

# Forming the Socialist frontier

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# FORMING THE SOCIALIST FRONTIER

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Ting Chen

Shenzhen's passion for construction has constantly been intensified in an attempt to 'modernize', 'upgrade' and 'heighten'<sup>1</sup> the coastal urban landscape shared with its neighbor Hong Kong. Its status as the first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the People's Republic of China has made it a testing ground for the dramatically changing national political ideologies from communism to State neo-liberalism,<sup>2</sup> with conflicting urban fabrics emerging over the past three decades of construction along the coast. During this process, the executors of the national leaders' political will to reform – especially the powerful state-owned enterprises (SOEs) – have evolved from pioneering border-builders heralding a new post-Cultural-Revolution era to conservative and pragmatic real estate developers following the general consumerism urban trends of today. Thus, although many projects in the newly reclaimed border areas are still carried out by 'red developers' – SOEs and companies founded by privileged members of the Communist Party of China. It can clearly be seen from the newly-made urban structures and public space systems that the idea of the city has been fundamentally re-framed. The resulting neighborhoods vividly illustrate how the coastal frontier has become privatized into fragmented, spatially and socially exclusive territories in the course of the national reform experiment.

#### 1980s: WE ENJOY WALKING ON THE SEASHORE

During the 1980s, the first-generation builders were asked to plan a 'modern city'. As the SEZ was situated along the Hong Kong-China border, they built a linear city with an average width of only 7 km but a length of 49 km. From east to west, several multi-functional settlement clusters were laid out neatly with publicly accessible green belts between them. After the general urban planning framework was set by the newly-established Planning Bureau of Shenzhen Municipality, the responsibilities for construction of individual urban clusters was assigned to several newly-founded SOEs, who were either high-level enterprises directly implanted and owned by central ministries and provincial governments, or mid-level ones established by local agencies. Although there was little financial support from the central or local governments, these enterprises were incentivized by the prospect of greater autonomy over their assigned territories – not only authority over planning and land administration, but

also permission to test new social, economic or even political systems within their boundaries. With such freedoms, the pioneers tried hard to explore various ways of city-making, several examples illustrate their endeavour. For instance:

1. When the China Merchant Company under the Ministry of Transportation built the Shekou industrial port town, its pro-democratic planners paid great attention to crafting a walkable city with a well-connected social, housing and public space system.
2. When the Overseas Chinese Town (OCT) company under the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council built an industrial new town, it invited a Singapore-based planner to make a Singaporean style 'garden city' characterized by a dense commercial center connected to quiet residential clusters at the fringe by a circular system of neatly landscaped boulevards and paths.
3. When the Pengji Company under the Shenzhen government came to build the Shangbu industrial zone. Learning from Hong Kong's precedents, it set up an open grid to accommodate a mixture of workers' dormitories, multi-storey light industry plants and a well-maintained pocket park in the middle of each subzone. In general, with the overarching aim of making a city to facilitate reform and improve public life, builders with different motivations devoted themselves to test various urban strategies promoting public accessibility and spatial equality in the design of physical forms. In this spirit of reform and social responsibility several mass public housing estates, parks, and other public facilities were placed in a pedestrian-friendly open grid along the natural seashore, enabling members of the public to walk by the sea at Shenzhen Bay and enjoy the view and the breeze.<sup>3</sup> Thus, at that moment, the 'socialist frontier' was still property of the public.

