistically for Yantian District and beyond" (Liu and Yong 2018,9), the Biennale's legacy in Dameisha can be questioned under a different perspective.

The event ended with the aspiration - repeatedly expressed by local government's representatives - to maintain the "cultural boost" injected by the event in order to "hold a Biennale that never ends" (Liu and Yong 2018, 459). After such ambitious statements, several months after the event[74] Dameisha seems to be crossing a consistent metamorphosis. Although the totem and the sculpture designed by Yong Yang still welcome the visitors as the new community's landmarks, most of the houses renovated during the Biennale are now empty and without a specific function. Nevertheless, in some areas of the village, it is possible to observe that a vast portion of the buildings forming Dameisha's residential fabric is undertaking relevant renovations.

Curator Doreen Heng Liu repeatedly advocated post-event interactions between artists, villagers and the Biennale architectures, underlining the importance of artists' residency in creating "a new possibility for [the] 10 houses" after their transformation (Liu and Yong 2018, 204). Few months after the Closing Ceremony, Yantian District made indeed efforts to keep alive the Biennale memory, organising an exhibition named *On the Move — International Art Project of Yantian, Shenzhen*[75]. Four artists[76] stayed in the village for three months, inhabiting the houses transformed for the event. The was part of a two-year artists-in-residence project organised by "Shangqi Art". Zhou Min, vice chief of Yantian District, clearly expressed the willingness to extend art activities in Dameisha Village implementing the artists-in-residence project, to make the village "more dynamic and interesting, attracting artists and art lovers from

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72   http://www.nodeoffice.com/show/?id=417. Accessed 14 September 2020.

73   http://www.nodeoffice.com/show/?id=419. Accessed 14 September 2020.

74   Site surveys in Dameisha have been conducted in October 2018, April 2019, and May 2019.

75   http://shangqiart.com/visual/27-22-1.html. Accessed 16 July 2020. No more accessible.

76   Tetsu Takeda from Japan, Yang Xiaoya from Beijing, Rainy Ip from Hong Kong and Xiao Yu from Shenzhen and Beijing.

all over the world" (Cao 2018).

In the words of Zhou Min, setting such an art initiative in a decentralised area - rich in natural resources and characterised by a vibrant local identity - suggested the reconstruction of the village's imagery as an idyllic place where artists could "get away from the fast pace of urban life and create their works in [a] peaceful environment". The reactions of villagers were depicted as cheerful, showing a high degree of interaction between the artists and the local community: such account is not surprising, considering the local government ambitions to use culture and cultural events to stimulate "the villagers' curiosity about contemporary art" (Cao 2018).

Beside this harmoniously depicted scenario, Zhou Min underscored that culture represented the leverage to explore "a new possibility for the development" of Dameisha, which the Biennale's advent could make possible - and desirable. While the event's project had been entirely supported and carried on by the local government (Liu and Yong 2018, 202), the unpacking of the post-event spatial narratives shows the close connection with real estate developers who operate in the area. The idea of involving big entrepreneurs to make a "forever-lasting biennale" already circulated during the initial phase of the show as advocated by Yuan Jiandong[77], who announced the existence of a preliminary design scheme - involving real estate companies OCT East and Vanke - "to improve the environment and culture of Dameisha Village by preserving, furnishing and repairing the houses" (Liu and Yong 2018, 274). Notably, Shenzhen-based real estate corporation Vanke strongly emerged in the post-event process. In line with the Shenzhen Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for Urban Renewal issued in 2016 - which advocates on-site renovation as the most sustainable transformative action to be undertaken in urban villages - the company launched in 2017 the "Wancun" project (Zhang 2018). The initiative envisioned the unified leasing, transformation and management of self-built houses or collective property owned by villagers; it combined comprehensive spatial renovations of villages with property management and commercial operations[78].

The Biennale has been widely praised for its role in making Dameisha "a culture-loaded place, an attraction" and orienting local officers' intention to blend "the new curatorial ideas of art, architecture and design with the culture of Yantian" (Liu and Yong, 274). Such an overall frame righteously met the ambitions of the Deputies of Yantian District People's Congress "to turn the urban village into a tourist town [and] to improve the living environment in the village" (Zhang 2018). During a public seminar in 2018, Lu Hao, chief of the Urban Management Section of Meisha Subdistrict Office, announced the plans for a comprehensive project involving the village, which envisioned the upgrading of 290 building into long-term rental apartments under a unified management system, as well as the upgrading of the village's public spaces.

Vanke's entrepreneurial vision has gradually engulfed Dameisha, arguably following the *Wancun* project. In 2018, the real estate developer appointed the Shenzhen-based architectural office FangCheng Design (FCHA)[79] to draft a feasibility plan for the village's redevelopment.

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77 President and Party branch secretary of Shenzhen Dameisha Industrial Co., Ltd..

78 https://www.jqknews.com/news/250364-Shenzhen_City_Village_Renovation_B_Who_will_pay_for_the_upgrade.html. Accessed 16 July 2020.

79 FangCheng Design (FCHA) took part in the 2013 Biennale Value Factory transformation as the local designer in charge of the Machine Hall project. After the event, they have been appointed by China Merchants Group to draft the development plan for the future of the area (see Chapter 4). The information about the plan come from the documents released from Shenzhen based office Fengchan Design *Dameisha Binhai Art and Cultural Tourism Town Research on Comprehensive Renovation Strategies of Dameisha Village, Yantian District, Shenzhen*

Figure 5.43_The House no.3 undergoing further transformation after the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. Picture by the author.

Figure 5.44_Promotional billboard of the "On the Move" art project after the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. Picture by the author.

Figure 5.45_The Dameisha Exhibition Hall unused after the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. Picture by the author.

Figure 5.46_House no.9 and the "Glowing Square" unused after the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. Picture by the author.

Figure 5.47_House no.10 unused after the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. Picture by the author.

Figure 5.48_House no.9 unused after the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. Picture by the author.

Figure 5.49_Dameisha's built fabric undergoing transformations after the 2017 Shenzhen Biennale. Picture by the author.

Figure 5.50_Commercial billboard promoting Dameisha's Wancun project by real estate developer Vanke. Picture by the author.

While the technical details of the real estate operation might not differ substantially from similar entrepreneurial approaches, it is worth to observe how the project's narration - appropriating and manipulating the Biennale's premises - positions itself as a mouthpiece of the local government's claims. Vanke's project runs along with two intertwined narrations. On the one hand, the plan fully mirrors governmental ambitions, emphasising the site's potentials to create a high standard "International Coastal Leisure Eco-tourism City" - to which the future connection with Metro Line no.8 will give further value. On the other hand, the project re-enacts and expands the Biennale's ambitions to consolidate and give value to local culture through the intersection with artistic activities.

The term 'culture' represents the - somehow ambiguous - connector of such narrations: while the Biennale's curatorial statements see local culture as an instrument for the community's self-empowerment, it becomes a brand for consumption in the developer's hands. Vanke interpreted curatorial intentions - aimed at establishing a relationship between art and local communities to delineate future perspectives on the village's development - in a design concept based on three pivots: the local identity tied to Dameisha's marine culture, the history of local populations and Hakka settlements, and the follow-up of the Biennale activities. The renovation plan aims at enhancing the interconnection and penetration between the village and the surrounding areas: the Biennale directly entered Vanke's plans as an instrument to bring attention to the village, to strengthen its cultural appeal and to "create new highlights" in the area.

Dameisha's transformation project also enters in a broader frame: the Biennale's visibility is instrumental in creating a spatial and functional reorganisation inside the village, exploiting surrounding resources to promote the site as an "Emerging art Cultural Tourism Town" and mixing the traditional fishing village folk tourism with new commercial and leisure facilities. The operation is vast, covering approximately an area of 67,300 square meters combining accommodation and commercial/cultural functions[80]. The new plan revolves around the implementation of "two-axis and four zones": the Biennale legacy becomes part of such narrative construction, which operates a continuous interpenetration between cultural display and consumption.

Vanke's project expands the 500 meters long promenade and the blue pavement system created by the Biennale in different directions beyond the village's boundaries, establishing connections with other services and new construction areas. A North-South axis aims at setting a dialogue between the service compound formed by Vanke headquarters seaside area (including the Marina Park, the future "Ocean Art Creative Market", and Dameisha Beach with the Marina Plaza) and Vanke Meisha Education Headquarters. At the South entrance of Dameisha, the "Ocean Culture Plaza", whose three-dimensional visualizations clearly show Yong Yang's sculptures as landmarks, welcomes the visitors introducing the "Ocean Cultural Tourism Commercial Area" equipped with "gourmet" workshops, music restaurants, coffee shops and bookstores.

In the inner part of the village, "Dameisha Village Cultural Exhibition Hall" is the brand new name for NODE's translucent pavilion in the Banyan Tree Square. In Vanke's promotional representations, the square becomes the "Ancient Tree Cultural Plaza". The pavilion is still there,

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drafted for real estate company Vanke in 2018. Courtesy of FangCheng Design (FCHA).

80   The functions articulates as follows: 40% residential functions (elites apartment, tourist holiday accommodation products, homestays, hostels, hotels), 60% other functions (commercial, art, cultural industry, cultural tourism, public services) (FangCheng Design 2018).

but in a slightly offset position: a crowded public space filled with commercial signs dominates the scene, where international luxury brands like Cartier and Max Mara overlap the traditional writings affixed to local historical houses. The Plaza acts as a pivotal node intersecting the East-West "Cultural tourism art axis", representing one of the project's prominent features. The axis crosses different functions, where the term 'culture' encounters various interpretations and manipulations. The project also envisions the upgrading of existing 3-4 story buildings located in the western and eastern areas of the village - realised in the 1960s and 1970s - respectively in a "Talent Apartment"[81] and a "Boutique Hotel"[82] compounds (Vanke 2018).

The original promenade designed by NODE overlaps a so-called "Characteristic commercial street", displaying a dense concentration of restaurants serving local cuisine, cafes, book bars, small art theatres, artist workshops, galleries and event spaces. A "Folk culture and art experience" area along the West-East axis strongly features the village's historical part. Existing Hakka houses are presented through an aesthetic and functional beautification filter. On the one hand, the plan envisions to restore traditional materials (notably brick and mosaic walls and grey tile roofs) to keep a local aesthetic appearance. On the other hand, a functional reorganisation extensively introduces new 'cultural' activities such as artist studios, exhibition halls and workshops.

The feasibility plan emphasises the Biennale's legacy: the first phase of the project focuses on the functional recovery/enhancement of the post-event exhibitionary spaces as a cultural opportunity for Dameisha Village. The re-use plans for House no.1, House no.6 and House no.8 envision to continue the artist residency program aiming to "activate the development potential of local arts and culture, tourism and fashion industry", where resident artists can hold solo exhibitions. The direct cooperation with Vanke Meisha Academy features the transformation plans for House no.2, House no.3 and House no.4, aspiring to attract "internationally renowned artists" who could interact with Vanke Academy students through masterclasses and workshops as a pilot project for the creation of a "talent art compound". Making "full use" of the event, the appropriation of the Biennale's exhibition theme *Village as Kitchen* is epitomised in the plans involving Houses no.5, 7 and 9 - entirely dedicated to promoting the village's "authentic" food experience and "unique taste". These three buildings would house food consumption and leisure functions such as music bars and cafes, conveniently listed in the feasibility plan as a "cultural discovery" functions. In this frame, former House no.10 is renamed "Dameisha Village Cultural Exhibition Hall" as the pivotal connection of the two axes. In the renovation plan, the building would represent "the core of the entire village's information", showing "the traditional characteristics and historical features of Dameisha Village and [its] future development", arguably functioning as the exhibition hall promoting the whole renewal operation.

The NODE-designed Exhibition Hall becomes the "Dameisha International Art and Culture

81   The "Talent Apartment" compound, consisting of 93 buildings covering a floor surface of about 42960 square meters, would accommodate people from surrounding industries (teachers and students). The creation of the compound may be related to the presence of Vake Meisha Academy. Source: (FangCheng Design 2018). The creation of "Talent Apartments" in urban villages is an increasingly common operation in Shenzhen. In 2017, Shuiwei Village in Futian District had been involved in a comprehensive renovation plan (Chen 2018a). Notably, Vanke Group "entered into a strategic cooperation agreement with Shenzhen Talents Housing Group Co., Ltd., for cooperation in development and construction, property leasing, decoration and property management of talent housing and social rental housing" (Vanke 2018).

82   The "Boutique Hotel" compound envisions the refurbishment of 38 existing buildings, covering a floor surface of about 18130 square meters. In the first phase, Vanke's development envisioned creating a 1900 square meters "flagship boutique hotel for Internet celebrities". In the later stage, the group hotel brand of other camps would be gradually introduced (FangCheng Design 2018).

Figure 5.51_Digital aerial view showing Dameisha's Wancun project by real estate developer Vanke. Source: FangCheng Design. © FangCheng Design.

Renovation of
#3, #4, #5 House
2017 Biennale
Atelier Z+ and Wutopia Lab

Dameisha
2018 Renovation Plan
Wancun project
Vanke Real Estate

Figure 5.52_Digital visualization showing Dameisha's Wancun project by real estate developer Vanke, engulfing the 2017 Biennale House no.6 and no.4. Source: FangCheng Design. © FangCheng Design. Re-elaboration by the author.

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**Renovation of
#10 House
2017 Biennale**
*Doreen Heng Liu and
NODE Architecture & Urbanism*

**Dameisha
2018 Renovation Plan**
*Wancun project
Vanke Real Estate*

Figure 5.53_Digital visualization showing Dameisha's Wancun project by real estate developer Vanke, engulfing the 2017 Biennale House no.10 in Banyan Tree Square. Source: FangCheng Design. © FangCheng Design. Re-elaboration by the author.

**Dameisha
2018 Renovation Plan**
*Wancun project
Vanke Real Estate*

**Dameisha Exhibition Hall
2017 Biennale**
*Doreen Heng Liu and
NODE Architecture &
Urbanism*
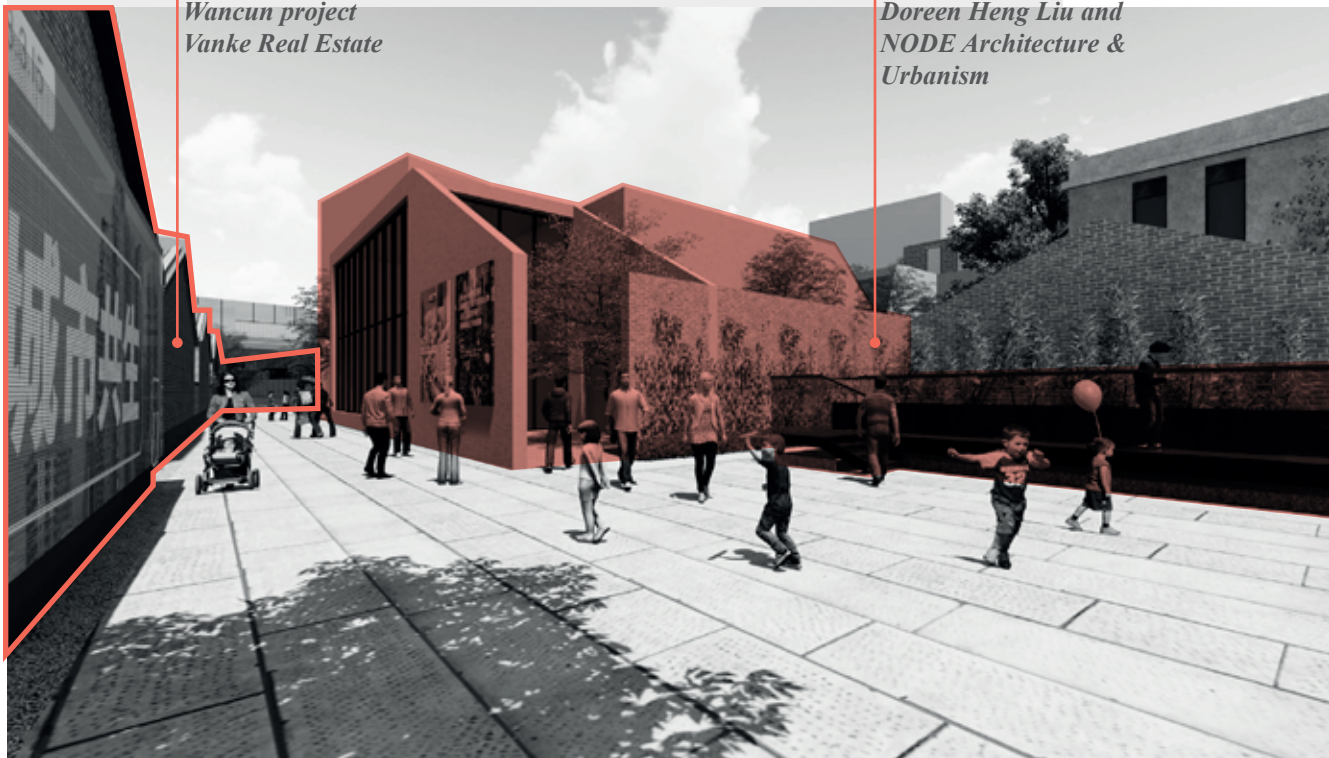
Figure 5.54_Digital visualization showing Dameisha's Wancun project by real estate developer Vanke, engulfing the 2017 Biennale Dameisha Exhibition Hall and the "Glowing Square". Source: FangCheng Design. © FangCheng Design. Re-elaboration by the author.

Exhibition Center" in the new configuration. While the building's spatial imprint remains unchanged, the functional program is implemented holding forums and "highly influential exhibitions", forming a more integrated system with the former House no.9. The whole upper eastern area is reconfigured as an "Art Village"[83] centered on the cultural and art exhibition hall designed for the Biennale[84].

Vanke has manipulated the event's initial assumptions to recreate a seductive imaginary for the village, appropriating the Biennale's spatial legacy and its symbolic meaning. Digital visualisations epitomise such an approach. During the Biennale's spectacle, both curatorial actions and the representations of the event aspired to create (and strengthen) a relationship between the new interventions and local dwellers' real life. Vanke's digital visualizations, yet, depict the Biennale's architectures and installations in the background of an idealised and touristic version of Dameisha's local culture - closely intertwined with commercial and consumption activities. The Biennale's interventions are inserted in a context that differs consistently from the village's original configuration. During the event, the ten renovated houses could find in their contrasting visual appearance a *raison d'etre* in the context of a traditional village; yet, they seem to lose their aesthetic and symbolic power when observed in the representation of Dameisha's pervasive restyling, accumulation of architectural objects and new functions.

Contextually, despite the overwhelming claims to enhance the local village culture, digital visualisations show the substitution of Dameisha's real life and space with an ideal, 'sanitised' socio-spatial context. The crowd populating the scenes is far from representing the local migrant population of the village: it is instead representative of a generic cosmopolitan, well-educated middle class that arguably holds the cultural and economic power to enjoy - and consume - what is produced and sold in the village. The representation of the yet-to-be Dameisha shows a mix of art galleries, high-end shops, recreational and cultural spaces whose appearance evokes and standardises the aesthetic language of the Biennale's interventions: the newly-designed expansion which will connect the eastern area of Dameisha and the commercial outlet outside the village epitomises such interlocking between cultural tourism ambitions and consumption. Moreover, the emphasis put during the event by the curatorial team on food culture as a social connector and device for self-empowerment is translated into the pervasive presence, in Vanke's vision, of fancy cafés and restaurants serving local cuisine.

5.3.4 Represented spaces and their discontents

Wancun initiative is known for promoting sustainable transformation and management models able to protect villagers' real estate properties, meeting recent governmental guidelines: according to the model, Vanke is responsible for renting and managing the buildings on behalf of the owners, providing them with a constant income with no loss of equity in assets. The Group would also "upgrade the public facilities of the urban villages and provide standardised

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83   Art house, Art salon area, Art Gallery and Art Experience Zone are the main functions envisioned for the area (FangCheng Design 2018).

84   Observing the status of Dameisha's transformation during the last site survey in May 2019, the operation did not seem to have fully respected the scheduled time line. Phase 1 would involve the re-use of the 11 Biennale Buildings, to be Completed on 30 July after launch. Phase 2 would inaugurate the set up of the Cultural Tourism Area, at the end of 2018. Phase 3 would interest the other areas of the plan, to be launched on 30 July, 2019 (FangCheng Design 2018).

leasing services" (Vanke 2018).

In this entrepreneurial framework, digital visualisations show a harmonious Dameisha. Such pacified representation conceals the potential consequences on local dwellers renting villagers' houses and the conflicts deriving from transformation plans. Spatial manipulations operated during the event already raised some potential contested situations. Designer and curator Yang Xiaodi from Projective Architecture Office pointed out in an interview that the initial communication with local dwellers in the frame of the Biennale's urban renovation has been a difficult task: the villagers were "non-committal, and [...] sceptical about the plan and such a big renovation" (Liu and Yong 2018, 97). Zhang Feng from People Architecture's office (Liu and Yong 2018, 464) also reported some controversies in the process. The House no.1. transformation project raised arguments between architects and the villagers: some local dwellers contested both the house's cultural function and its sharp design aesthetic with "edges on top", which they accused to harm the surrounding houses' Fengshui.

It is reported that although the initial perplexities, eventually, the project undertaken during the Biennale obtained recognition among the local community thanks to the communications between curators, villagers and the government. "Villagers began to understand and agree that design can improve their quality of life, and designers began to understand the villagers' concerns for their residence": according to Yang Xiuaodi from Projective Architecture Office, the project represents a "reference for other villages in Shenzhen" (Liu and Yong 2018, 97) and many efforts were invested in making spaces that "will be accepted by the villagers after three months and become a featured residential house or a place with technical functions" (Liu and Yong 2018, 196).

Along with circumstantial doubts about specific renovation brought about by the three-months event, deeper concerns about its potential evolution emerged. Co-curator Yong Yang reported reactions of "initial rejection, curiosity to their subsequent concern and expectations" (Liu and Yong 2018, 437). Project Site Manager Zheng Yanling confirmed "a long-term plan" for the village's future development, generating opposite reactions during the event. Positive feedback came from villages' householders, who mainly live in the village's corporation's compounds outside the old fabric and realise the potential benefits deriving from Dameisha's "artistic" spatial and functional upgrade. Some tenants, yet, "have begun worrying about the possible increase of their rent in an economically-thriving future of this area", on which Dameisha's future transformation plan might play an active role (Yong 2018, 492). Such villagers expressed their scepticism towards the project, underlining the potentially harmful consequences of the renovated houses' rising prices brought about by the beautification of Dameisha. Concerns also derived from the housing shortage in Dameisha exacerbated by the functional restructuring initiated by the Biennale, which might lead to a further rising in rental prices[85] and in the gradual expropriation of housing - thus generating the forced relocation of local migrant communities leaving the floor to "a place only for [...] white collars" (Yong 2018, 493).

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85   A villager declared that "When we first came here, [rent] only cost 200 yuan per month, but now it costs 800 yuan to 1000 yuan. There are not enough houses to live in and the rent has increased in just one year". The concerns mainly regarded the beautification of the village in relation with the shortage of affordable housing (and rent prices growth) which the progressive occupation of housed by art initiatives and developers would cause: "the house prices will go up again. Maybe it will grow from 1000 yuan this year to 1200 or even 1300 yuan next year. [...] the old houses in the business street in Dameisha Village were demolished last year for new apartments" (Liu and Yong, 346).

5.4 Taming the 'wild' city

The Biennale's interventions involving derelict industrial spaces can be related to the aspirations to consolidate in Shenzhen the domestic and international 'creative industries' trend - epitomized by the realization of ambitious architectural projects. Nevertheless, as the cases of Nantou and Dameisha witness, the Biennale's action in urban villages shows a different approach, overcoming the mere realization of single architectural artefacts - and directly involving the city's socio-spatial fabrics.

Undeniably, the attention which the event brought on *chengzhongcun* had some positive sides, as the event strongly contributed to the shift in perspective in observing such urban spaces: URBANUS, NODE and other curators demonstrated through research and projects the event's role as a device to shed light on sensitive urban issues. Their work involved cultural and political elites in elaborating proposals for the future development of such areas, considering architecture not a merely formal gesture but a process inserted in a broader socio-spatial context. Such a media attention resulted in positive outcomes: in 2019, Shenzhen Urban Planning Bureau the city approved the *Shenzhen Urban Village (Old Village) Comprehensive Remediation Plan (2019-2025)*. Considering the issues which affect the *chengzhongcun*, the plan encouraged all districts to undertake actions to improve public facilities and public spaces as part of a general strategy for the comprehensive management and urban renewal of urban villages (O'Donnell 2019a). The other side of the coin, yet, reveals the existence of another scenario. The spectacular event celebrated *chengzhongcun* as 'frontiers', fertile territories of difference, heritage, coexistence and flourishing urban material/immaterial culture representing an alternative to the monotony of mainstream urban developments. Nevertheless, the emphasis on such informal and 'authentic' features contributed to their *de facto* aestheticization, re-shaping and manipulation "in favour of something which reassures and entertains" (Huxtable 1997 in Hannigan 1998, 5). The power of such re-enacted imagery, in some cases, obscures the real issues involving *chengzhongcun*: borrowing the words of Alsayaad (2013, 22), "the image of the thing may now actually replace the thing itself", concealing that the so-called "places of heritage remain places where real people live and where real conflicts may arise": it is evident the tension between 'authentic' difference and what has been referretd to as "curating exotica" (Keith 2005, 112). In such a perspective, Urban Villages become 'fashionable' urban objects, incorporated in the system of the city's cultural display and consumption. Shenzhen is not the only place where to observe this trend: in 2019, the first Guangzhou Airport Biennale titled "Extreme Mix" aimed at shedding lights on Fenghe Village, located next to Guangzhou's Baiyun International Airport. The curatorial team spent three years in refurbishing the village through artworks and public art injection, as a strategy to draw visitors to the decaying area[86] (Wong 2019).

This approach can be related to the recent fascination for the informal city, which prominent cultural events like the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, curated by Alejandro Aravena, launched globally as an object of display and theoretical research. Differently from such events, the Shenzhen Biennale aimed at operating tangible urban transformations by exploiting its own exceptionality. As seen, yet, aestheticization and spectacularization under

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86   The operation included the display of over 100 artworks divided into four sections—named Section A, B, C, and D—each of which tackled a mix of topics, ranging from the aviation industry and transnational identities to urban development (Wong 2019).

a cultural flag might represent the injection of gentrification phenomena: the Biennale tackled Shenzhen's 'wild side' not only by taming its imagery but also by bending its socio-material components to governmental and corporate powers. What emerges from the stories of Nantou and Dameisha is the tension between the forces of corporate urbanism (driven by economic governmental ambitions and by ruling minorities) and the staged 'tacticalism' of the micro-interventions realised for the event. Curatorial stances - which insisted on the collective use of space and benefits for local communities - often clashed with the pragmatical transition from the 'curated' world to the 'real' one. Smith (1996) and Zukin (1982; 1995; 1996) underline how art practices - supported by corporate and governmental interests - represent a powerful vehicle to inject gentrification phenomena[87]: such trend is closely related to the aesthetic value and symbolic re-imagining of places, notably contextualized in culture-led and image-making urban operations (Colomb 2016). In her studies, Zukin extensively points out how, despite publicly declared intentions, culture-led urban regeneration might disempower communities instead of reinforcing their socio-cultural status, reproducing material inequalities. With their aesthetic power, image-making and culture-centred urban regeneration strategies become means of social control concealed under a plethora of slogans advocating inclusive cultural production and innovation.

Under 'regeneration' and 'culture' labels, both corporate and governmental interests are re-shaping considerable portions of Shenzhen's urban villages. A governmental-backed project recently transformed Shuiwei Village, in Futian District, turning a vast portion of buildings into rental apartments for white-collar and 'talented' workers; such operation has gradually created a socially-and spatially defined middle-class enclave, where a new array of consumption spaces has now replaced the existing shops. With a total investment of 18 billion RMB, Futian District Government is operating a "face-lift" (by upgrading sanitation/firefighting/public security systems, and adding cultural and sports facilities) to 15 urban villages, involving nearly 8,000 buildings housing 900,000 people (Chen 2018a).

Today new services, shops, franchise cafes and restaurant permeate Nantou's streets, while 'food and art' consumption spaces dominate Vanke's digital representations of Dameisha. Middle-class leisure spaces are the leitmotiv of such aspirational scenarios, where the emphasis on amenities embodies "a new urban geography for a new social regime of consumption" (Smith, 1996, 50). To this scenario one should add the issue brought about by developers' economic interests: housing, which is recognized as an urgent issue involving urban villages, has been exploited by Vanke through the *Wancun* operation, which leaned upon the exhibition's media exposure to attract attention and consensus on both its 'cultural tourism' and real estate development projects.

Such controversial flipsides show that besides positive effects, the Biennale's intervention in urban villages and its emphasis on Shenzhen's informal and 'grass-root' enclaves might polarize - rather than reduce - social differences, reinforcing top-down processes. Observing the transformations which are affecting historical areas of Beijing, Broudheoux (2004, 276) points out how ruling minorities have used the power of "visual imagery" to "determine who will dominate, use, live in and profit from urban spaces". Such ideology's aesthetic power -which can be observed in spatial narratives - has contributed to the conversion of the *chengzhongcun*

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87   As Smith (1996, 30) underscores, "gentrification is the process [...] by which poor and working-class neighbourhoods in the inner city are refurbished via an influx of private capital and middle-class homebuyers and renters— neighbourhoods that had previously experienced disinvestment and a middle-class exodus".

spaces into secluded, dream-like, and accumulating spectacles, where the social critique propelled by the Biennale might become an accomplice part of the overall show.

The 'frontier' myth pervades the gentrification ideology's discourse. Nantou and Dameisha's cases show that social differentiation and exclusion lie behind the "frontier imagery" that accompanies also *chengzhongcun* narrative along - and after - the event, carrying a relevant ideological weight. As Smith (1996,11-16) conceptualizes, "the poor and working class are all [...] easily considered as a category to 'civilize'". The consequence of such imagery is to "tame the wild city, to socialize a wholly new and therefore challenging set of processes into safe ideological focus", often devitalizing existing communities through re-branding and renovation (substitution) processes.

Žižek (2016, 47) asserts that every ideological construction, to be effective and dominate, needs to manipulate a "trans-ideological" counterpart. He underlines that not only there is no ideology without an authentic trans-ideological core, but that the only reference to that trans-ideological core can make an ideology work. Drawing on this conceptualization, it is possible to observe how the Biennale - through the explicit emphasis on the informal, grass-root, and contested *chengzhongcun* imagery - has implicitly contributed to the manipulation of their spatial and social reality. By opening tackling and putting on display urgent urban situations, the processes towards the *passage à l'acte* undertaken by ruling powers become more fluid and legitimated. In a critical review Ni Kun[88] argued that - despite proclaimed ideals - the bottom-up discussion strongly claimed by the Biennale remained self-referential, and questioned the event on how to avoid becoming an accomplice to the robust regulatory framework in which it operates (DBL 2017). In a similar vein, during the Opening Forum of Dameisha Sub-Venue, curator Yang Yong (Liu and Yong 2018, 204) questioned "what [the Biennale] brought to villagers by talking so much and so beautifully": he expressed concerns about the future relocation of Nantou's residents due to the rent price rise and asking whether the event has "helped architects or the government turn this place into a showcase or a result of cultural creation".

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88   Curator and co-founder of Organhaus Art Space in Chongqing. https://www.chinaresidencies.com/residencies/organhaus. Accessed 14 March 2021.

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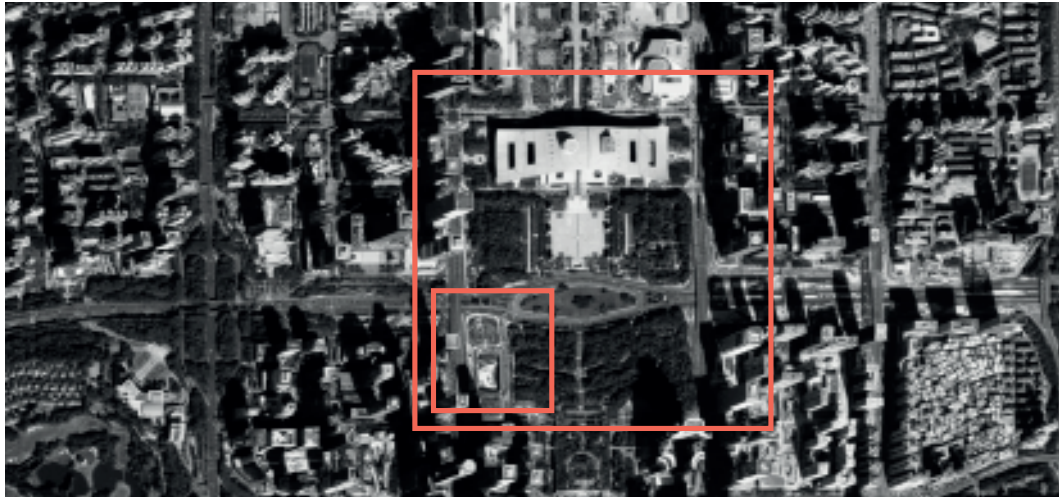
Shenzhen Civic Square; Shenzhen Civic Centre
UABB 2009, UABB 2011 - Main Venue

Futian High Speed Railway Station
UABB 2019 - Main Venue

Figure 6.1_Portion of Shenzhen's Central Business Distric object of research. Source: Google Maps.

Chapter 6.

Performing the Institutional Super-block

This chapter shows the Biennale's agency in another urban typology that characterises the Generic City, the race of Chinese mega-cities of the post "Reforms and Opening-up" era - and notably Shenzhen's recent urban development: the Futian Central Business District. In Shenzhen, the Central Business District is a hybrid space representing both the economic and political forces that move the entrepreneurial city.

The Biennale's action in the Central Business District throughout three editions - 2009, 2011 and 2019 - can be observed as a performance spectacle. Ephemeral, theatrical actions display the overlapping of institutional powers and the imaginary that the Biennale triggers as a critical - and potentially subversive - device to observe the city. The performance staged by the Biennale is a controlled 'role-playing' game between institutional powers and cultural elites: the contrasts between the two - staged in the Civic Square, the Civic Center and the Futian High-Speed Train Station symbolic locations - show how the exhibitionary device's agency represents ruling powers to affirm Shenzhen's position as a critical node in regional and national political strategies.

6.1. Futian Central Business District and «Shenzhen 2.0»

2009 represented a crucial date for the Special Economic Zone, which celebrated 30 years after the official conversion of Bao'an County in Shenzhen - and coincided with the Biennale's third edition. The combination of such dates needed a proper venue: Futian Central Business District (CBD) represented thus a convenient, institutional setting to celebrate the event - and to display the city's muscular power. In 2011 and 2019 the Biennale intersected Futian's core again, albeit in different forms, affirming the event's ambitions to interact with one of the most institutional areas of the city.

Futian Central Axis

Hongli Road

Deng Xiaoping Statue

Lianhua Park

Shenzhen Concert Hall

Children Palace

Book Centre

MOCAUP
Biennale 2019
Shenzhen Biennale Main Venue

Shenzhen Civic Centre
Biennale 2009
Shenzhen Biennale Main Venue

Shenzhen Stock Exchange

Shenzhen Civic Square
Biennale 2009, 2011
Shenzhen Biennale Main Venue

Shennan Road

Shennan Road

Futian High Speed Railway Station
Biennale 2019
Shenzhen Biennale Main Venue

Convention and Exhibition Centre

Binhe Avenue

Binhe Avenue

Figure 6.2_Map of the Futian Central Business District showing the different functions, landmarks and Shenzhen Biennale venues articulated along the central axis. Drawn by the author.

Due to its dimensions, spatial articulation, and functional mix, Futian CBD epitomizes the notion of "superblock". Superblocks represent a peculiar feature of urban development in contemporary Chinese cities (Kan, Forsyth and Rowe 2017). Typically bounded by wide arterial roads, these neighbourhoods usually occupy blocks measuring between 300 and 500 meters in length and width: as Brazier, Johnson and Lam (2020) underline, they represent spatial configurations with cultural, economic, environmental, and social implications, operating between the scales of architecture and the city, constituting "the basic unit of China's urban development".

Central Business Districts - which populate contemporary Chinese urban landscapes - represent a specific variation of this typology, epitomizing what Koolhaas (1995) referred to as "Generic City". They represent a distinctive form of urbanization which reflects the restructuring of China's economy since 1978 reforms and its transition from industrial to service production, embodying the ambitions of contemporary Chinese cities to gain position into the global scenario. Their vast spatial imprint, scale and "late Modernist" architecture, "punctuated with iconic structures and representational open spaces, symbolize the national drive towards a globalized modernity" (Zacharias and Yang 2016, 209).

Futian CBD is a crucial urban node, the centre of the 'new' Shenzhen, representing a powerful vehicle to nurture urban imaginaries (Ng and Tang 2004a, 2004b, 2005; Huang 2017; Chen, Zhacarias and Zeng 2020). The state usually plays a significant role in planning and developing these new CBDs, and Futian makes no exception (Yeh and Yang 2013). Futian CBD is a "state-led spatial transformation with a mix of historical and global symbolism", where elements belonging to traditional Chinese urban form coexist with the modern city: "grandness, symmetry, order, symbolism, fortune and power" recall the traditional Chinese spatial order, making the precinct a "microcosmos" which combines "Western modernism" and "Chinese traditionalism" (Jiang 1999 in Hu 2020, 55).

As Hu (2020) underlines, Futian CBD developed through a massive public intervention, the result of various consultancies from international architecture and planning firms. Its design symbolises the city's transformation from a border town manufacturing zone into a 'world city' (Cartier 2002, 1515). Its origins can be traced back in the 1980s. At that time, the idea of establishing a new urban node parallel to the existing city centre in Luohu - which represented the origin of Shenzhen's urban expansion (Chiu 1987; Hu 2020; Chen 2010) - emerged. When Shenzhen was created in 1979, Luohu area represented the first kernel of the newborn city's development. Thanks to its proximity to Hong Kong and the presence of a custom port, Luohu housed manufacturing and business support activities; by the mid-1990s, commercial spaces and offices developed in the area. As the city grew, Shenzhen's expansion eastwards was difficult due to the geographical constraints and the administrative boundaries with Hong Kong: the metropolitan area started thus expanding westwards. The 1985 Shenzhen Masterplan formalised the intention of building a new central district which could mirror the bold city's ambitions and urban growth (Hu 2020; Sun and Xue 2019), defining corresponding planning guidelines and land use patterns. The Masterplan also defined the centre of Futian as the geographical position of the new district (Chen 2010). The shift of the city centre from Luohu to Futian reflects the gradual consolidation of Shenzhen from a single-nucleus city to a - as Bontje (2019) and Liaw (2009) point out - poly-centric city: O'Donnell (2019b) defines this passage the "transition from Shenzhen 1.0 to Shenzhen 2.0", where Futian CBD (originally called Shenzhen Central District

- SCD) represented the pivotal node of the new expansion. Its spatial configuration mirrored the vocational shift of the city: while Luohu centre reflected the image of a city leaning on the secondary sector of manufacturing, the tertiary sector of services (financial services, culture and creativity) located in Futian epitomised the new Shenzhen's economic and institutional base.

Three master plans - in 1986, 1996 and 2010 - have led to the definition of Futian CBD's spatial imprint (Ng and Tang 2004; 2011). When the planning started, the area lacked a specific vocation as "a desolate land scattered with small Danwei plants, villages and undeveloped fields" (Chen 2010, 134). The municipal government invited diverse planners and designers to gather advice about the area's future functions, who underlined the potential strategic character of the site "in shaping Shenzhen's new urban image" (Hu 2020, 55).