#### 1990s: WE CANNOT ENJOY THE SEA ANYMORE

From the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident<sup>4</sup> onwards, the central government started suppressing social and political reform while putting greater focus on economic development to legitimize its governance. Following the marketization of the real estate sector and the establishment of the country's first stock market, enormous amounts of floating capital

were discharged into Shenzhen's property market,<sup>5</sup> leading to exponential growth in land value. Both the coastal SOEs and the city government started to extend their territory by maritime landfill reclamation. In this period, some projects were carried out with the clear objective of upgrading the economic structure of Shenzhen. For example, a more than 1 km<sup>2</sup> 'Science and Technology Park' supported by the Ministry of Science and Technology was developed to incubate companies in high-tech industries. OCT started to develop the tourism industry by building huge theme parks along the coast (including 'Beautiful China' for foreign visitors and the 'Window of the World' for domestic tourists). The Shenzhen government not only initiated the financial industry by planning a Futian CBD to attract Hong Kong commercial property developers, but also reclaimed large pieces of land at Futian and Shatoujiao to make free-trade zones, aimed to boost connections between local industries and global players. Meanwhile, some SOEs became increasingly interested in real estate speculation, for instance, the Shahe Company under the Guangdong provincial government sold a large piece of unbuilt land to private golf course developers. Just next to it, the OCT also implemented several luxury apartment developments on its fallow land. Since no one regulated SOEs' profit-making activities on their heavily subsidized land, the liberalized 'red companies' became increasingly bold in spatial privatization. A former planner explained: «At that time, the companies could do anything to the sea. No one cares about how far you fill the water, or ask what you are going to do with the newly reclaimed land.»<sup>6</sup> During the fever of land reclamation, less than 18% of the coastal areas were laid out by professional designers,<sup>7</sup> leading to various damaging effects on the city and its inhabitants. For instance, a reclamation project in Qianhai (or Front-Bay) affecting 5 km<sup>2</sup> heavily reduced the original drainage capacity of the land by not providing enough compensatory drainage facilities, leading to increased waterlogging at the downtown areas.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, engineering efforts have been made to correct such mistakes, for example by connecting the internal lake to the sea with canals. Such is what has happened to the local tax payers' border.<sup>9</sup> Also, by building gated estates and highways on the newly-obtained land, the border builders successfully privatized most of the seashore and blocked the public from accessing it. Since the previously-built public facilities along the old coastline were now already far away

from the new waterfront, people were robbed of their every-day sea view, making Shenzhen widely known as 'a coastal city without a sea view'.

## 2000s: THE SEA IS IN DANGER

During the early 2000s the Planning Bureau of Shenzhen Municipality wrested back administrative authority for these quasi autonomous SOE territories and soon launched a city-wide campaign for larger and faster land reclamation. Between 2003 and 2006, some 30 km<sup>2</sup> of land was reclaimed, whereas 42 km<sup>2</sup> had been reclaimed during the last two decades.<sup>10</sup> While some segments of the original coastline have turned into major streets (such as Houhai Ave), many stretches remain indiscernibly in the urban fabric. This shift in political power also brought unexpected consequences for the coastline. Investing heavily in land reclamation, the city and district government required the financial support of the SOEs to actually construct the real estate development and infrastructure. This had to be done within the limited tenures of the politicians in charge. Again, with extremely low land-use fees as incentives, the former protagonists were invited back, and thus the newly made coastline was again



*Luxury shopping complex close to Luohu River by China Resources, Shenzhen.  
Photography: Ting Chen, 2014.*

occupied by SOE projects. This time however, due to a series of liberalizing reforms since the late 1990s, the 'red developers' returned with unprecedented aggression, developing the newly made coastal areas with numerous gated communities, large shopping complexes, enclosed golf courses, luxury entertainment bases and clusters of office skyscrapers. No matter how public-oriented the builders purported to be, their spatial production

had little to do with the provision of public goods or services. Meantime, the urban and natural environment suffered. At Bao'an Centre, several high-rise apartments were hastily erected before the ground was fully stabilized, leading to more than 100 mm of subsidence at several roads and residential estates. At Shenzhen Bay, owing to large-scale reclamation at both the northern and western coasts plus a gigantic carriageway at the south, the water exchange between the bay and the sea was hindered. Not only did the natural mangrove forest



*Gated community under construction, Qianhai area, Shenzhen.  
Photography: Ting Chen, 2014.*

along the coast decrease in size by half,<sup>11</sup> but also the baywater's self-purification capacity was also largely destroyed, leading to heavy pollution of the surrounding body of water.<sup>12</sup> Today, the landfill campaign is expanding towards the environmentally-sensitive Dapeng Bay at the eastern end of Shenzhen. Recently, PetroChina – one of the most powerful SOEs – sought to build a huge gas transfer station<sup>13</sup> as well as 'essential service facilities' that include an indoor ski slope.<sup>14</sup> Although the potential threat to the environment has attracted great public attention and protests, the project is going ahead as planned.