The 1986 master plan mainly outlined the vocation of the site as a business district for international finance, trade, information and communication companies; it also defined the "urban grid" for the area. The 1996 plan established the spatial structure for the site[1], and for the first time described central Futian as "Shenzhen CBD", defining it "the city's focal area of development in the coming 15 years to create a twenty-first-century image for Shenzhen"; the 2010 plan further confirmed Futian as "the primary financial centre in Shenzhen" (Hu 2020, 57). Parallel to the master plans, the municipal government released a series of statutory development control plans and urban design plans: in particular, the Futian Central Area Detailed Plan formalized the area as "Shenzhen CBD", also defining the construction of nearly 10 million square meters on the area.

Notably, the "International Urban Design Consultation for Core Areas of the SCD", a "semi-competitive process" won by American architects John M. Y. Lee and Michard Timchula (Hu 2020, 57) contributed to shape the area as it appears today. The team proposed a design scheme which implemented the 1986 plan: the CBD spatial outline leaned on a North-South central axis, a vast public space distributing the main functions and cut by the East-West arterial Shennan Road. Futian CBD today's layout follows the proposed outline. The North part of the area houses administrative, cultural and financial services: it includes the Civic Center, the Civic Plaza and five major public cultural facilities, covering a land area of 180 hectares. The South part primarily houses financial, commercial and residential properties, covering a land area of 233 hectares (Chen 2010; Sun and Xue 2019).

The central axis represents the physical and symbolic backbone of the whole development, bonding Shenzhen's past and present history, as well as the political and corporate powers that shape the city: the nearly 2 kilometers-long and 250 meters-wide strip connects Lianhuashan Park to the Convention and Exhibition Center designed by the German firm GMP, which hosts high technology expositions.

Deng Xiaoping statue, located on the top of Lotus Hill in Lianhuashan Park, symbolically looks towards the new CBD and beyond, reaching the neighbouring Hong Kong border with its gaze. The statue is a relevant symbolic element in the story: apart from the one in his hometown, it is the only existing sculptural representation of Deng, further reinforcing the relationship between the Communist Leader and the city (O' Donnell 2019b; Hu, 2020). As Cartier (2002, 1514) points out, the central alignment of Deng's statue with the new CBD development recalls "the central axis in imperial compounds reserved for the emperor or the location of Mao's

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1   Chen (2010) observes that in 1996, the Central District Development Office (CDDO) was founded as a branch of Shenzhen Planning and Land Resource Bureau; it was devoted specifically to elaborate guidelines, take decisions and coordinate actions for the Central District development.

New SEZ boundary

Former SEZ boundary

Luohu core
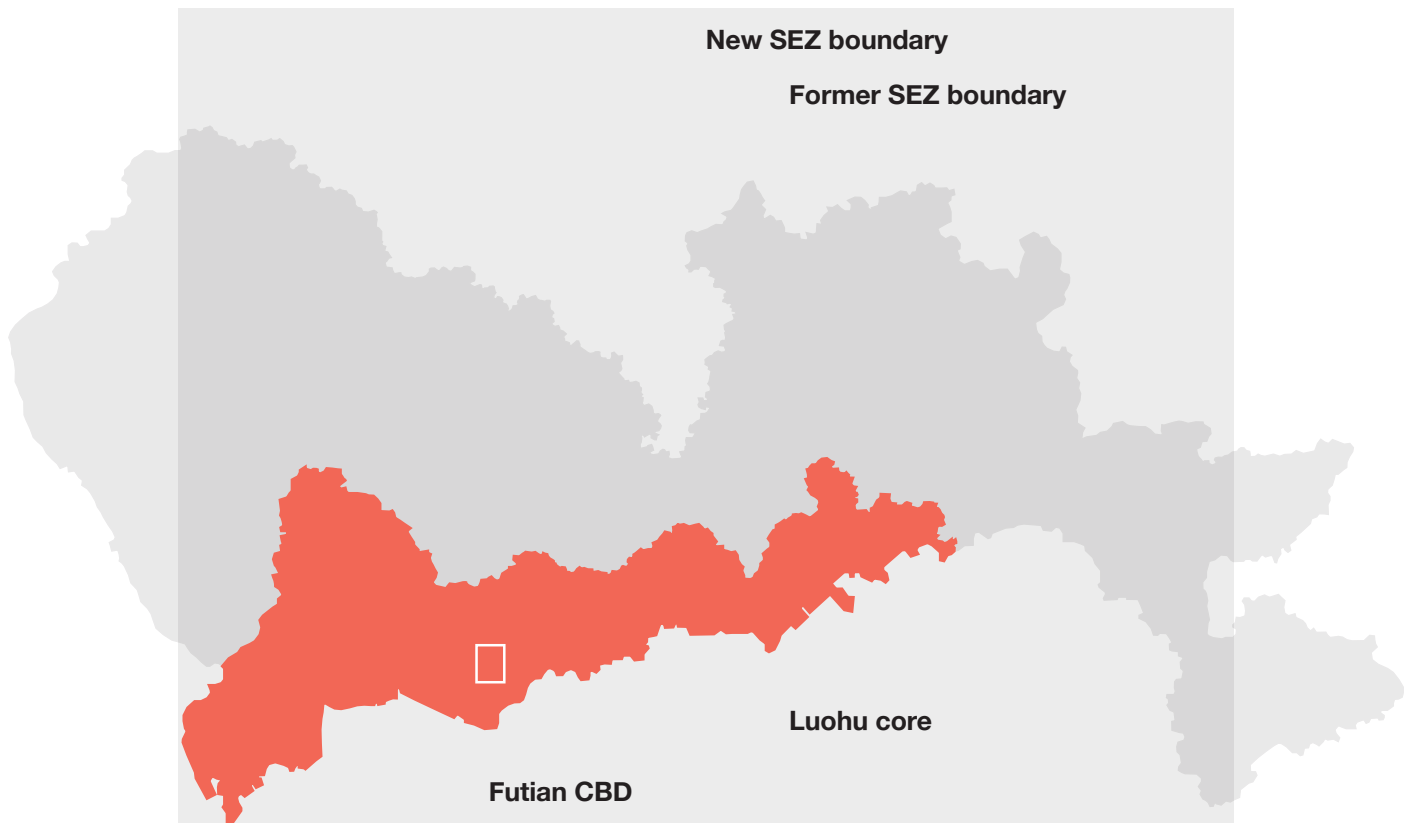
Futian CBD

Figure 6.3_Map showing the transition of Shenzhen's centre from Luohu to Futian. Drawn by the author.

Figure 6.4_View of Futian Central Business District skyline from Lianhua Park. Picture by the author.

mausoleum just south of Tiananmen", thus paralleling the "symbolic space of power" with the new "prevailing economic ideologies" that have accompanied the city - and China at large - since the 'Reform and Opening Up' era. Southward, the axis enters the Shenzhen Civic Square - the kernel of the area - from the North through the Monumental Park, a 360 meters-long linear flat pedestrian rooftop. It continues as a 600 meters-wide green park built on a hill, and it "further extends as the roof of a shopping mall, the Central Shopping Park', to the front square of the exhibition centre" (Chen 2010, 126).

Futian CBD plan forms a regular grid whose spatial pattern is governed by the cardinal directions "in the form of Chinese imperial capitals" (Cartier 2002, 1514). Compared to its historical ancestors, yet, it is possible to retrace a different narrative in the newly conceived district. While the Forbidden City's articulation formed an enclosed system deliberately celebrating and concealing political powers, the spatial and physical arrangement of Futian Central Business District is both orchestrated and narrated as an open, transparent and accessible system to publicly display the successful image of the city (Hu 2020) following the 'Window of the World' narrative.

The district covers a 4.13 square kilometers area and it is referred to as the "four centres" of Shenzhen gathering financial, transportation, administrative and cultural facilities (Hu 2020, 56): the spatial arrangement of these functions defines a collage of diverse corporate and institutional elements, which embody Shenzhen's multifaceted aspirations. Iconic architectures follow one after the other along the central axis. In 1998, Shenzhen municipal government invested in the realization of six major projects: Civic Centre, Shenzhen Library, Shenzhen Concert Hall, Children's Palace, the TV Centre and the Subway Station. As Hu (2020) underlines, these structures opened in the early 2000s to reinforce the cultural and institutional identity of the northern part of the precinct, while boosting the value of the southern part - dedicated to business and commercial functions. Throughout time, more iconic buildings joined the stage. In 2013, dutch architectural practice OMA inaugurated the Shenzhen Stock Exchange, which "symbolizes the impulse to make physically present the non-materiality of Shenzhen's growing economy" (O' Donnell 2019b); in 2016, the dutch firm Coop Himme(l)blau completed the Museum Of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning (MOCAUP); in 2018, Hans Hollein and Cristoph Monschein completed the office building SFB Tower.

Futian CBD, its axis and its buildings represent a bulk of stories bound by a narrative which connects the imagined city and the real one, nurturing the storytelling of Shenzhen's pioneering urbanization, and the conception of a new typology of institutional and corporate mega-block. Such layering of spaces and iconic buildings can be observed as the attempt to create a "cultural landscape": O' Donnell (2019b) underlines how "the layout of the CBD functions as a meta-cultural geography" where the Library, the Concert Hall, the MOCAPE and Children's Palace epitomize "the city's spiritual goals of literacy, musicality, poetry and comportment", contrasting the stigma of 'cultural desert' which accompanied the city for years.

Shenzhen Civic Centre, which lies at the heart of the axis, epitomizes this conceptualization: the monumental complex is a significant feature of the area, entangling architecture, power and symbolism. The building, covering 89,000 square meters, 435 meters-large and 84.7 meters-tall, was designed by the American firm John M. Y. Lee and Timchula Architects - which won the international design competition in 1996[2]. It houses the municipal government, the Shenzhen

2   As Sun and Xue (2019, 444) underline, the final appearance of the Shenzhen Civic Centre building process differed from Lee's original design: "the long roof truss [...] was built in 1998, but the government did not

Museum and the Shenzhen Industrial Museum. Considered as "the first iconic building in the new city centre"(Sun and Xue 2019, 444), it is characterized by "a wing-shaped roof representative of Shenzhen's nickname 'city of Peng'"[3] (Hu 2020, 57). The blue roof connects two yellow and red towers, which reflect the colours of the PRC national flag. The Civic Centre represents a symbolic space linked to a new conception in the manifestation of power, political order, and consensus: it mirrors the instrumental actions of cultural elites in creating "representative landscapes" linked to the desire for civilization[4] Cartier (2002, 1514). The building represents a 'fresher' image for Shenzhen's government, symbolizing its openness: as the first municipal government calling its office building a "Civic Center", the municipality aimed at "promoting a newly democratic concept with the city residents at the centre while the government is at their service, utterly unlike China's traditional political concept of the primacy of the government" (Ou 2013b, 81).

6.2. Regulatory symbolism and aspiring counter-narratives

The Biennale intersected Futian CBD throughout two consecutive editions in 2009 and 2011, representing a practice of 'interruption' in the spaces of Shenzhen Civic Square and Civic Center. The exhibition attempted to connect two systems: the institutional dimension of the vast representational spaces and the aspiring social dimension which characterized curatorial statements - with their related spatial practices. Such an interlocking underlined a tension between an aspiring 'critical' exhibition - using approaches which belong to art and tactical urbanism - and the theatre of its actions - a strongly regulated and regulating framework.

Shenzhen Civic Square is a nearly 40,000 square meters area located in front of the Civic Centre, paved with granite tiles and surrounded by trees on three sides. Due to its peculiar imprint and proximity with governmental power, this space represents a reinterpretation of the symbolic function of the square in Chinese tradition (Hu 2020). During the first 2013 World Biennial Forum, Ou (2013a, 70) underlined the controversial character of Shenzhen Civic Square concealed by its symbolism: although defined a 'public' space, the presence of a civic square in front of a governmental building, familiar in China, often reflects the willingness to demonstrate the government's political power "to control society, much like the spatial function of a prison".

6.2.1 The square›s symbolic power

Squares represent relevant urban elements in contemporary Chinese cities, notably from

have sufficient funds to clad it. It was finally clad with colorful metal sheets in 2004".

3   The Civic Centre is divided into three parts bond together by the big roof evoking the wings of the Peng, "a legendary giant bird symbolising ambition and fortune in Chinese tradition" Hu (2020, 57). The central part of the Civic Centre "houses halls, celebration rooms and space for public activities; the west part houses municipal government offices; People's Congress and Museums are located in the East part". From the Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (Ed.) (2008) *City of Expiration and Regeneration.* 2007 *Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen).* Shenzhen: Shenzhen Press Group Publishing House.

4   To explore the notion of 'civilization' see Chapter 2.

the Cultural Revolution onwards. The notion of public space in traditional Chinese cities embraced a limited set of places like "street markets, temple grounds, military parade grounds and marginal spaces" (Gaubatz 2019, 2). The establishment of the People's Republic of China during the 1950s and 1960s paralleled the construction of squares in many large cities as mass-rally space to celebrate the "symbolic triumph of the people over the intensely private, walled-courtyards of China's pre-revolution elites" (Gaubatz 2019, 2). During the "Reform and Opening Up" period, Chinese cities have undergone profound economic and spatial restructuring: rapid economic growth brought about significant changes in how urban spaces were designed and produced. Chinese cities needed to address relevant and specific issues related to the increasing population, economic growth, rural-urban migration, modernization of infrastructure, globalization, consumption, and an "increasing desire for 'world-class' urban space and urban life" (Gaubatz 2019, 2).

The recent economic and spatial restructuring investing Chinese cities also affected the design and production of public space. In major cities, relevant transformations have often engulfed the sites surrounding the squares realized during the Cultural Revolution. Their historical, political and symbolic value, yet, preserved them from the demolition and reconstruction operations, and from commercial development. Today, massive high-rise (and high-standard) real estate projects surround public squares such Beijing's Tian'anmen Square and Shanghai's People's Square, serving as the focal points for the development of new Central Business Districts areas. These changes have gradually redefined the representational and functional role of the square itself: public squares epitomise today the transition towards a hybrid notion of public space "as international standard design elements" housing "a wide range of events and spectacles typical of the emerging Chinese economy and society" (Gaubatz 2019, 2-8).

6.2.2 Shenzhen Civic Square: a functional, material and symbolic space

Although being the result of a brand new planned operation, Shenzhen Civic Square can be considered as one of the most representative public and political spaces in Shenzhen (Chen 2010). As the pivotal node of Futian Central Business District, the spatial system composed by the Civic Center and the Civic Square is the physical manifestation of Shenzhen's pioneering spirit of 'Reform and Opening Up' and of later 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristic'. The shiny skyline of "Shenzhen 2.0" is reflected in the glossy surfaces of the skyscrapers embracing the Square, conveying a strong narration which swings between solemnity and the celebration of openness and democratic values.

The entanglement of different elements - such as the axial symmetric spatial configuration, the design details and the use of heavy construction materials - convey a strong character "of solemnity and formality" to the whole area, which is further exacerbated by the scale of the intervention, making Civic Square a "political-oriented iconographic" space (Chen 2010, 139). The emphasis on monumental scale and the symbolism conveyed by architectural and urban forms lead the whole design of the Square, instrumentally addressing both international and domestic aspirations. Such representation embraces the whole surrounding urban context: a mix of brand new buildings housing cultural, governmental and corporate institutions makes the Civic Square not only "physically and economically charged, but also related directly to the political expression" (Chen 2010, 142).

Nevertheless, this narration embodies an intrinsic tension. If the emphasis on the symbolic meaning of the Square aims at conveying a sense of solemnity and openness, the material side of its urban design has resulted in "an open but 'isolated' land without 'contact' with the adjacent urban environment" - or with users -, questioning whether, despite its name, the Square is created to host real "civic" functions (Chen 2010, 165).

6.2.3 Contesting the Square

In the 2009 Biennale curatorial statement, Ou (2013c, 10) tried to question such a narration, expressing the ambition to open a "new kind of Biennale" which "might entail a degree of social, "grass-roots" participation". The event, themed *City Mobilization*, aimed at representing a 'manifesto' rather than a curatorial statement: it aspired to represent a "groundbreaking approach" able to tear down "the professional barrier set up by traditional biennales, thus lending a democratic tinge to the entire [...] exhibition".

The whole exhibition narrative revolved around a specific vocabulary prompting the event as disruptive for the *status quo*, ambiguously alternating playful and subversive tones. "Large-scale social mobilization", "grass-root initiatives", "participation" and "revitalization" were just some among the terms to describe the social and spatial agency of the event: such storytelling aimed at conveying a sense of subversion, redefining the role of the Biennale institution at large and advocating "the possibility for another kind of biennale" Ou (2013b, 11). Ou (2013b, 11-12) also questioned the agency of public institutions in urban spaces, where "state power" and "the profit-oriented capitalist machinery" have become powerful forces in reshaping the city without considering its human dimension, existing "social structures, community interests and political realities". In the curatorial vision, social engagement and rebellion against the idea of an event dedicated to the "high and mighty" might lead to regain "intellectual criticality, invoke the public's desire for action, and take up the responsibility of advancing social progress". By 'happening' in the representational space of the Civic Square, the Biennale positioned itself as a practice of spatial and social engagement to "activate the square as a public space for the citizens" and to provide "a physical space for ordinary people to come together [...] and to create their own personal experiences" (Ou, 2013b, 70).

This attitude positioned the square as an urban element with a dual character. On the one hand, it represented the institutional space of power; on the other hand, it displayed a stage for its questioning. According to Hershkovitz (1993), historically, the square has the role to reinforce the hegemonic political power of the state. Nevertheless, on the other side, it represents the space where to challenge the orthodoxy of ruling institutions, a locus where oppositional political practices can take place: the physical space of the square becomes thus the theatre for a temporary *détournement* of the hierarchy (Hershkovitz 1993). Tien An Men Square struggle in 1989 epitomized this contrast: according to Broudehoux (2004, 168), the square became "a site of both power and contestation", a "dominant and dominated monument" where a new, spontaneous social and political order can temporarily subvert the ruling authority.

Ou Ning's Biennale safely staged such a dialectic: its alleged political stances embedded a strong grade of symbolism, notably for an international public exhibition themed *City Mobilization* taking place in the most representative square of one of the New China's major cities in 2009 - 20 years after Tian An Men events. Shenzhen Civic Square became thus a

Figure 6.5_The installation "Snow Bull" by Rigo 23 during the 2009 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 6.6_The installation "Double Happiness" by Bureau des Mésarchitectures during the 2009 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 6.7_The installation "Public Trailer" by feld72 during the 2009 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 6.8_The installation "With the Wind" by Jiakun Architects and Associates during the 2009 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

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symbolic field of action suspended between activism and urban spectacle, where the event proclaimed itself a "call to duty [...] to dispense with the superstructures of excess governance and top-down power systems in favour of self-organized agendas" (Yao 2013, 51).

6.2.4 Symbolic practices

The show deployed different means to foster citizens' interaction and 'humanize' the gigantic space of the Square. These spatial practices directly recalled Bourriaud's notion of "institutional critique" (Yao 2013, 50), trying to establish a dynamic relationship between the exhibition space and the visitors. A plethora of domestic and international designers colonized the vast public stage, composing a 'collage' of spectacular forms overlapping art, performance and architecture: symbolism - with the instrumental use of objects, scales and materials - was the counter-tactic adopted by a vast array of the 2009 Biennale spatial installations to trigger interaction in the Civic Centre and Civic Square - and to convey 'political' counter-meanings.

The symbolic character of material objects was at the centre of the sculpture "Snow Bull Station" by Portuguese, San-Francisco-based artist Rigo 23, intended to be "a semi-permanent monument to the living people of the city" (Ou 2013b, 84). The bull is an omnipresent symbol of Shenzhen in the form of iron or glossy bronze sculptures, epitomizing the recklessness of the city's entrepreneurial power. Questioning this archetypical image, the bull became an element of intimacy - a furry sculpture close to ancestral collective rites - with whom people could interact. In a similar vein, "Double Happiness" by the Paris-based art and architecture studio Bureau des Mésarchitectures represents a symbolic answer to the contemporary "society of materialism": small "urban reanimation devices" aimed at reactivating public space through individual experiences, entailing a contrast with the monumental scale of the Square (Ou 2013b, 147). Vienna-based architecture collective feld72 staged the "Public Trailer" installation which re-evoked past dynamics of interaction between people and public spaces: different kinds of mobile bicycle trailers (The Public Speaker, the Urban Boxing and the Lonely Karaoke) offered visitors different functions: they could be mobilized in different parts of the Square, and combined to constitute "stronger and multifunctional units", activating temporary, site-specific public spaces (Ou 2013b, 150).

The symbolic connection between "local culture, land and ethics" was at the base of "Shenzhen Civic Square Blueprint" by Taiwanese architectural practice Liu Kuo-Chang & Ou Studio. In Shenzhen Civic Centre - shaped by modernist urban design ad oriented towards the future - fragments of the "younger Shenzhen" emerged: cycling, rice paddies, forests, waterways and sampan boats. The work literally subverted the notion of "blueprint" not only as a tool to transform a place but as a device to recall memories (Ou 2013b, 95). The dialectic between past and present is the core of the land art installation "With the Wind 2009" by Jiakun Architects and Associates: the curved shape of Shenzhen Civic Centre roof is re-enacted in an empty space through suspended balloons supporting a sunshade net, forming a light-gathering space and celebrating the origins of the building (Ou 2013b, 98).

6.2.5 ... and spatial «occupation»

Scale and materials also represented a physical means to question the Civic Square space: in the curatorial vision, the use of small elements made by lightweight materials could empower the individual in front of the monumentality and anonymity of the city, engaging an alternative conception of public space. The "Medular Pavilion" by Dutch group Maurer United Architects represented a reflection on the notion of 'scale'. Its translucent canopies acted as a shaded space during the daytime and as a lighting landmark during night time, while light curtains divided the space under the canopies, offering to visitors "a place to sit down, relax or read—to reset the mind" (Ou 2013b, 164).

In other cases, organic materials were used to challenge the purely mineral landscape of the Civic Square. "Creature Triptyque" by Sao Paulo and Paris-based architects Triptique evoked the birth of three-legged creatures made from bamboo and straw, suggesting the idea of the very essence of the city as an "organic fluid" (Ou 2013b, 90). The "Bug Dome" by Taiwan-based WEAK! Architects represented an exploration of natural construction methods instead: bamboo, a mix of soil and cement and other natural materials shaped a temporary cocoon shelter, multi-functional space for "post-urban meditation" (Ou 2013b, 100). In a similar vein, "Urban Oasis", by the Chinese research platform Studio Pei-Zhu and the international engineering group ARUP used bamboo to create a light, spiral-shaped architecture. The reflection, oscillating between traditional philosophy and contemporary architecture, evoked "Chinese philosophical concepts of balance and harmony". Designers created a flexible space inspired by nature where visitors could gather and relax: the work represented a reflection on the coexistence of past and future in the contemporary city, which has become "an urban desert composed of isolated and disconnected pockets of individuals" (Ou 2013b, 93).

The use of organic materials introduced a broader reflection on the relationship between natural and artificial: Shenzhen's urban hypertrophy - epitomized by the rapid realization of Futian CBD, where natural and built environment coexist - is taken as a relevant scene to set such a discourse. In this frame, the installation "Footprints in the Square" by Chinese (but internationally renowned) firm MAD Architects presented two giant-sized pink plastic footprints in the then still under realization Shenzhen Civic Park. Such land-art installation created a playground where people could experience "free movement in the public sphere", injecting a reflection of the city "as a site of negotiation between natural and urban, public and private, past and future" (Ou 2013b, 192). Chinese studio O.P.E.N. Architecture[5] explored similar issues in the installation "Red Line Park", tackling the imbalance between the overabundance of private gated community space and the shortage of inhabitable public space in contemporary Chinese urban fabric. The installation - interlocking symbolic and material plan - turns such boundaries "into a system of linear parks, providing an example of a grassroots urban initiative" to create diverse patterns of spatial and social interaction (Ou 2013b, 152).

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5   O.P.E.N. Architecture is co-founded by Li Hu, partner of Steven Holl Architects and Huang Wenjing, former senior designer and associate of Pei Cobb Freed and Partners Architects.

Figure 6.9_The installation "Medular Pavillion" by Maurer United Architects during the 2009 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 6.10_The installation "Creature Tryptique" by Triptique during the 2009 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 6.11_The installation "Bug Dome" by WEAK! Architects during the 2009 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 6.12_The installation "Footprints in the Square" by MAD Architects during the 2009 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

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Figure 6.13_The installation "10,000 Flower Maze" by John Bennett and Gustavo Bonevardi during the 2011 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 6.14_The installation "Centrifugal Villages" by Clavel Arquitectos during the 2011 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

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*Figure 6.15_The installation
"Oxymoron Pavillion" by OBRA
during the 2011 Shenzhen Biennale.
Source: Shenzhen Biennale of
Urbanism\Architecture Organizing
Committee archives. © Shenzhen
Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture
Organizing Committee.*

*Figure 6.16_The installation "Gizmo" by Studio UP during the 2011 Shenzhen
Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing
Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing
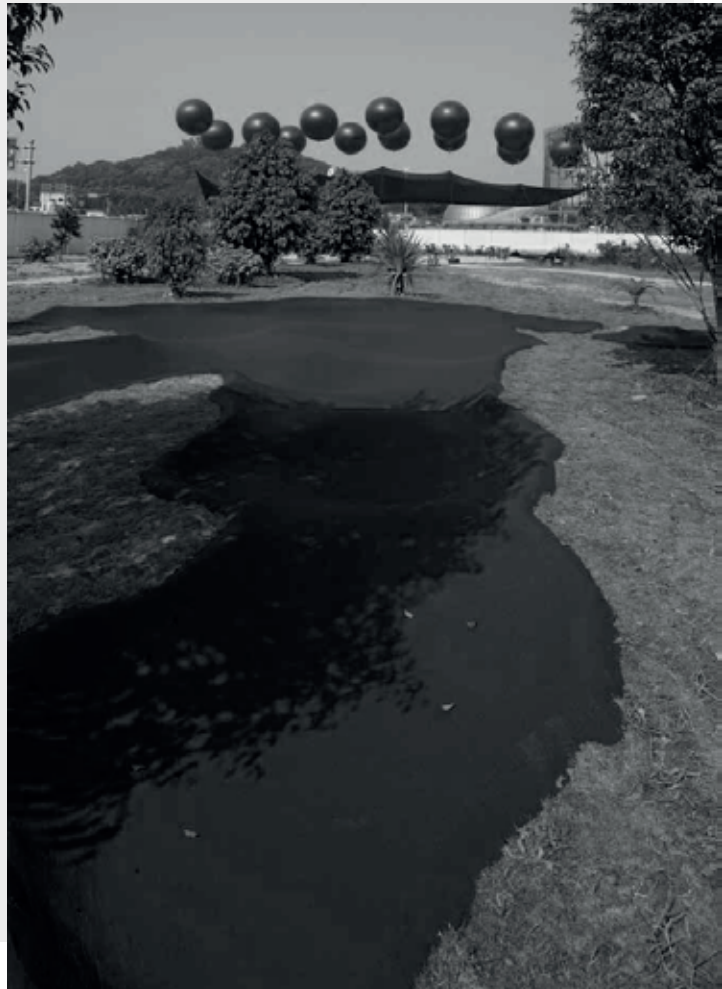Committee.*

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6.2.6 Performing the Square

In 2011, the Shenzhen Civic Square[6] housed *Architecture Creates Cities. Cities Create Architecture* curated by American architect and critic Terence Riley - acclaimed as the first foreign curator in the Shenzhen Biennale history. The need for a 'political' reflection on the city, as advocated by Ou Ning in 2009, seemed already outdated in 2011. Riley's stated objectives revolved around a more pacific reflection on the relationship between the material production of urban space and a generic "quality of life": the "over-scaled and underused plaza" (Riley 2014, 18) of Shenzhen's Civic Center seemed once again the right location to house such reflections. Presenting formal affinities with the previous edition, some of the installations interacted with the venue as a stage for performative spatial practices.

The ephemeral work "10,000 Flower Maze" by New York-based architects John Bennett and Gustavo Bonevardi exhibited a labyrinthine "assemblage of thousands of orange traffic cones" which directly deals with the "austere, and somewhat inhospitable" space of Civic Square. Through the symbolic re-interpretation of the square, the installation aimed at connecting the memory of the historical Chinese City with its present and future - epitomized by the reckless speed of construction in the 'City without history'. During the Opening Ceremony, a crowd of skaters flocked into the cone maze "in an informal, free form choreographic performance, [transforming] the largest and most ceremonial of public spaces" in a street theatre. The cones - representing "the ubiquitous emblem of new building or road construction" - directly recalled the lanterns carried by the dancers during the traditional, annual evening race in the *Wan Hua Zhen* garden during the Mid-Autumn Festival. The installation also represented a 'cautionary (spatial) tale' for the future: in the ever-changing CBD space, "each cone restricts a movement and warns of a local hazard [,] collectively [reminding] of ongoing overdevelopment". The choreographic disposition of the cones entailed a contrast between their regulatory character in everyday life and their freeing, "playful and joyful" use in the exhibition's heterotopic space[7]. Moreover, the scale of the installation embedded a reflection on the power of collectivity, where a multitude of micro-elements directly influenced the macro-space of the Square, defining new usages.

The plaza under the Civic Center's winged roof represented another urban theatre where the 2011 Biennale spectacle unfolded. In the project "Ultra-Light-Village", curated by Terence Riley, six full-scale spatial installations designed by domestic and international architects[8] populated the axis connecting the Civic Square, Civic Centre and the Lianhuashan Mountain Park. As Riley pointed out, Shenzhen Civic Center upper plaza represented the occasion for

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6   OCT-Loft as the 2011 Biennale second exhibition venue. The decision to house the 2011 edition of the Biennale in the former industrial precinct paralleled the inauguration of the OCT-Loft Northern Park (see Chapter 4).

7   The work was directly inspired by the labyrinthine garden called "Wan Hua Zhen" (10,000-flower maze) designed by the Italian architect Giuseppe Castiglione for the Old Summer Palace just outside the Forbidden City in 1756. Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (ed.) (2014) *Architecture Creates Cities. Cities Create Architecture.* 2011 *Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen).* Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, p. 40.

8   Conceived by: Amateur Architecture Studio from Hangzhou, China (WANG Shu and LU Wenyu); Clavel Arquitectos from Murcia, Spain (Manuel Clavel Rojo, principal); MO S from New York, USA (Michael Meredith and Hilary Sample, principals); OBRA from New York, USA (Pablo Castro and Jennifer Lee, principals); Studio UP from Zagreb, Croatia (Toma Plejic and Lea Pelivan, principals); and Wei Chunyu from Changsha, China.

architects to react with the public space in order to elaborate alternative "spatial and physical perspective on contemporary architecture"[9]. "Ultra-Light-Village" presented six different approaches, where 'scale' played a significant role in redefining relational and functional spaces. Amateur Architecture Studio aimed at subverting the ceremonial role of the plaza through the realization of an experimental temporary shelter, occasionally used by the Biennale's workers for their rest breaks throughout the exhibition. Colour and movement were the main concepts behind "Centrifugal Village" by Spanish designers Clavel Arquitectos: six red and gold giant parasols - two colours strongly related with traditional Chinese symbolism - aimed at creating a lively place where children could interact with the kinetic mechanism of the seats revolving around the central support, in contrast with the severe atmosphere of the plaza[10].

New York-based architecture office OBRA's ephemeral "Oxymoron Pavilion" emphasized "the critical scale of the individual over the collective", questioning the monumental space of the Civic Centre. The pavilion aimed at acting as a pacifying element between the social and the institutional order: it recalled Tatlin's Monument to the Third International, "whose spiralling form is often interpreted as symbolic of Communism's constant emphasis on progress and the future", and at the same time offered an intimate space in the highly institutionalized space of the Square[11], "a salute to the millions of souls living in Shenzhen". Also, the 14-meter long extruded house-shaped structure designed by Croatian Studio UP aimed at proposing a mediation: in a kaleidoscopic game, the internal mirrored walls suggested a harmonious interpenetration and complicity between the intimate notion of "house" and the surrounding, hyper-urbanized environment; inside the installation, the image of the visitors "became intertwined with the reflections of the urban landscape, producing a sense of wonder and visual delight"[12].

6.3. How a train station became political[13]

On 21 December 2019 a night light show projected on the shiny walls of Futian CBD towers marked the opening of the 2019 Biennale themed *Urban Interactions*. The ceremony represented the debut of a particularly complex Biennale edition, whose process is inextricably bound to several contingencies which made apparent the political character of the exhibition.

2019 was a relevant year, marking four decades since the creation of the Special Economic

9   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (ed.) (2014) *Architecture Creates Cities. Cities Create Architecture.* 2011 *Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen).* Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, p. 51.

10   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (ed.) (2014) *Architecture Creates Cities. Cities Create Architecture.* 2011 *Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen).* Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, p. 61.

11   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (ed.) (2014) *Architecture Creates Cities. Cities Create Architecture.* 2011 *Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen).* Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, p. 69.

12   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (ed.) (2014) *Architecture Creates Cities. Cities Create Architecture.* 2011 *Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen).* Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, p. 77.

13   This section tackles the 2019 Biennale case study as both a spatial practice, and an *ex-post* reflection on the personal research and curatorial experience in *Eyes of the City* exhibition between August 2019 and March 2020.

Zone. Moreover, the inauguration of the Biennale heralded another relevant anniversary: the founding of the municipality of Shenzhen in 1980. While the 2019 Biennale was on stage, and the Special Economic Zone was celebrated as a successful economic and political project, less than 30 kilometers away, in nearby Hong Kong, the protest begun in summer 2019 - which shed light on the still controversial relationship between the former British colony and Mainland China, redefining China's position in the international geopolitical balance - was still in full swing.

Technological innovation was the leading leitmotiv of the 2019 Biennale, which chose for the third time Futian Central Business District - notably, the Futian High-Speed Railway Station and the Museum Of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning (MOCAUP) - as a stage.

The selection of the station as one of the two main venues for the exhibition was made official in April 2019, after previous diverse hypotheses for alternative locations - strategic for the Biennale's theme - were explored. At the beginning, it was assumed to house the exhibition in the High Tech Park area; later, the Futian Free Trade Zone area emerged - where private companies could have provided locations. The Free Trade Zone would have been a strategic choice of representation: this kind of special regulated areas is encountering success in the city, as the case of "Qianhai Shenzhen-Hong Kong Modern Service Industry Cooperation Zone" witnesses[14]. Moreover, Futian is an important buffer zone between Shenzhen and Hong Kong: by displaying the new area of Shenzhen's economic policies, the Biennale could have represented a tool to to promote the status of the Mainland entrepreneurial city in its ts twinning/competition relationship with the former British colony.

The final location, yet, made explicit the role of the exhibition in representing municipal ambitions: the choice of Futian Central Business District was dictated by an exclusively public move which adhered to a logic of political representation. *Urban Interactions* was divided into two main sections - "Eyes of the City" and "Ascending Cities" - curated by two different groups[15]. Notably, "Eyes of the City" took place in the underground spaces of the Futian High-Speed Railway Station.

6.3.1 Positioning Futian High Speed Railway Station

As Hu (2020) underlines, Futian CBD has the densest metro system in the city - which Shenzhen municipality officially inaugurated in 2011. It is not the first time that the Biennale intervenes in the Central Business District underground space. In 2009, the "Future City-State" section presented some projects that tried to establish a spatial and social interaction with the underpass connecting the Civic Center to the underground network. The "Graphic Interchange Device" project by London-based Fashion Architecture Taste (FAT) combined decorative patterning of floors in tiling and carpeting with the instructive signage of way-finding systems as a means of "intensifying relationships, forming connections, suggesting

14   http://qhsk.china-gdftz.gov.cn/en/POLICY/Comprehensive/content/post_4380592.html. Accessed 12 April 2021.

15   *Urban Interactions* featured Italian architect Carlo Ratti, Chinese academic Meng Jianmin and Italian art critic Fabio Cavallucci as Chief Curators. The exhibition was split into two sections: "Eyes of the City" section in Futian High-Speed Railway Station was curated by Carlo Ratti (Chief Curator), Politecnico di Torino and the South China University of technology (Academic Curators); the section "Ascending Cities" in MOCAUP was curated by Meng Jianmin and Fabio Cavallucci (Chief Curators), Wu Yan (Co-Curator). http://www.szhkbiennale.org.cn/En/Curators/. Accessed 15 October 2020.

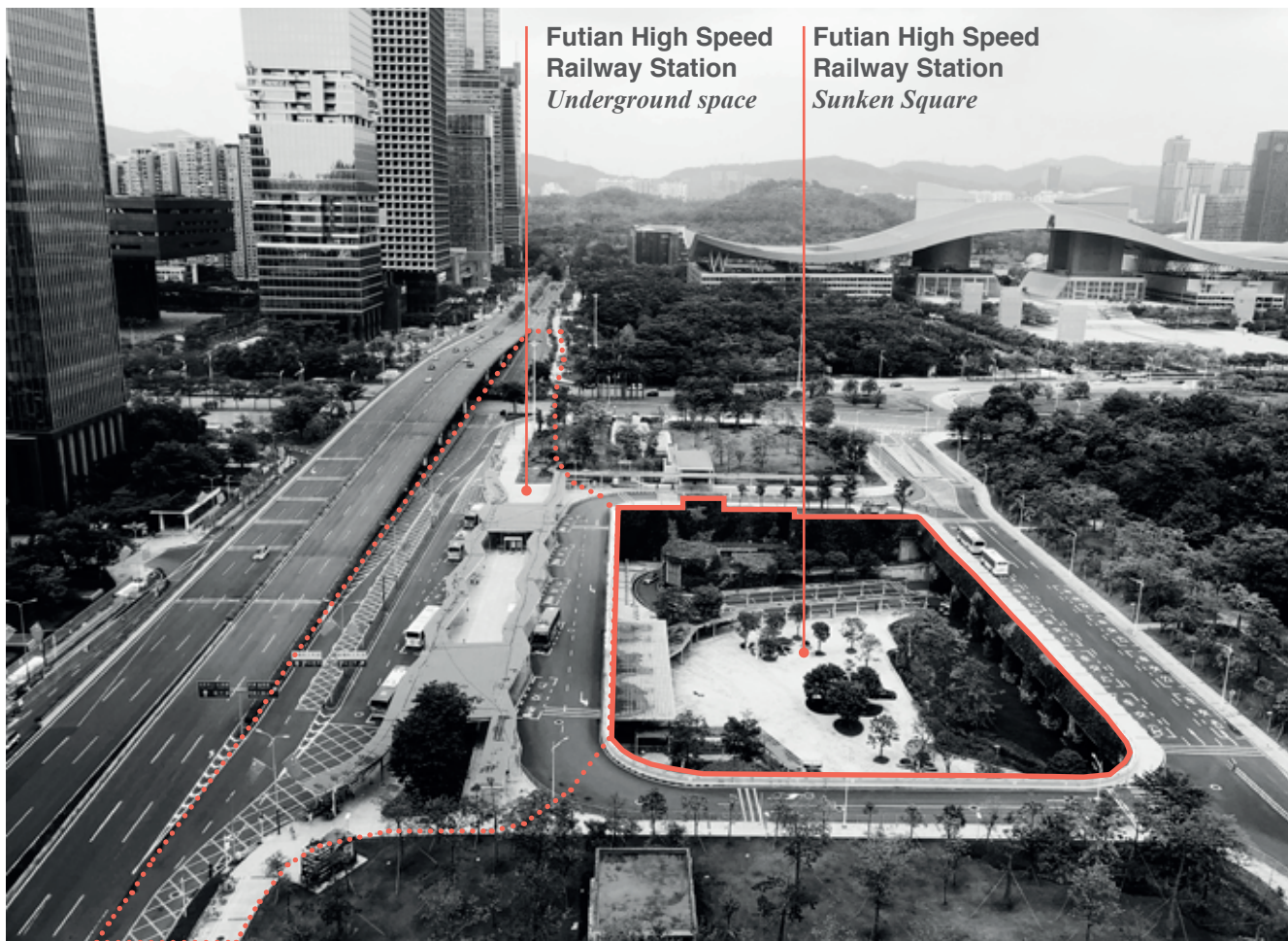*Figure 6.17_Aerial view of the Futian High Speed Railway Station and the Sunken Square, 2019 Shenzhen Biennale venue. ource: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture Organizing Committee. Re-elaboration by the author.*

Figure 6.18_Interior view of the Futian High Speed Railway Station, 2019 Shenzhen Biennale venue. Picture by the author.

modes of occupation and making both places and spaces"; in the same section, the tile patterns of "Natural History" by Wang Wei aimed at injecting a reflection on the relationship between human-made environments and real natural surroundings (Ou 2013b, 186-188).