## 2010s: UNKNOWN HORIZON

Generally speaking, thanks to the growing manufacturing industry where China is serving as the 'factory of the world', the enriched Shenzhen government has become increasingly aggressive in landfilling and eager to upgrade the city's physical appearance. Meanwhile, as a result of the early 2000s SOE reform, many SOEs were strengthened via asset restructuring, consolidating and merging with other

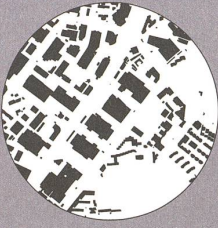
monopolies, while also happily shedding their communist-era social responsibilities in relation to welfare and the supply of public facilities. In this situation, by positioning themselves as pure market players following the call of the city to 'upgrade the urban environment'<sup>15</sup> (an imprecise but popular planning slogan, widely understood as making new urban fabrics to let the urban spaces look newer and more developed), 'red developers' no longer need to disguise their interests in land revenue and luxury property development, but are still able to use hidden privileges (that is, non-transparent privileges formed through internal networks and political structures) to obtain approvals for special plans to the detriment of the larger natural environment.

Nowadays, in response to the global financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent years of depression in its wake, the developmental municipal government and 'red developers' are passionately devoting themselves again to an even larger round of spectacular territorial expansion into the sea in order to boost economic recovery via the real estate industry. This SOE-led and government-supported landfill campaign is spreading not only to Shenzhen, but also to many other Chinese cities. For instance, at the coastal region of the country, landfilling has contributed to around 15% of the total annually added buildable land.<sup>16</sup>

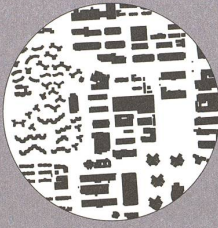
After demonstrating the relationship between Shenzhen's changing coastline and the growing State neoliberalism in a history of ceaseless land reclamation, it was suggested that in order to avoid a reiteration of wasteful property speculation and ecological pollution, the city and its 'red developers' do need to rethink the purpose of 'SEZ-building', to find out what is truly needed and what kind of urban environment will really benefit the larger public. Only if the questions are clearly answered with specific spatial policies rather than florid but imprecise slogans, and the neither-public-nor-private developers are truly guided to be in charge of their public responsibilities rather than orienting themselves towards institutional privileges as a means towards profit, will they then be ready to truly envisage an 'international standard' – meaning it is both socially and environmentally sustainable – for the future of the city.

1980s

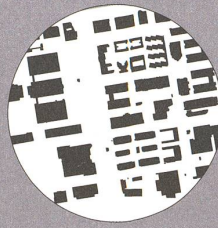
1 SHEKOU  
Experimental society based on port services and industrial production



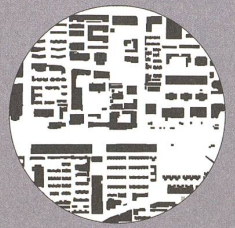
2 OVERSEA CHINESE TOWN  
Experimental garden city for working and living



3 CHEGONGMIAO  
Industrial zone built to attract machinery and light industries



4 SHANGBU  
Industrial test field for electronics goods under the Ministry of Electronics Industry Industries



1990s

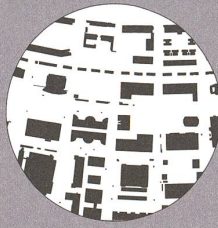
5 SOUTH OF HIGH-TECH PARK  
Gated community