Apart from these marginal interventions, in 2009 and 2011 the focus of the Biennale was mainly represented by the theatrical scenery of Civic Square and the Civic Center. Ten years after, yet, the High-Speed Railway Station - the latest flagship of the Futian Central Business District infrastructure system - lies at the core of the event's spotlights: the station has a strong political relevance as a part of the CBD and a complementary element to Civic Square and the Civic Center.

As Gaubatz (2019, 7) points out, "large, open public spaces, and transportation-related spaces continue to be key aspects of contemporary Chinese development". In particular, the development of infrastructural networks epitomises the growth that has characterized contemporary Chinese urban areas. It is also representative of the political system's ability to equip the country with a state-of-the-art mobility infrastructure capable of keeping up with the growth rate. The rapid development of urban rail transit and intercity railways has played an increasingly important role in shaping the urban and transportation landscape of China's densely populated regions (Chen 2018). Notably, the relationship between the intensification of the infrastructure/rail system and the built fabric is particularly relevant in the Pearl River Delta, which covers an area of 54,754 square kilometers, has a population of 57.15 million and a per capita GDP of about 9,800 RMB: intercity express railways operated regularly between Guangzhou and Shenzhen since 2011, as result of the massive migration from rural to urban areas (Chen 2018, 13).

Futian High Speed Railway Station is representative of this trend. The station is part of the Guangzhou–Shenzhen–Hong Kong Express Rail Link which opened on 28 June 2011 serving the Shenzhen Metro, and since 30 December 2015 it has been the first underground high speed railway station on a long-distance line in China (Lee 2015). Connected with the broad underground infrastructural system of Futian CBD, it serves as an interchange station between the Guangzhou–Shenzhen–Hong Kong Express Rail Link and Line 2, Line 3 and Line 11 of the Shenzhen Metro.

The space of the station is organized in four underground levels and an outdoor square. The first underground level connects the metro and the high speed intercity trains with passenger lounges, customs and immigration facilities, while the second and third underground levels serve Shenzhen Metro trains. The fourth underground level houses the platforms for China Railway High-speed (CRH) intercity trains connecting Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Guangzhou and other cities along the line. The station covers a total area of 147,000 square meters - 1023 meters-long and 78.86 meters-wide: celebrated as Asia's largest underground railway station, it as a space with a high strategic value mirroring Shenzhen's pioneering ambitions[16].

Connecting Shenzhen to Hong Kong in 10-15 minutes, the station embodies mainland China's ambitions to establish a connection with the neighboring city, and at the same time to position its infrastructural supremacy. The station serves as a source of both pride and competition over Hong Kong in the frame of a broader strategy: through the realization of such an infrastructure hub, Shenzhen would merge with Guangzhou, Hong Kong and the Pearl

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16   http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-12/31/content_22880569.htm. Accessed 17 December 2020.

River Delta cities to become a true urban belt, or one big urban zone[17]. The Biennale has acted as a mouthpiece and forerunner of this trend: in 2007, the organization of a "Bi-City" Biennale already represented an "audacity that defies accepted boundaries" (Ou 2013, 12) and clearly stated the desire to celebrate the fruitful union of the two twin cities of Shenzhen and Hong Kong, which represent the engine rooms of China's "Open Door Policy". Today, this approach well mirrors Shenzhen's regional and municipal ambitions within the Greater Bay Area Strategy outline approved in 2019 - which puts a great emphasis on infrastructure connectivity and technological advance (Hong Kong Government 2019).

6.3.2 Curating the infrastructural hub

Facing the space of the station, the curatorial strategy was articulated along two lines of intervention aimed at addressing the interaction between architecture, urban space and technology. On the one hand - in line with previous editions - curators aimed at leaving their own spatial imprint through the event; on the other hand, the exhibition proclaimed itself a platform to collect critical reflections, the opportunity to write "a new chapter in the relationship between the city and digital technologies" (Erman 2019). Curatorial intentions aimed at triggering new patterns of interaction with space, exploring the physical and symbolic environment of the station both as a venue for the exhibition and as a new type of urban space.

Futian High Speed Railway Station represents a spatial typology which differs from Civic Square and Civic Center - yet no less relevant from a spatial and symbolic point of view. If Civic Square and Civic Center were referred to as open and visible representative spaces, the station and the square in front of it represent another kind of urban promise in imagining the contemporary Chinese city: they materialize the notion of progress, according to which the modernity of the city parallels the level of invisibility of its infrastructural network where "more innovative infrastructure is invisible" (Federighi and Fiandanese 2019, 157). Gandy (2011, in Federighi and Fiandanese 2019) argues that the infrastructural system is a decisive element in urban landscapes, representing the transition from modern to contemporary cities. The spatial complexity and scale of the Futian Station underground network epitomizes and expands this notion, embracing the conceptualization of Koolhaas and Mau (1994, 23) on "Bigness", which "is interpenetrating with the city; represents the city; appropriates the city; or, even better, it *is* the city"[18]. Connecting three subway lines and stations, and supporting an impressive underground commercial network (the 'Link City'), the station celebrates the supremacy of urban planning over the city: the articulation of the system - through the entanglement of consumption space, transport space and the regulatory space of customs - makes it a new paradigm in the definition of urban public spaces.

"Eyes of the City" curatorial strategy was grafted into this frame, considering the recently realized station and the sunken square as a "in progress" spatial system. The theme of 'anonymity', which - according to curatorial statement - characterizes this spatial complex, was the leitmotiv of the design project, aimed at encouraging the collective use of a space

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17   As Belleri, Bruno and Xu (2021, 20) underscore, "since 2018, the station has become in line with the visions of Beijing, one of the hubs of the Great Bay Area, transforming itself from a mere infrastructure to an institutional outpost, using commuting as the way to make exchanges at the border more and more fluid".

18   Italic mine.

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Figure 6.19_View of the Futian High Speed Railway Station Sunken Square for the, 2019 Shenzhen Biennale. Source: Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee archives. © Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee.

Figure 6.20_View of the "Eyes of he City" exhibition in the Futian High Speed Railway during the 2019 Shenzhen Biennale. © Prospekt Photographers

that lacked a well-structured character and demanded stronger connections with the city. The space of the sunken square was the object of a master plan which underwent several variations during the exhibition design and construction process - and eventually did not find its material realization. The project - initially conceived as a permanent transformation - gradually turned into an ephemeral operation that sought to establish a connection between the monumental scale of the infrastructural system and human scale social interactions, using the Biennale "to produce a positive impact on Shenzhen's public space" (Belleri, Bruno and Xu 2021, 25).

In its final configuration, "Connected Plaza", the development of the master plan involved the curatorial team and several national and international designers[19] in a self-proclaimed 'urban curation' operation imitating the previous experience of 2017 Biennale[20] in Nantou Old Town. The design revolved around the dualism entailed in the notion of 'infrastructure': on the one hand it represents the overwhelming idea of hyper-connection; on the other hand, it embodies "a cut dividing rather than unifying urban space and the people who daily live it"[21].

The master plan featured the realisation of a *promenade* sewing otherwise fragmented spaces, a sequence of elements connecting the Station, the square and the neighbouring park. Several heterogeneous fragments composed a light infrastructural system, with the ambition of engaging interactions and connections between the public space, the city and the users - making a shift from the "technocratic" character of infrastructure to a "more holistic experience of contemporary urban space." The master plan acted as an urban, ephemeral apparatus and questioned the supremacy of infrastructural systems in the contemporary hyper-metropolis. Curators Carlo Ratti Associati, Politecnico di Torino and South China University of Technology developed the new entrance of the Station by re-configuring the existing shelters and the entrance canopy; Shenzhen-based architectural firm NODE designed a new staircase connecting the Sunken Plaza with the park, where "terraces and slopes encourage the public to enjoy news views of the surrounding CBD"; a central stage and a painting canvas, designed by CRA - Carlo Ratti Associati, would host public shows. Inside the Park, Tokyo-based architectural firm Atelier Bow-Wow proposed the "Urban Foresters Club" pavilion, a social project aimed at displaying the process of forestry as a cycle[22].

The underground space inside the station hosted the "Eyes of the City" exhibition. The curatorial vision interpreted the integrated exchange infrastructure - and notably the main hall measuring about 70 meters in width by 300 meters in length - as an underused and oversize space, unable to interact with the travellers crossing it, defining the station as an "empty cave in the central heart of one of the liveliest metropolis of the new millennium" (Belleri, Bruno and Xu 2021, 23). The venue design aimed at triggering both a physical transformation and a critical reflection on how to live and use a 'generic' space. The spatial imprint of "Eyes of the City" was conceived as a seamless transition between transit and exhibitionary space: a

19   Carlo Ratti Associati, Politecnico di Torino, South China University of Technology, Atelier Bow-Wow + Tokyo Tech Tsukamoto Lab, NODE Architecture and Urbanism, HIL Architects, Guangzhou Architectural Engineering Design Institute Co. Ltd, Jiang & Associates Design.

20   See Chapter 5.

21   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (ed.) (2020). *Urban Interactions: 2019 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen)*. Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, p. 248.

22   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (ed.) (2020). *Urban Interactions: 2019 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen)*. Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, p. 249.

400-meter-long "train-like" corridor with multiple entrances occupied the main hall, promoting "a series of zigzagging routes, encouraging people to get lost among the artefacts" (Belleri, Bruno and Xu 2021). Curators focused their design on injecting new interaction patterns between the commuters' daily moving and the exhibition visitors. The pre-existing technical and commercial functions in the Station represented the starting point for a design concept that drew inspiration from the world of the duty-free shops: the general aim was to attract inside the exhibition the passersby of the anonymous transit and consumption space (Belleri, Bruno and Xu 2021).

6.3.3 Biennale as 'interruption'?

The physical space of the station was instrumentally used by the curatorial team to develop a critical reflection on the interaction between urban space and technology: as underlined in the statement, the influence of Artificial Intelligence processes (from facial recognition to natural language processing) has made urgent the necessity to reflect on diverse issues such "the ethics of technological agency, the meaning of urban observation and design by proxy, the power of data ownership, and how technology can be re-appropriated by individuals and communities" (Erman 2019).

The general theme *Urban Interactions* - which welcomed these reflections - referred to a real situation where Shenzhen (as the new hi-tech outpost of China) is directly involved. Technological advancement is one of the pivotal points of the GBA Outline, which aims at enhancing "coordinated innovation" and "technology carriers and platforms" in the PRD Region (Hong Kong Government 2019). Notably, the 2020-2025 reform plan issued by the general offices of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council aims at positioning Shenzhen SEZ as a "pilot demonstration area for socialism with Chinese characteristics" and a new "sci-tech innovation hub "providing support to innovation strategies through the integration of industry, university, research and development" (CCTV 2020).

Security is another node of the GBA Outline. In contemporary Chinese cities, such issue often relates to the governmental use of emerging Artificial Intelligence technologies. In China, more than 100 cities adopted face-recognition surveillance systems in 2019 (Roussi 2020): surveillance cameras equipped with facial recognition technology are thus a pervasive phenomenon covering a vast array of usages (Chen 2019; Zhang 2019). Notably, Futian is the central station in a city that officially announced in 2017 its ambition to become the world's primary AI innovation centre by 2030, and with the second-most surveillance cameras-per-capita ratio (Chen 2019; Federighi, Naso and Belleri 2021). Such statistics have gradually nurtured a broad debate around concerns for privacy protection and the use of data. The curatorial strategy fitted into this framework, trying to question the interaction between technology and urban space. The pervasive use of facial recognition represented a design theme, as the meeting point between technology and space. Dutch architectural firm MVRDV, in cooperation with Shenzhen-based hi-tech company DareLove, designed the entrance and exit points of the exhibition: the info-points presented a technological infrastructure of face recognition which gathered data about the flows in the venue and allowed passersby to sign-in as visitors, tracking their path throughout the exhibits.

The curatorial vision aimed at tackling the theme of surveillance by adopting an alleged,
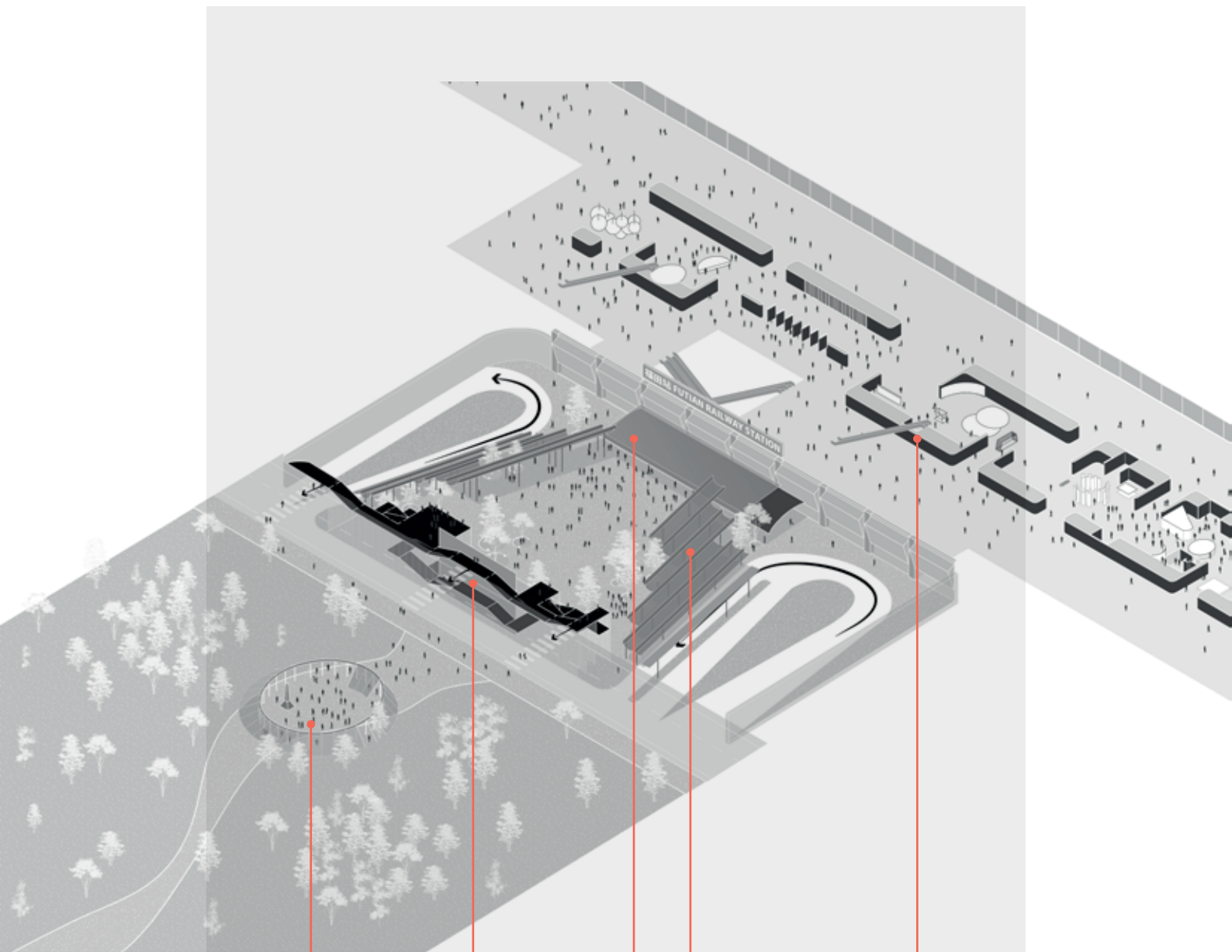
Urban Foresters Club
Atelier Bow-wow,
Tokyp Tech Tsukamoto
Lab

Infographic Vault
Carlo Ratti Associati,
Politecnico di Torino,
South China University
of Technology

Eyes of the City
Carlo Ratti Associati,
Politecnico di Torino,
South China University
of Technology

City Theatre
NODE

Welcoming Pavillion
Carlo Ratti Associati,
Politecnico di Torino,
South China University
of Technology

Figure 6.21_Axonometric view of the "Connected Plaza" unrealised master plan for the 2019
Shenzhen Biennale. Drawing by Camilla Forina. Re-elaboration by the author.

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subversive scheme to - virtually - unhinge the station's controlled space: in the heterotopic exhibition realm, the imposing instruments of regulation became tools of interruption and leisure, empowering visitors who could freely choose to be tracked by the system (enjoying its advantages) or to "opt-out" and ideally keeping their anonymity - which is indeed not possible in real space (Belleri, Bruno and Xu 2021).

6.3.4 From 'connected' to 'contested' space

Although fuelled by ambitious curatorial intentions, "Eyes of the City" exhibition process turned out to be far from frictionless. Several tensions emerged considering both the spatial intervention in the venue and the impact of the Biennale as an environment for critical reflection - bringing to light the 2019 Biennale disposition as an instrument of political strengthening.

The "Connected Plaza" master plan design went through several phases of reworking. The project aimed at realizing a permanent intervention in the station square, in line with the history of spatial transformations that had characterized some previous Biennale editions. The curatorial team developed three different designs between January and November 2019: the solutions were discussed in public sessions that involved both the different decision-making bodies gravitating around the Biennale as a cultural institution (curators, Biennale Organizing Committee, Urban Planning Bureau) and the actors managing the site (Shenzhen Railway Company, Futian District, Shenzhen Metro Company). The overlapping of such heterogeneous, institutional actors turned the negotiation on the square's transformation into a layered, contested arena. The first versions of the master plan envisaged the realisation of an external extension of the station - accessible to the public - consisting of a metal structure leaning against the existing facade of Futian High-Speed Railway Station. This new architectural layer would have housed a public open-air museum to connect the street level and the sunken Square, encouraging their usage as public spaces. However, management issues - combined with bureaucratic slowdowns and security concerns - represented decisive obstacles in obtaining a joint approval for the design. Shenzhen Subway Company managed the ground of the Square, while the Railway Company was responsible for the walls of the station on which the addition project insisted. The presence of an underground level also represented an obstacle in negotiating the installation of permanent structures on the ground level of the Square; the recent construction of the station, moreover, made difficult the approval for the realization of a structure leaning against the existing facade; fire regulations also denied the authorization to build the metal structure accessible to people. Conceived as a permanent intervention, throughout the negotiations with Futian District, the Biennale Organizing Committee and Urban Planning Bureau, the project gradually changed its shape as an ephemeral installation with the mere purpose to bring attention and public to the Square[23].

This increasing dematerialisation can be observed on a broader frame. The "Connected Plaza" master plan intended to give identity to a newly born place which was already imbued with significant political representation: curatorial intentions aimed at adding an additional layer - another self-proclaimed 'cultural landmark' - in an area that already displays the juxtaposition

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23   Reconstruction based on personal attendances to public design meetings in Shenzhen Urban Planning Bureau between January and November 2019.

of various cultural containers[24]. Moreover, the site's future transformation was at the centre of an debate directly involving the governmental sphere. During the exhibition setting up, the Square - with the whole Futian CBD central area - was the subject of a feasibility study for an urban transformation promoted by the Futian District and Shenzhen Urban Planning Bureau. In 2019, the Futian District Bureau of Planning and Land Resources Management appointed URBANUS to draft a study for the Futian CBD. The "Fu [+] Infill Plan"[25], as part of the "Urban Research and Concept Planning on Revitalization of Public Space in Futian Area", aimed at defining solutions to revitalise and redevelop public spaces in the central urban area. URBANUS plan is a parallel project which did not directly involve "Eyes of the City" curators - and where a hypothetical spatial intervention linked to the Biennale, if successful, would have served as a test-bed to orientate new future spatial transformations for the area[26]. As the curatorial team, URBANUS worked on public space, expanding the scope of the plan to the whole Central Business District area and capitalizing on the 'urban curation' notion already rehearsed during the 2017 Biennale. The High Speed Train Station was directly involved in the plan: the general aim was to enhance the connections between the station and the park, empowering the urban design of the central axis with a "public art" corridor where the park acted as a pivotal area for the "reactivation" of CBD's green spaces[27].

While the Biennale Organizing Committee seemed to be aware of Futian District's plan, it did not mention them during the various meetings which rather encouraged "Eyes of the City" curatorial team to propose different revised versions of the project: eventually, the ephemeral masterplan designed by the curators failed due to time, budget and governmental constraints.

The space of the Futian Station was also subject to other different tensions, where contingencies played a primary role both in the construction process of the exhibition and in its legacy - making explicit the Biennale's character as a political space.

The general theme *Urban Interactions* was announced in a positivist perspective that mirrored the enthusiasm for Shenzhen's development as a new model hi-tech hub in the future Greater Bay Area, prophesying its cooperation with Hong Kong. The pacifying symbolism of such an exhibition theme unwittingly turned out to be controversial. Hong Kong riots represented an unexpected pressure point for the Biennale's representational role. The first protests in the former British colony, born as the "Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement", heavily marked the second half of 2019[28]. Begun in March 2019, the protests underwent an escalation of violence starting from June, to further intensify in October, making the "Bi-City" feature especially sensitive for a Chinese - as well as for an international - audience (Federighi, Naso and Belleri 2021). In October, the protests - which also contested the use of artificial intelligence systems for the dissidents' facial recognition - made it difficult to publicly discuss the role of pervasive surveillance technologies in a governmental Chinese cultural platform. The Cultural Bureau, which was in charge of supervising the exhibition contents, operated a strict revision on

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24 See Chapter 2.

25 http://www.urbanus.com.cn/projects/fu-plus/?lang=en. Accessed 15 February 2021.

26 Interview with Wendy Wu and Liu Xiaodu. 24 May 2019.

27 http://www.urbanus.com.cn/projects/fu-plus/?lang=en. Accessed 15 February 2021.

28 For a report of 2019 Hong Kong protests see Purbrick (2019).

Figure 6.22_The "Info Point" designed by MVRDV during the 2019 Shenzhen Biennale. © Prospekt Photographers.

Figure 6.23_The installation "City Panopticism" transformed in "City Opticism" by Wang Xiaoyu and Wang Yutian during the 2019 Shenzhen Biennale. © Prospekt Photographers.

Figure 6.24_The dismantilng of "Eyes of the City". © Freddy Curiél.

various exhibits: among others, the installation "Storm City" by architectural firm Future Plus[29] - which displayed a picture of people standing under umbrellas in a Hong Kong street - was the object of a long debate between involved parties, as it was feared it would remind visitors of the 2014 Umbrella Movement.

Both the construction and the use of the exhibition space in Futian Station also underwent a metamorphosis. The station was born as an modern infrastructural hub and as an element of symbolic and spatial connection, materializing the ambitions of the GBA Outline plan to enhance the synergetic coalition of Shenzhen and Hong Kong in developing the mega-region. In October 2019, yet, the station expressed its imposing political and regulatory role. Over the weeks before the exhibition, some customs were closed and trains between Futian and Hong Kong were discontinued (Federighi, Naso and Belleri 2021). The venue design project was also subject to pressure from the government in response to protests. The alleged subversive and heterotopic feature of the exhibition space turned into the spatial miniaturization of the growing political tension that characterized the relationship between Mainland China and the former British colony between June and November 2020, making explicit the politicized nature of the Shenzhen-Hong Biennale 'bi-city' relationship.

"Serendipity, surprise and intentional participation" were the curatorial premises for the use of the exhibition space (Belleri, Bruno and Xu 2021, 59): the regulatory drift in response to the protests weakened these stances. Originally intended as a space open to the free movement of commuters, the exhibition was fenced off for two weeks through barriers and security control: it opened to the general public exclusively through the visitors' monitored online and on-site registration. The only exception was allowed at midnight on opening day when security officers temporarily removed the barriers for an hour for the official photoshoot: the exhibition space was always kept in a controlled state, giving it "even more traction as disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourse on topics of emerging technologies have been the subject of political debate" (Federighi, Naso and Belleri 2021, 9).

Although during the exhibition setting up the Biennale Organizing Committee expressed the idea of preserving - in whole or in part - the venue design project in the Station, this intention turned out to be unattainable: the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent health emergency exacerbated its ephemeral character. At the end of February, Shenzhen closed all non-medical public places in the city and "Eyes of the City" was no exception: the authorities shut the exhibition on 20 February 2020, after eight weeks since the opening[30]; the venue was eventually demolished since 20 May 2020.

Such a set of contingencies forced the exhibition to reconfigure its form in an immaterial dimension. The curators reorganized the program in virtual form, moderating online thematic forums with international and national guests. Although less representative than the material side of the event, the forums played an important - although unintentional - role in conceiving the exhibition as an interruption: they also somehow represented an opportunity to escape the meshes of the Cultural Bureau, which requested the projection of the contents of each intervention to be housed in the physical, official exhibition spaces. In the digital locus of online discussion platforms, outside the physical space regulated by the Biennale Committee and the

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29   http://eyesofthecity.net/storm-speed-city/. Accessed 17 February 2021.

30   The same epilogue was shared by "Eyes of the City"' twin exhibition, "Ascending city", housed in MOCAUP.

government, the adaptation of the exhibition to contingencies ultimately represented a shared dimension where political control had a minor agency.

6.4 Between subversion and regulation

During a public forum to introduce "Eyes of the City" exhibition at the "Biennale Tecnologia" in Turin, on 9 November 2019[31], Chief Curator Carlo Ratti wore a gray T-shirt claiming "Architecture is always political". Such stance represented - perhaps unwittingly - the most sincere statement from the 2019 Biennale, summarizing how politics permeated both the architectural shape of Futian CBD, and the agency of the three exhibitions housed in the area.

As Ou (2013b, 40) underlined, Shenzhen was in search for an identity "after the completion of its mission as a special economic zone": in his words, the city aspire to enhance its pivotal role to "become a special political zone, and lead the nation in experiments in institutional political reform". This claim finds a confirmation a few years later, with the consecration of Shenzhen in government plans as the epicenter of the Greater Bay Area and outpost of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" (Shenzhen Government 2021).

The construction of Futian Central Business District and the largest Asian infrastructural hub have confirmed and reinforced these political ambitions: by accompanying Shenzhen's evolution from manufacturing hub to "Global Knowledge City" (Hu 2020), the Biennale has become the ideal mouthpiece for these stances.

As underlined in the 2007 Biennale Catalogue, "in Shenzhen, representation takes surface value to the maximum": the images of the city, "of its future and quality of its life" epitomize an urban promise of "eternal youth and rejuvenation"[32]. In a similar vein, Futian CBD space acts as a metonymy: it represents the whole city, and at the same time it is the spatial manifestation of its governmental and regulatory system. In this framework, the Biennale as a spatial practice investing the Central Business District embodied a strong symbolism. The event did not perform differently from a rendering or a promotional panel, manifesting an explicit symbolic value, happening in symbolic years - one year after the proclamation of Shenzhen as UNESCO City of Design, thirty years after the proclamation of the SEZ and twenty years after the events in Tienanmen Square - and in a symbolic space.

This section has observed how the 2009, 2011 and 2019 Biennale editions acted as a way to interrupt and questioning both the imposing spatial scale and the symbolic meaning of CBD's institutional spaces: in curatorial views, Futian CBD, the Station and the Civic Square were the places where curatorial stances made the the Biennale's role explicit as a an alleged 'counter-political', tactical tool. The Biennale has tried to challenge the official, imposing and regulating narratives with specific counter-tactics: the representation of the event and its symbolic value aimed at visually subverting the established order, trying to set up a spatial and conceptual locus for critical reflection.

Nevertheless, as observed, the agency of the event in the CBD mainly remained ephemeral:

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31   https://2019.festivaltecnologia.it/sessioni/gli-occhi-della-citta. Accessed 13 December 2020.

32   Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture Organizing Committee (ed.) (2008) *City of Expiration and Regeneration*. 2007 *Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (Shenzhen)*. Shenzhen: Shenzhen Press Group Publishing House, p. 23.

the trajectory of the exhibition started as a critical spatial practice, but ended up in being a tool of institutional representation which paralleled governmental ambitions and further underlined the gap between symbolic intentions and real legacy.

In 2009 and in 2011 the Biennale highlighted Shenzhen's power and national ambitions as the outpost of Chinese aspiring Global Cities, epitomized by the realization of Futian Central Business District - with its top-down planning, the central axis, the entanglement of institutional, corporate and consumption spaces. Chen (2010, 174) underlines how the production of urban space "as image construction is embedded in the political-philosophy of the entrepreneurial governance in the present Chinese transitional market-economy". The space of the Square served as a stage for institutionally organized activities in Shenzhen's urban entrepreneurialism: the Biennale was one of them, entangling city marketing, social control and governmental aspirations, mimicking bottom-up interventions where spatial practices intended as subversive were rather used in complicity with the *status quo.*

Despite curatorial visions, the Civic Square revealed its character as a "problematic" public space (Chen 2010, 165). One year after the 2009 exhibition, the same place which housed *City Mobilization* was under constant surveillance and no commercial or recreational activities were allowed. The square was as a highly regulated space where control passed through "hard" physical elements and "soft" strategies. A "Rule of Plaza" was posted in the square detailing "the kinds of prohibited activities" which were not consistent with the representational status of the space and included "all leisure activities that could be done in this vast place — riding bicycles, roller skating, lying down on the chairs, shouting, [...] retailing, distributing flyers or any written materials" (Chen 2010, 166): quite paradoxically, the same activities that the Biennale proudly displayed in its editions. The regulation of everyday life in the square represents the *de facto* negation of both the curatorial statements and the founding principles of the Biennale. The so-called "civic" square is not "designed or managed as a space for relaxation or free meeting of the common people, but a space reserved for scheduled events or grand celebrations organized by the government". Its "civic" functions are not intended as functions dedicated to the self-empowerment of citizens: it is a space that serves "the purpose of educating [...] and mentally influencing" people (Chen 2010, 150). Despite curatorial intentions, who was eventually represented by the Biennale's spatial intervention in the square were not the citizens. The space of the exhibition became an exemplary space where curators gave full rein to what governmental institution safely allowed to stage: it became almost a didactic space, where the curatorial momentum was the premise for a 'pacifying' urban carnival.

In 2019, the second largest infrastructural hub in Asia station became the theater of an urban festival propelling Shenzhen's affirmation as a pivotal outpost of the Greater Bay Area Strategy. Such a celebration of an institutional space could not be questioned by a permanent master plan project conceived in few months by a curatorial team mainly composed by foreign designers[33]; it rather epitomised the city government's power, stating the role of Shenzhen in the Greater Bay Area strategy, and was surpassed by a broader, official feasibility study commissioned by the Urban Planning Bureau - and led by URBANUS, one of the most influential architectural offices in the city's cultural *milieu*. Curators cooperated with such a regulatory system, accepting the restrictions imposed by the Cultural Bureau concerning both the master plan and the revision of

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33   In all the previous editions, the transformations were carried out by Chinese architects. The only exception was represented by 2013 Biennale with Dutch Ole Bouman as Artistic Director (nevertheless, he coordinated different international design groups, each one paralleled by a Chinese design practice). See Chapter 2.

several exhibits[34], allowing ideologies and political affairs shape the exhibition and affirming *de facto* the same institutional forces that "Eyes of the City" aimed at questioning: the Station maintained its character as a highly controlled space.

What happened in the Central Business District followed thus a different scheme than the transformation of dismissed industries and urban villages. The manipulation of the post-industrial legacy aimed at shaping the image of a international cultural city, well-positioned on the global stage; urban villages represented the stage - for an 'exemplary' municipal government - in creating sustainable scenarios at the city level. In the first case, the presence of powerful corporate actors managing the areas (OCT Group for the regeneration of OCT-Loft, and China Merchants Group for the transformation of Value Factory and Dacheng Flour Factory) guaranteed the fluidity of both process and sponsorship in the transformations. In the second, local government and developers cooperated in widespread urban regeneration operations to build a 'model' imagery for the transformation of other areas in the city.

In Futian, the Biennale manifestly acted as a political matter: it embodied the entanglement of curatorial ambitions and political stances, epitomizing Shenzhen's muscular power in affirming its role as the future urban promise "with Chinese characteristics". In the Central Business District area stakeholders were mainly public/governmental actors whose task was to reinforce the position of Shenzhen in Mainland's China at the regional scale, representing the city's ambitions in the Greater Bay Area strategy - and especially managing the city's position towards the contingent political unrest in Hong Kong.

"Eyes of the City" curatorial visions aimed at critically re-configuring the future of a space which was already imbued with a strong political identity - and awaiting for a a new commissioned characterization. The opening of *Urban Interactions*, with the Sunken Square richly decorated with a huge number "40" lying on red and yellow flower beds, witnessed that the success of an entire political strategy was at stake during the event's duration, which made necessary not to allow the *remise en question* of the square spatial symbolism and its urban promise: its political and representational value did not admit any curatorial re-interpretations which did not fit into the governmental gaze.

The alleged 'subversive' curatorial vision acquired thus a deeply softened dimension, loosening all its political strength. The absence of any reference, in "Eyes of the City", on Hong Kong riots, nor on the use of Artificial Intelligence in China as an instrument of control and regulation, epitomized the accomplice compromise between curatorial team and the the Biennale Organizing Committee in order to realise the exhibition and to pursue shared interests: international visibility for the former, political control and consensus for the latter. To pursue international visibility is an understandable approach for an internationally renowned architectural firm like Carlo Ratti Associati - whose business strategy might justify a certain grade of negotiation on ethics and political issues. Nevertheless, the conscious compliance

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34   Beside the above-mentioned "Storm City", the Cultural Bureau operated control on other exhibits. The work "Intimate Strangers" by Barcelona-based architect Andrès Jaque and his Office for Political Innovation was cut off from the exhibition because of its explicit reference to same-sex relationship social networks; the work "Score everyone" by Peije Gu was rejected because of its reference to the Chinese 'social credit system'; the installation "City Panopticon" by Wang Xiaoyu and Wang Yutian for the "Eyes of the City" event. This work, which was meant to illustrate the disseminated effects of urban curation by monitoring through live streaming the sub-venues of the exhibition spread over as many city areas, was modified on the eve of the inauguration. To see the proposals: https://eyesofthecity.net. Accessed 20 December 2020.

with an imposing, political regulatory framework like the one represented by the joint actions of Shenzhen Government and the Cultural Bureau in monitoring the exhibition seems less understandable when undertaken by a public institution like the Politecnico di Torino - which figured as one of the event's Academic Curators.

During the Opening Ceremony held in Shenzhen on 21 December 2019, Carlo Ratti wore a black suit and t-shirt - a more convenient curatorial attire than the one provocatively and safely exhibited in Turin a couple of months before. After all, as Antoine Picon provocatively pointed out during the above mentioned forum at the "Biennale Tecnologia" - referring to the alleged need stated by Ratti to reconnect with the political unrest that Hong Kong was experiencing during "Eyes of the City" setting up - "it's not enough to wear a T-shirt" to address major political problems[35].

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35   https://2019.festivaltecnologia.it/sessioni/gli-occhi-della-citta. Accessed 13 December 2020.

PART THREE

Beyond the
Object

Chapter 7

The Event as the City

The case studies show how the Biennale's operation as a device with an 'agency' is aimed in a specific direction. Keller Easterling (2016, 72) refers to "disposition" as "something of what [an] organization is doing - activities that may diverge from the stated intent" encompassing the entanglement among capital, space, and politics - and emphasizing how exceptions can regulate economic flows and spaces. In this sense, the repacking of the Biennale's spatial narratives has shed light on the event as an assemblage with a 'disposition' that brings together different dimensions.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, spatial narratives depict an unfixed space, always in motion and "always in progress, never as a closed system" (Massey 2005, 11). It is possible to observe how the architectural exhibition device runs along two interconnecting routes, performing both as a critical and theoretical platform and as a tool for urban transformation, injecting a variegated set of tensions into the city's socio-spatial fabric.

The following section aims to unpack the meaning of the Biennale as an 'urban curation' tool, observing the layered relationship between the event and the city.

7.1 The Biennale as a theoretical device: a 'critical' lens on the city

The Biennale exhibition has set up a critical reflection around urban issues, triggering a system of trans-local relations where both international and domestic curators and designers deal with Shenzhen as the paradigm of an 'expanded' notion of the term urban.

Throughout its eight editions, the exhibition has represented one of the elements to position Shenzhen as an aspiring global 'cultural city'. An articulated and increasingly cosmopolitan set of curators and participants have made the Biennale a locus of discussion, fully adhering to the global system; at the same time, the event has consolidated a cultural and professional network

to observe urban issues that affect the very local reality. These player systematically carry out targeted research on the city, of which the Biennale has become the official stage.

Going through the event's catalogues from 2005 to 2019, it is possible to notice the presence of some recurrent names that have gradually built up the local cultural milieu. Over the years, the architectural studio URBANUS has consolidated the research around urban villages[See Chapter 5.], displayed by the exhibition since 2005 - bringing the architectural firm (notably, the two partners Liu Xiaodu and Meng Yan) to the curatorship of the 2017 edition of the Biennale. Another example is NODE Architecture and Urbanism studio, founded and run by Doreen Heng Liu, which has consolidated research on the Pearl River Delta and co-led the curatorship of the 2015 Biennale with the "PRD 2.0" section.

At the same time, this network of players physically 'handles' some of the city's urban transformations. The Biennale represents the showcase where the firms belonging to the cultural milieu affirm themselves and show off their ability to manipulate spaces. URBANUS' intervention in Nantou in 2017 and the transformations directed by NODE in the Value Factory in 2013, the Dacheng Flour Factory in 2015 and Yantian in 2017, are the expression of the comprehensive network of designers and cultural players gravitating around the event - and the urban transformations that involve the city. Former director of the Shenzhen Center for Design and Bi-City Biennale Huang Weiwen has set up the research and design institute FuturePlus Academy[1]; again, URBANUS has been involved in a vast set of urban transformations (the most recent of which include a feasibility study for the Futian CBD transformation); NODE Architecture and Urbanism has also taken part in several transformation projects[2]; FengChang Design, who designed the Machine Hall regeneration during the 2013 Biennale, drafted the "Re-Value Factory" project in 2014, was later appointed by Vanke real estate group for the transformation of Dameisha village after the 2017 Biennale[3], and has been involved in the beautification of other urban villages[4].