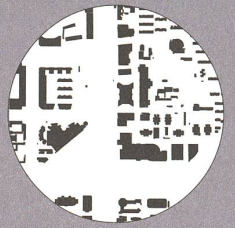
6 SHAHE  
Enclosed golf course and high-end residential estate



7 FUTIAN FREE-TRADE ZONE  
Test field to improve the globalization of the local industry and market



8 FUTIAN CBD  
Central area with commerce and finance activities



2000s

9 COASTAL CITY  
Complex of shopping malls and entertainment facilities



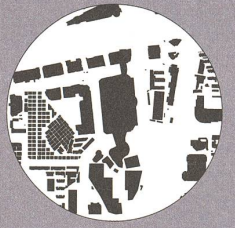
10 OCT BAY  
Facilities for entertainment, gastronomy and shopping activities; luxurious clubhouse and villas



11 ROYAL VIEW CITY  
Luxurious gated communities



12 MIX CITY  
High-end shopping complex



1979

1990

2000

2010



0 1 2 3 4 5km

- 1 These words appear frequently in urban construction advertisements.
- 2 So Alvin Y., Chu Yin-wah, 'The Transition from Neoliberalism to State Neoliberalism in China at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century', in: Chang Kyung-Sup, Ben Fine, Linda Weiss (Eds.), 'Developmental Politics in Transition: The Neoliberal Era and Beyond', Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012.
- 3 Interview with several local dwellers who transmigrated to Shenzhen in 1980s.
- 4 In mid-1989, Chinese students and the wider society organized several protests against the government corruption and for political reform. Afterwards, the central government became even more antagonistic towards political reform and tightened control while mainly focusing on economic liberalization.
- 5 Huang He, 'How the Vankes Were Made 8 - Why Shenzhen Real Estate Developers became Nation-wide Leaders', in: 'Southern Weekly, 09/11/2007', [www.infzm.com/content/1799](http://www.infzm.com/content/1799), retrieved: 03 February 2014.
- 6 Conversation with Mr. Liu who is a former chief urban planner at Nanyou Group, May 2013.
- 7 P&LRC, 'Exhibition on Urban Development of Shenzhen - Land Fill. Internal document, internal document 2010, pp. 3-4.
- 8 Ibid. In order to remedy this, the municipal government took over responsibility for infrastructure construction from the enterprises and huge engineering investments were made to re-excavate the river to create a multi-river system.
- 9 Ibid. To rectify the mistake, approximately 400 million CNY was invested to open canals to connect the internal lake with the sea.
- 10 P&LRC, 'Plan for the Landfill Movement in Shenzhen - General Report, internal document 2012, pp. 22-24.
- 11 Li Tianjun, Song Yi, 'Living on the Sea', 30 Years of Landfill in Shenzhen, in: 'Yangcheng Evening News, 06/09/2013', [www.ycwb.com/epaper/ycwb/html/2013-08/06/content\\_220976.htm?div=3](http://www.ycwb.com/epaper/ycwb/html/2013-08/06/content_220976.htm?div=3), retrieved: 21 March 2014.
- 12 A detailed investigation about the potential environmental impacts of the landfill plans in Shenzhen bay area was carried out in 2001. It has foreseen today's problems, but the projects were simply continued.
- 13 Li Bin, 'PetroChina Intends to Reclaim 39.7 Hectares in the Eastern Part of Shenzhen: an Open Hearing Will Be Held Soon', in: 'Southern Daily, 20/03/2014', [www.news.qq.com/a/20140320/008605.htm](http://www.news.qq.com/a/20140320/008605.htm), retrieved: 21 March 2014.
- 14 Anecdotal oral history according to a planner involved in the project.
- 15 This phrase is frequently mentioned in official planning documents as well as the planning proposals made by developers.
- 16 P&LRC, 'Plan for the landfill movement in Shenzhen - general report, 2012, p. 11.

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