As a trans-local platform to operate both theoretical exchange and spatial transformations, the Biennale has consolidated the growth of a cultural network capable of triggering discussions on the hyper-growth of the city - and embracing the multiplicity of realities layered in the construction of both Shenzhen's memory and identity. The consolidation of these alternative 'critical' gazes has allowed the Biennale to swing between the observation and the manipulation of both 'real' and idealised space - inextricably linked to Shenzhen's evolution.

Huang Weiwen (2017) highlights the fact that two cities overlap on the material space of Shenzhen as it manifests today: the city shaped (and narrated) by governmental and corporate players through top-down planning, and the city that runs along different trajectories outside the institutional sphere. It is possible to retrace a multiplicity beyond Shenzhen's 'tidy narrative'. On the one hand, the city is prompted as an 'ideal' (and idealised) city molded 'from scratch' from the myth of Deng Xiaoping's dream and the Reforms and Opening Up period - a 'city without history' that has affirmed itself as an economic and civilized outpost thanks to its entrepreneurial explosion. On the other hand, the 'real' city shows a complex overlapping of historical and spatial layers that have shaped its form and constitutive character (Du 2019).

1   https://www.futureplus.net.cn. Accessed 3 June 2021.

2   http://www.urbanus.com.cn/map/shenzhen/?lang=en. Accessed 3 June 2021.

3   See Chapters 4 and 5.

4   http://fcharchi.com/?portfolio=龙华坂田新围仔村综整治. Accessed 14 May June 2019.

In this sense, observation of the Biennale's spaces has demonstrated the event's contribution to pushing Shenzhen's shift in paradigm from a 'generic' city to a city that embodies a set of multiplicities.

As noted throughout the research, the Biennale has highlighted the tensions and discrepancies between rhetoric and reality in planning and nurturing both Shenzhen's imagery and physical spaces. Historically, the city has primarily figured in a nationalist narrative of development and progress, especially considering the speed of its economic growth. Nevertheless, today it aims to be a stage for carrying out urban experiments, acknowledging contributions from its various urban populations (Fan 2017). Besides the well-rehearsed city branding strategies, the promotion of Shenzhen as a 'cultural' outpost also means highlighting the superimposition of layers that make up the city. The exhibition has generated the need to consider the coexistence of multiple dimensions, fostering the 'cultural oasis' imaginary as a threshold between Shenzhen's aspirational moves towards the 'world-class city' imagery and its local reality. The research displayed throughout the exhibition aspires to represent and investigate this threshold.

7.2 The Biennale as a spatial device: from ideal(ized) space...

The Biennale setting as a theoretical tool to reconstruct Shenzhen's multiplicity is inextricably linked to the consolidation of the event as a spatial device. The 'Biennale City', made up of spatial fragments - as mentioned in Chapter 3 and observed throughout the case studies in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 - represents an assemblage of ideal places, a heterotopic territory *par excellence*.

Different urban 'samples' constitute an archipelago of exemplary urban fragments - transforming and displaying some (carefully selected) parts of the city. The Biennale purposefully - and instrumentally - toys with a dichotomous attitude. On the one hand, Shenzhen's condition as a 'city without history' represents an opportunity to constantly experiment with bold spatial transformations, making the presence of such an affirmed cultural event in the city even more appreciable; on the other hand, the frantic search for a 'memory' of the city summons a sense of nostalgia and authenticity which the exhibition aims to preserve and 'rescue' from the bulimia of hypertrophic urbanism.

Both the vision and the narrative propelled by the Biennale generate an 'idealised' doppelganger. The event's idealization as a device triggering critical reflections on the city interlocks with the idealization of the physical spaces transformed by the exhibition. As said, the Biennale's spatial actions position themselves as 'breaking points', potentially injecting disruptive changes into the urban development trajectories that have guided Shenzhen since its foundation. The dominant narratives portraying Shenzhen's various urban fabrics (the post-industrial legacy, urban villages and the Central Business District) depict an ideal city that runs smoothly thanks to the frictionless overlapping of institutional and municipal ambitions, creative actions and entrepreneurial interventions.

Such overlapping of players and actions propels the urban transformation linked to the event as a critical act, generating alternative scenarios to the existing dynamics of socio-spatial exclusion that characterize the contemporary city. In this perspective, as seen throughout the case studies, space embodies different intentions.

The transformations triggered in the OCT-Loft, Guangdong Float Glass Factory and Dacheng Flour Factory have highlighted how the spectacularization of disused industrial spaces has contributed to Shenzhen's positioning as a global creative city. Within this narrative, the future creative districts imagined around the newly refurbished industrial areas are part of a collective vision in which the event has been a catalyst for the city's cultural transformation.

The spatial manipulations carried out in the urban villages of Nantou and Dameisha have helped reshape another idealized city parallel to the 'world-class' outpost: a metropolis where the colorful, peaceful and frictionless coexistence of different socio-spatial fabrics can overcome the limits of comprehensive planning. The case of Nantou is paradigmatic, illustrating the exhibition's 'social' narration through the beautification and the insertion of new transformations in the village. In contrast to the contested tabula rasa operations affecting other chengzhongcun, the event officially represented a 'pacifying' moment that offered an alternative look at urban villages - and opened new perspectives on their transformation.

Lastly, the action of the Biennale in the Futian Central Business District has nurtured Shenzhen's image as the outpost of 'enlightened' socialism within national and regional strategies. In the exhibition's storytelling, the institutionalized and corporate-driven space of the megalopolis has combined with counter-tactics in praise of the population's mobilization in appropriating a more social and shared dimension of urban space. In the Central Business District, the Biennale has been an event capable of questioning the same institutional status quo that generated it. Performances and slogans have criticized the speed, hyper urbanization, and corporatism that characterize the city's exponential growth: the space of the square (and the center of institutional power) has become a demonstrative arena for staging an allegedly critical gaze.

It is also necessary to add the role of the exhibition's dominant visual narratives played in the reinforcement of this idealized vision. As Hornstein (2011) points out, visual representation is a powerful tool to shape memories and convey a collective image of a place. As highlighted by Hornstein (2011, 3), "visual images of sites can generate constructed images that in turn can create a memory of a place": the Biennale triggers a "visual recollection" of urban sites, encouraging their interpretation in an instrumental - and purposefully orchestrated - vision. The exhibition becomes a device connecting space and memory in a dimension of 'visual delight' propelling a 'perennial' version of the transformed sites - and re-molding their memories. Cosmopolitan cultural elites feed on these images and amplify their idealizing power through pervasive dissemination in magazines and websites as paradigms of 'virtuous' approaches. Visual - and narrated - representations perpetuate the meaning of the Biennale's iconic spaces, setting up "networks of knowledge and desire about a place" (Hornstein 2011, 10-11). This orchestration is conveyed through the architectural objects' material nature and narration, triggering individual and collective visions - and instrumentally concealing a robust political framework.

Although (as observed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6) most of the Biennale venues have undertaken dramatic changes throughout time, their visual memory stands as a "surrogate [...] and create a picture of an entire city" (Hornstein 2011, 2). The images of the heterotopic sites transformed by the event travel around the globe, propelling Shenzhen's narrative as a 'model' city capable of making different dimensions of planning coexist.

This approach is particularly evident in urban villages. The spatial fragments produced

by the event have attempted to reshape and trigger 'new' memories of the informal city, reconnecting their past and present dimensions in a contemporary and 'sanitized' attire. Spatial transformations in Nantou Old Town and Dameisha - disseminated in architectural websites and magazines - aimed to spread an idyllic vision of chengzhoncun, in which the event's intervention acted as a panacea for the socio-spatial issues affecting the informal areas of the city.

Moreover, the power of the Biennale's visual representations is carefully mirrored in their framing - which is instrumental in reinforcing the idealized vision promoted by the exhibition. In the post-industrial spaces such as the Guangdong Float Glass Factory and Dacheng Flour Factory, dramatic shots emphasize the glorious past of architectural ruins and introduce their bright future revamp. In urban villages, a 'parade' mood prevails: the pictures aim to highlight the spatial and architectural qualities of the artefacts created for the event (whether the choice of materials or the volumes carefully inserted in the context). At the same time, they attempt to capture 'lived-in places' and convey a strong sense of belonging to the local culture, engulfing local residents as if they were part of the orchestrated stage in the messiness of everyday life.

The Biennale's dominant representations systematically showcase 'pacifying' processes, part of a 'panacea' mechanism that promotes the event and curatorship operations as alternative methods to the current - mainly profit-oriented - modes of living/thinking/designing the city. The transformations implemented and staged by the event figure as virtuous fragments that reconnect the city's past with its future. Shenzhen acts as a model again: these transformations nourish the city's narrative as an ideal territory of exception, capable of renewing itself and renegotiating its image as a beacon of civilization.

7.3 ...to the hyper-real one

However, the diachronic and synchronic observation of the exhibition's spatial narratives highlights specific tensions: the idealized 'spatial fragments' produced by the event - and their metamorphoses - highlight the frictions emerging from the event's intrinsic mechanism, unveiling its fractures.

In all the cases observed, the Biennale functioned as a device to build and display ideal spatial situations. Nevertheless, when the spotlight on the event switches off, the event evolves its agency through the transformations and hybridizations of its own legacy. The contrast between the exhibition's narrative and its physical transformations highlights a paradox of which space (and everything revolving around it) becomes the tangible proof: the unpacking of spatial narratives unveils another side of the story in addition to that conveyed by catalogues and official reports.

It is possible to observe how the Biennale, in the three urban fabrics observed, has acted as a filter, a 'mediating agent', catalyzing the transformations triggered during the event. After the exhibition closes, once the institutional, cultural player has gone - and, with it, the filter between ideal and real space - short-circuits usually happen.

The space left by the Biennale becomes a "third space", borrowing the words of Edward Soja, who defines this specific category as space where "everything comes together" (Soja 1996, 56 in Lindner and Meissner 2019, 6). The heterotopic, idealized, "mediated", "simulated" and "reproduced" reality propelled by the event leaves the floor to the 'Post-Biennale City', where

the former exhibition spaces evolve after the event. Such an assemblage of fictional spaces and actions, when observed in its evolution, proves to be "more real than real", as French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has conceptualized in his writings on Simulacra and Simulation (Baudrillard, 2006 [1981], 81 in Lindner and Meissner 2019, 8).

In its disposition, the Shenzhen Biennale makes apparent the tension between the imagined/idealized space and its tangible counterpart by both concealing and exacerbating the (social, economic and political) power relationships that rule the city. The city fragments transformed by the event are spaces where it is possible to observe urban dynamics in a condition of space-time compression. The exceptional nature of the event allows the transformations (and their subsequent hybridizations) to occur at high speed and - often - free from the regulatory/bureaucratic constraints that characterize projects in 'real' conditions.

Once the temporal/regulatory framework that defines the 'heterotopic' exhibition space is exhausted, the void left by the event acts as an attractor and condenser for the mechanisms and players who shape the 'real' entrepreneurial city as the symbol of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics".

From being the locus where the mise en scène of a theatrical 'suspension of disbelief' occurs, the city fragments created by the Biennale evolve into "hyper-real" spaces, where the fictional world of the exhibition complex overlaps with the real world, exacerbating the same dynamics that regulate it in everyday life. In this fusion between the city and the event, in the post-Biennale period, the 'doppelganger' city generated by the exhibition is not only a lens through which to observe an 'alternative' city's vision; instead, it depicts an amplified vision of it.

The action of the Biennale in post-industrial spaces well describes this trajectory. The affirmation of OCT-Loft's 'creative' district following the 2005 and 2007 editions of the Biennale - together with the concentration of services related to the emergence of an educated and cosmopolitan middle class - has influenced the transformation of the surrounding sites. Moreover, the State-Owned Enterprise OCT Group has consolidated its 'expertise' in undertaking projects related to real estate development and 'culture'. Besides expanding the OCT-Loft 'format' in Shanghai and Beijing, OCT Group played a primary role in transforming the 2017 and 2019 Biennale sub-venue of Guangming village: its participation seems anything but disinterested, considering that the multifunctional center sponsored and built for the 2017 event has now been converted into an exhibition area to promote the new eco-rural inspired Guangming Eco-City[5], defined as a "National Flagship Project" (Deng and Cheshmehzangi 2019, 125). Moreover, in 2018, OCT Group sponsored the first edition of the Anren Biennale[6].

In Shekou, China Merchants Group instrumentally exploited the exhibition and its 'catalyst' role in abandoned factories as a showcase to draw attention to an area of real estate development and economic speculation. Transformation of the Value Factory and the Dacheng Flour Factory into fenced and secluded areas have left little room for the curatorial visions that animated the 2013 and 2015 events - in which the two refurbished factories were supposed to host public cultural institutions for the social aggregation of local communities. The Value Farm, designed in 2013 by Thomas Chung, has given way to a parking lot and the new (partially completed)

"Re-Value Factory" project, while the redevelopment carried out by NODE in 2015 will be arguably swallowed up by the more profitable Prince Bay real estate project.

The case of urban villages is even more emblematic. The social intentions propelled by the transformation of Nantou and Dameisha have resulted in the villages' massive manipulation, with evictions and demolitions. The cooperation between public institutions and private entrepreneurs has led to the extensive 'beautification' of the fabric of the villages, replacing existing local commercial activities with middle-class commercial facilities[7].

In both cases, real estate developer Vanke has cooperated with local government institutions to re-enact the Biennale's alleged 'critical' approach and its material legacy. The result is the setting up of an entrepreneurial context that has triggered and legitimized extensive transformations and gentrification dynamics in large portions of urban villages. Some critics have highlighted that like many other high-profile events, Biennale has disregarded the local community. Despite being fueled by good intentions, the conceptual and physical displacement of Nantou's villagers in the framework of an art event has reflected "what they face in real life, as Shenzhen marches on to become an ever-larger metropolis" (DBL 2017).

Socio-cultural sustainability is a crucial concept in the Biennale's agenda. Observing the hybridization of the event's legacy, it seems that the Shenzhen municipality's actual plans often differ from the statements propelled by its own cultural instrument. The demolitions of urban villages, favoring the expansion of high/middle-class compounds, seem to have less to share with the Biennale's aspirational transformative effects: instead, they seem more related to the growth of tourist consumption and spatial development.

The tensions detected in the clash between the ambitions stated and results achieved demonstrate how the transformations generated by the event coexist - and somehow, (yet un) wittingly, reinforce - rather than replacing the dominant, comprehensive planning scenarios undertaken by the city government. The preponderant role of real estate developers - and State-Owned Enterprises - reinforces this assumption. Corporate players figure among the event's main sponsors in official catalogues. Although the Biennale promotes itself as a non-profit organization, companies hold dedicated exhibitions within the event. Sometimes they participate in the opening ceremonies and official press conferences - as happened in 2015 with the representatives of China Merchants who, as 'Main Sponsors' of the event, officially inaugurated the exhibition by switching on the exhibition's 'power' button (Shapiro 2016).

Attention to the local scene has always been a crucial issue in every edition of the Shenzhen Biennale: however, this often "obscures the fundamental role of capital" (Waley 2007 in Kim 2017, 318). The role of real estate developers in propelling and driving the transformations during and after the event mirrors - in a temporal and spatial compression framework - the public-private partnership (PPP) growth in East Asian cities as a key feature in urban restructuring and regeneration. Within the 'PPP' framework, the city government (and the Biennale, par conséquence) acts as a "market facilitator", lowering "regulatory barriers to capital" (Hackworth 2007, 61 in Kim, 2017, 317). This approach reflects the urban restructuring modes that have characterized the interlocking of developmentalism and neoliberalism in contemporary Chinese cities, where a robust governmental apparatus has gradually cooperated with the market forces "in a more market-driven and pro-capitalist direction" (Stubbs 2009, 13 in Kim 2017, 317).

The Shenzhen Biennale embodies this attitude. On the one hand, it celebrates the solid

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7   See Chapter 5.

ambition of public government to 'reactivate' city areas and provide a platform for dialogue and exchange with local communities. On the other hand, it behaves as an entrepreneurial player in involving real estate developers and private capital in the transformation of sites (and their subsequent development). What seems to be a paradox in the functioning of the exhibition's heterotopic actually epitomizes the mechanisms that rule the city, condensing its dynamics, tensions and exclusions.

7.4 Bread and circuses: the city as an 'exhibitionary complex' between display and control

Since 2005, the Shenzhen Biennale has represented what Jordan and Lindner (2016) define as "interruption" to identify the potentially disruptive role that ephemeral artistic practices and activism aspire to play within the mechanisms ruling contemporary cities.

Nevertheless, on the one hand, corporate investors see the exhibition as an opportunity to promote business activities and economic capitalization on 'culture'; on the other hand, the city government systematically exploits the exhibition as a tool to consolidate its power. The city government keeps stringent control over the exhibition contents, highlighting the tension between the alleged artistic autonomy propelled by the exhibition and the presence of a robust institutional framework. Curators and artists on display must undergo a selection process and review by the cultural bureau to avoid potential 'controversies' in the contents on display: what the public enjoys, in the end, is a 'controlled' version of an aspirational disruptive practice.

Through the case studies, it is possible to observe how the Shenzhen Biennale conveniently exploits the notion of 'exception' to trigger "new forms of centralization and control, rather than an actual dispersion of power" (Tang 2011, 82). This attitude emerges in the display of works that, although presented as critical, are well-tolerated in the exhibition context - and the heavy sanction of others. The removal of Hu Jiamin's wall painting in Nantou during the 2017 Biennale and the celebration of the same technique - in an affirmative perspective - in Boa Mistura's wall painting Pingheng are representative of this attitude.

The Biennale's agency in the Futian Central Business District is also significant. Despite the ambitious curatorial intentions of the 2009, 2011 and 2019 editions, the event staged a celebratory vision of the space and the role of government institutions, which have taken a stance towards the same provocative issues raised by the main themes of the events. For "Eyes of the City", in particular, exhibitors underwent a procedure led by the Cultural Bureau to check (and, where necessary, to revise or remove) potential controversial contents in their work. This approach evokes what anthropologist Franco La Cecla (2018, 5 in Gallicchio 2019) frames as the "illusion of transgression", referring to the sense of "total inauthenticity" pumped up by the rhetoric which pervades the events' storytelling and reduces the city to a mere "backdrop" for the manifestations of the art system and the market (and, in the case of the Shenzhen Biennale, for the affirmation of political institutions).

Observing the evolution of museums and exhibitions during the 19th century, Tony Bennett (1996, 59) introduced the notion of "exhibitionary complex" to note how, in contemporary society, museum institutions have undergone a transition from the private domain to increasingly "more open and public arenas where […] they formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting

the messages of power": through the power of display and the systems of knowledge managed by museums and exhibitions, the whole of society is configured as a show.

While referring to the 19th century, Bennett's consideration seems to be still valid nowadays, considering the boundaries of cultural institutions that overcome the walls of galleries and museums, giving rise to a redefinition of the concept of 'exhibitionary complex' that encompasses the city as an expanded field of curation. In this sense, a peculiar disposition emerges in the exhibition's agency, closely linking the event and the city. Observing the eight editions of the Shenzhen Biennale, the actions of artists and curators seem not to be independent of the tensions that transform contemporary urban spaces, but correlated with them instead. The cultural institution takes on the function of a system where an assemblage of different powers shapes the social and physical space of the city. More often than not, the event operates forms of control and social, economic and political representation.

As mentioned, the Shenzhen Biennale is directly interdependent with the Shenzhen Urban Planning Bureau. In general, the event - which proclaims itself an urban curation laboratory - represents a 'sounding board' of the real ambitions that shape the city's socio-spatial fabric. What is happening in Nantou and Dameisha is paradigmatic: as narrated in Chapter 5, the government has used the event to legitimize vast real estate operations that will arguably transform urban villages in the future.

Despite the manifested 'social' curatorial ambitions, which depict the Biennale as "an invisible hand of local government that fosters the collaborative linkages between local government, NGOs, and local communities" (Wang, Oakes and Yang 2016, 45), the event acts as a hegemonic infrastructure manifesting its political agency. The government is deeply involved in the promotion - and consequently the control - of arts and creativity for "social stabilization", propelling a "state-led creativity" (Oakes and Wang 2016, 10) rather than a critical and independent take on urban issues.

This attitude highlights a contradiction between arts and politics as a form of "dissensus", as pointed out by Jacques Rancière (2009), and the affirmative action of the Biennale in replicating the speculative dynamics of the city: the notion of "engagement in 'art for the community'" might de facto "conceal the tensions, poverty and class relations that constitute the social [...] at the expense of community" (Tang 2011, 84-85). Andrew Ross (2007, 24; in Tang 2011, 84) points out that the mechanism adopted by a set of developing countries in fostering 'creative' economies has pushed artists "to be social in 'passive and complicit ways, and to eschew any real opposition to the state'". In this framework, artistic practices and projects seem to be part of a pre-determined orchestration: improving education and social inclusiveness parallels and fuels economic development, while concealing the alleged autonomy of cultural initiatives in catalyzing changes to benefit local communities. Moreover, this attitude reduces the affirmative role of art to an "undemocratic form of instrumentalization" (Tang 2011, 84). Censorship and forced evictions in the event's background are again emblematic: they have brought to light the ambiguous position of the Biennale as a cultural institution, whose alleged tactical approach conceals the forms of control exercised through the setting up - and surveillance - of the urban scenarios channeled by the curatorial show.

7.5 Is the city sick? On 'over-curating' the city.

Observing the agency of the Shenzhen Biennale, some questions arise concerning the real opportunities offered by the curation of urban space as an expanded exhibitionary complex. Besides the construction of 'alternative' realities within the even framework, it seems that a set of political-economic interests necessarily condition the curatorial view: how - and to what extent - can a city be 'curated' through a fixed-term event? And who - actually - 'curates' the city?

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the contemporary proliferation of biennials is a theme that leaves room for many - sometimes - apparently conflicting considerations and critiques. Unlike the existing literature on biennials and recurrent temporary events/exhibitions, this research has observed the Shenzhen Biennale through a specific lens, adopting the notions of 'assemblage' and 'device' to unpack its complexity and its agency in time, investigating the case study at a time when events of this kind are experiencing a global proliferation.

The Shenzhen Biennale is paradigmatic of the proliferation of biennials in the Asian context; its observation, however, makes it possible to open up the perspective (and reflection) on a broader scale. What is the meaning of such an exponential growth that aims to explore new relationships with the city and wish to differentiate themselves from each other while operating within a 'globally codified' taxonomy? And what does it mean for countries that have been exploring these patterns recently, such as those in the Chinese/Asian context?

It would be useful to borrow (and adapt) the notion of "isomorphic mimicry" from the economic field to frame the potentially exhausted agency of the proliferation of contemporary biennials in such diverse geopolitical contexts, through the Shenzhen case. Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017) describe "isomorphic mimicry" as a "key 'technique of successful failure'" that might perpetuate "capability traps in development". In countries with developing economies, "isomorphic mimicry" refers mainly to the extensive use of policies that insist on "short term programmatic efforts" to trigger quick and visible changes. Despite the well-rehearsed statements propelling the need to adapt economic/social policies to the specific situations of different countries, emphasizing diversity and the coexistence of different realities, there is still an "overemphasis on imported - one-size-fits-all - solutions" (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock 2012, 1) in the policymakers' agendas. The extensive adoption of "outward forms (appearances, structures) of functional states and organizations" in diverse economic and social contexts often instrumentally conceals "a persistent lack of function" (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock 2012, 1). When considered over an extended timespan, this approach might hamper the development of "state capacity" by encouraging countries to "adopt predefined solutions that focus on form over function, and thus neglect the importance of experimentation".

In this sense, when observing the agency of the Shenzhen Biennale, it becomes apparent how most of the ambitious expectations that aspire to trigger spatial and social transformations have been systematically disregarded throughout time: Huang Weiwen[8] has declared himself "disappointed" by the event's legacy, highlightingthe fact that policy makers often privilege the Biennale's cosmopolitan "fancy" side while overlooking its real socio/spatial transformative potential. On the one hand, the genuine 'push' towards distinction and innovation in the local context represents a strength for the event; on the other hand, however, adhesion to the fully

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8   Interview with Huang Weiwen, 5 November 2018.

globalized biennial system and format (which needs to be framed, as explored in Chapter 2, in relation to Shenzhen's ambition to join the ''world class city' elite) might represents a weakness.

This "hit and run" periodicity which, on the one hand, links the Shenzhen Biennale to the cosmopolitan biennials' circus (it happens every two years, with a compressed preparation time, featuring international curators and exhibitors) and, on the other, needs to address the rapid turnover of public administration representatives, makes it difficult to set up a long term strategy capable of enhancing its transformative potential: the vision of an idealised urban catalyst remains anchored to the promotional sphere propelled by the Biennale Organising Committee, municipal government representatives and corporate sponsors.

If, on the one hand, the event's cyclical reproduction might somehow be reassuring in its continuity, it is also arguable that a set of biases can be traced: the bulimic accumulation of transformations that the Biennale has realized throughout its eight editions reflects a tendency to 'over-curate' the urban landscape, which is passing from a territory to be curated to a territory which must be - forcefully - curated. The pace of the event pushes organizing committees, city representatives, curators and sponsors to frantically identify urban issues - and rapidly inject visually and aesthetically 'charming' mock-up remedies. The result is a plethora of architectural and spatial solutions where, in the framework of an all-embracing urban carnival, the fundamental questions concerning real socio-spatial needs might get lost.

As pavilions and full-scale temporary and/or permanent installations colonize and seduce urban spaces under the flag of public participation, "cities are more and more converted into sites of propaganda [...] and the general public [is] immersed involuntarily in state-sanctioned aesthetics": in this "established regime of aesthetics" it becomes challenging, for a Biennale, to represent a reliable counterpart to "mainstream social and political norms and to present an alternative order" (He and Wang 2018, 12).

It is difficult to define the Shenzhen Biennale's role as an agent of urban transformation. In its intentions, the event aims to blur the threshold between artistic experience, the notion of 'architectural exhibition' and real urban life by fostering experimental relationships in the process of making a 'creative city'. Nevertheless, it is possible to retrace a tension between corporate and institutional interests and the final socio-spatial outcomes. While the 2018-2020 edition of the IABR clearly proclaimed itself as an architecture 'laboratory' whose main aim was to set up a long-term strategic cooperation with the city[9], the Shenzhen Biennale still adopts a time-compression form where the urban spectacle is complementary to a transformative approach and makes the event inevitably ephemeral, contingent and fragmentary.

The Shenzhen Biennale could indeed have a strong impact: it happens in the same city, at regular intervals, attempts to address real urban issues and is backed by strong public support. Yet, often, this ambition to "integrate civic creativity with urban regeneration policy" (Wang, Oakes and Yang 2016, 45) is not adequately expressed in the event's outcomes, which seem to be hampered by a stringent political framework and adherence to corporate dynamics. As observed, spatial transformations often represent the result of a hierarchical process which mainly involves a network of institutional and corporate relationships that often fail to consider the local communities that will be directly targeted by the interventions. In its attempt to directly translate creative practices into a local context, the Shenzhen Biennale approach mostly "relies on the reflexive agencies of political elites rather than on collective consciousness of

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9   See Chapter 2.

the community" (Wang, Oakes and Yang 2016, 45): the frame of the 'creativization' of the city often turns out to be "too narrow to include various interest groups" (Wang, Oakes and Yang, 2016:49), generating social exclusion - as highlighted by the cases of OCT-Loft, Nantou and Dameisha.

The evolution of the Shenzhen Biennale's approach throughout time also raises some questions on the effectiveness of the instrument itself in a future perspective: while the first four editions of the event consolidated the awareness of the Biennale's 'innovative' potential in manipulating spaces and in 'reactivating' urban sites (provided that there was a real need to reactivate places which, like urban villages, already had an intrinsic balance), now the mechanism seems so well rehearsed as to seem 'obsolete', reflecting the phases summarized by Madanipour (2004) of "radicalism", "orthodoxy" and "obsolescence" when discussing the agency of urban design in contemporary cities. The Biennale's initial self-proclaimed disruptive energy - having consolidated a well-rehearsed urban transformation approach - seems now to be decreasing, getting lost in the bureaucratic, sponsorship and marketing mechanisms and losing contact with its primary social aims. This approach reveals a conflict between the 'exceptional' nature of the instrument and the ossification of its bureaucratic and organizational processes which, although necessary, could dampen its innovative potential.

Pestellini Laparelli (2018, 22) points out that it is important to "approach a 'biennial' as a long term project, lasting maybe five or ten years". In this sense, being subjected to a short time window – in which the expectations nourished by the promise of an event make it necessary to "quickly deliver something spectacular" –, the Biennale often foregoes the possibility to construct a realistic operating framework. The event's approach should be more systemic and linked to a strategy. The Biennale 'device' should try to make the city fragments cooperate - rather than considering them a juxtaposition of architectural artifacts nurturing promotional statements - in order to set up a network of socio-spatial transformations that can represent both a viable alternative to mainstream planning and a laboratory in which to observe the city, opening up dialogues about the future urban role of architecture.

Moreover, the importance of research should not be overlooked. Rather than expanding the experience of urban spectacle, which, as highlighted by Spencer (2012, 30), "serves a compensatory function" for the intrinsic lack of knowledge which pervades neoliberal systems, the event should aim to further analyze urban contexts. The Biennale Organizing Committee does not currently have a dedicated research branch - which might be an unconventional choice for an institution that aims to represent a stable actor in transforming and innovating Shenzhen's urban scenario. It would be difficult, for such an event without a research strategy, to elaborate effective solutions for the city's urban issues. Moreover, the constant and structured monitoring of the post-event legacy – or of its project, as it evolves over time – could help reinforce the relationship between the local reality and the Shenzhen Biennale as a cultural and urban institution.

Also to be taken into account are the rapidly changing conditions that have affected urban life over the past year and a half due to the health emergency. The Covid-19 pandemic and its impact in terms of uncertainties and travel restrictions has affected biennials and events on a global scale. Many of the international festivals have been re-scheduled, postponed or re-arranged in a different form with a greater emphasis on the local context or on the notion

of 'commons'[10]. As Carolyn Smith (2021) points out, "the Biennale's reliance on temporary, bespoke installations is completely out of step with the global shift towards the careful use of resources": such unexpected changes have questioned events in their constitutive essence.

The health emergency is not the only strictly contingent issue. Over the last decade, scholars like Rifkin (2014) and Mason (2015) have been questioning the biases inherent in the neo-liberal economy, theorizing that contemporary society is entering a post-capitalist phase in which resources, new economies, commons, social issues and environmental impact are acquiring emphasis. Institutions like biennials need to adapt to this new framework if they want to catch up with the rapidly changing conditions, where the notion of 'permanence' inextricably linked to urban and architectural design is being questioned through the lens of social and environmental sustainability. As biennials proliferate worldwide in their 'pop-up' mode, one of their major problems is the amount of cyclical material consumption (Smith 2021).

In the case of the Shenzhen Biennale, this issue was observed and directly experienced during the 2019 edition. "Eyes of the City" curatorial vision insistently propelled the local production of the exhibits' sustainability as a unique feature to avoid transport costs and emissions (Bonino, Ratti and Sun 2021), while the 'duty free'-like exhibition container was supposed to become a permanent architectural element in Futian High Speed Railway Station. The exhibition ended up in being a purely temporary installation. Moreover, a 1,900,000 RMB budget was spent on the production of the exhibits - which were destroyed shortly after the event, representing a waste of material and economic resources.

In this perspective, if the Shenzhen Biennale (and recurring exhibitions in general) still aims to have a transformative effect on the city, exploring and enhancing its self-proclamation as an 'urban catalyst', it should attempt to step away from its 'hit and run' temporal framework - and reconsider its steering framework. The overlapping of institutional and corporate players does not represent 'absolute evil' in itself: it is rather a pre-condition for agile operations in contemporary cities. However, a broader involvement of local communities and a more in-depth observation of urban issues might re-negotiate the event's agency not only as a highbrow "transitory theme park" (Smith 2021) - dedicated to the well-educated elite and serving institutional/corporate spatial, representational and economic ambitions - but as an active device which gives value to the local context.

Directing the device's outlook and actions beyond the cultural institution towards the spatial and social diversity of the city - while trying to initiate dialogue between project-making and event-making - might represent a a significant move to reduce the risk of fueling the "expanded seclusion" that characterizes cosmopolitan events and circuits. The effectiveness of a biennial should provide, as Jacques Rancière (2009, 63) would argue, "more than a spectacle, more than something devoted to the delight of passive spectators, because it has to work for a society where everybody should be active". Its legacy might be different to that of artifacts produced in a compressed time span, leaving space for something more intangible, like processes involving the city as a complex and ever changing object. In this sense, for architectural exhibitions,

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10 Different biennials worldwide have started focusing on the notion of 'crisis' - dictated by the health emergency - as a key point to trigger new thoughts on the relationship between architecture, society, commons and urban space; moreover, many events have revised their schedule. The 17th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice, curated by Hashim Sarkis, was postponed to May 2021 and - under the theme How will we live together? - welcomed reflections on the post-pandemic situation; the Chicago Architecture Biennial, due to be inaugurated in September 2021 and directed by David Brown, will be themed The Available City; the Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism, curated by Dominique Perrault, will be themed Resilient Cities.

new perspectives might open the way to elaborating strategies and gathering ideas on future transformations of contemporary cities.

7.6 Ethnicity and space: an instrumental entanglement of multifaceted stances

In the research's future perspective, it would be helpful to introduce some issues that this dissertation has not tackled - also considering the restructuring of the fieldwork in its different phases due to the pandemic crisis. Nevertheless, it seems urgent to face them in light of the current debates involving space and its multiple interpretations/transformations.

Chapter 2 has addressed the theme of the Biennale as a "worlding practice", as conceptualized by Ong and Roy (2012). In this perspective, the event has acted as a spatial and conceptual practice intersecting different dimensions, from the global circuit of biennials and aspiring world cities to the local context of the realized urban transformations.

Despite this internationalizing approach, the emphasis on the local dimension was a driving force that allowed to build (and make effective) the narrative framework of the event, setting the basis for its success. As a worlding practice, the Biennale has always relied on a narrative based on the reciprocal (and instrumental) exchange between local and global that has gradually influenced the device's functioning - and defining the trajectories of its agency.

In this framework, the theme of 'ethnicity' pervades the Biennale in a transversal manner, continuously interlocking local and global stances[11]. In 2005, 2007 and 2009, the prevalence of local curators arguably addressed the need to create a solid, theoretical framework where the event could find national (and, possibly, international) affirmation. Yung Ho Chang, Ma Qingyun, and Ou Ning are Chinese figures; Nevertheless, they represent renowned personalities well-integrated in a cosmopolitan scenario that could position the Biennale as a threshold within the international circuit of already consolidated cultural events. Since 2011, international curators (Terence Riley was the first in 2011) have become a stable presence in the event, and Western names stand side by side with established Chinese figures.

Arguably, foreign curators belonging to an international milieu have been instrumental in framing the Biennale's cosmopolitan context. International figures have shed light on the exhibition; on the other side, local names have acted as a connection between the event's need for international affirmation and its transformative ambitions in the local reality (also crucially addressing the need to manage design processes by coordinating local actors). During the transformation of the Value Factory in 2013, local architecture firms paralleled international professionals in the design process. While Dutch Ole Bouman figured as the star-curator who concretized the Biennale 'global' leap, Guangzhou-based design firm O-Office has coordinated the whole master plan. The transformation of the Dacheng Flour Factory in 2015 revealed a similar framework: Aaron Betsky, Alfredo Brillembourg, and Hubert Klumpner were the three international curators, but Doreen Heng Liu and her Shenzhen-based office NODE was in charge of the spatial transformation design[12].

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11 See Chapter 2.

12 See Chapter 4.

In this framework, the instrumental use of space comes again into play. As Harris (2007, 2) points out, "as the built environment constitutes a primary structure for the performance of everyday life, it must be examined as an active agent in the formation of ideas about race, identity, belonging, exclusion, and minoritization".

In the Biennale's narrative apparatus, the manipulation of space by a carefully orchestrated mix of foreign and local curators instrumentally uses the notion of 'ethnicity'. Following Harris' (2007, 2) question "What can the built environment tell us about the construction and maintenance of racial identities?", it is possible to observe how the Biennale acts as' racialized 'and' racializing 'device: as an allegedly inclusive practice, which nevertheless conceals frictions and segregation mechanisms, showing architecture's complicity in spatializing structures of race and power, "challenging questions about the ways in which governments, policymakers, patrons, designers, and ordinary citizens participate in the creation of racialized spaces— or in the decisions that have led to their creation "(Harris 20007, 2).

Such a dimension (and evolution) became evident in the transformations involving Urban Villages in 2017 when the exhibition sites merged with the space of everyday life. In Urban Villages, the Biennale operates in a different framework than the post-industrial legacy. The themes of identity, (alleged) authenticity and ethnicity, and their spatial and social implications, are sensitive issues which require an accurate set-up.

When observing the spatial action of the Biennale in Urban Villages, it appears that 'ethnicity' is a construct leading to the exclusion (or segregation) of the very local identity that the event's promotional framework seeks to enhance and showcase. The case of Nantou Old Town has shown how the urban village has functioned as a stage to display, seclude and crystallize the everyday life of the local community for the use and abuse of the show - and its economic and symbolic ambitions, represented by policymakers and investors. The event's installations and environment functioned as a spatial framework for constructing and staging the local identity.

The case of urban villages and their post-event transformations is relevant since it underlines, as Harris (2007, 1) argues, "the role of the built environment in the fortification of social constructions of racial identities", "spatial apparatuses that not only reflect, but reinforce and even create racially- based practices of exclusion, oppression, minoritization, and privilege". The space (re)created by the Biennale in Urban Villages is a space linked - more or less indirectly - to the question of ethnicity and local identity, which instrumentally exploits these notions. The event instrumentally the ethnicity of both local and international curators and exhibitors to show off the affirmation of Nantou's and Dameisha's identities and daily life.

In this framework, local curators are interested in the specific socio-spatial needs of minorities. Nevertheless, they operate within a dominant narrative which triggers a constant tension between the adhesion to globalizing forces and the representation of minorities.

The enhancement of local identity and ethnicity has often significantly deviated from the initial premises. In Nantou, the Idea Factory has become a manicured space filled with creative corners and creative labs that urban villagers are unlikely to use in real life. A promotional video by the creative studio "the SignR" shows an overview of the Factory today, populated no longer by textile workers as before the Biennale, but by young creative people belonging to the cosmopolitan middle-class[13].

13 https://www.youtube.com/ watch? v = 9-8GynK-Wd8. Accessed 30 August 2021. No longer accessible.

A question arises, then, concerning how local communities (socioeconomic minorities in the world-class imagery conveyed by Shenzhen's pervasive narration) are represented within the system set up by the Biennale. The framework set up by the exhibition becomes the stage for the performance of a political drama, where minorities are exploited and positioned within a spectacular tableau vivant: their spatial, social and economic instances are taken into consideration only for the limited time framework of the event.

The Biennale becomes a spatial narrative that barely hides potential contestations and conflicts. The mechanisms of dispossession and the forced evictions in Urban Villages are thus representatives of a device that injects crisis and intensifies inequalities. Nevertheless, recognising such a violent disposition might set the basis to tackle the dominant role of dispossession injected by the Biennale and other similar events (Zhang 2017) and (eventually) open future possibilities. As Tayob (2020) recognizes, "by paying attention to the violence in our economies [and] institutions, [...] we can begin to generate alternative approaches ". Such a perspective undoubtedly deserves further research and attention as a lens to investigate the trans-local dimension embedded in ephemeral cultural events with aspirational long-term effects for local communities.

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