

Landscape and Infrastructure

China's Garden City Shenzhen

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China's Garden City

Rachna Kothari details the blooming of one of China's major cities, Shenzhen, through a symbiosis of lush landscapes and public spaces that have evolved with the needs of the city



Shenzhen is symbolic of, if not synonymous with, 'instant cities'; an extraordinary phenomenon of urbanisation, the scale and speed of which is unprecedented in human history. The meteoric rise of this nondescript fishing village – a far-flung outpost on the southern edge of China – to a metropolis of gleaming skyscrapers in less than 30 years is a piece of urban legend. Often mentioned in the same breath as Dubai and other new cities of the Gulf, Shenzhen's ascent is analogous to that of China, sharing a microcosmic relation of virtue and vice that such staggering growth entails.

Located in the Pearl River Delta between Guangzhou (Canton), an important port, and Hong Kong, Asia's financial and trade centre, Shenzhen was a tranquil village with the unique geographic advantage of its neighbours. In 1979, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the city

was designated as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Shenzhen became a living laboratory of the new policies of 'reform and opening', marked by the principles of market capitalism and immune from the strict Communist regime, which attracted huge foreign and Chinese investments. The city experienced dramatic urbanisation, not just in expansion of population and economy, but in the entire built landscape that changed the characteristics of the region, its topography and shore-lines and its place on the world map.

Many early observers of the city wrote off its development as hollow, superfluous and devoid of context, with criticism directed towards its deregulated growth, glittering empty towers, the stark contrast of urban villages and taunts of a 'cultural desert' among other aspects. However, though Shenzhen may have been an audacious and a seemingly precarious urban experiment, it was

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Shenzhen skyline

PHOTO: LICENSED UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS



PHOTO: OSMAN SHARIF

Shenzhen Bay Park looking onto the bridge connecting to Hong Kong



PHOTO: TOM FOX, COURTESY SWA GROUP

Interactive water-feature plaza at OCT Bay

a carefully controlled one. The close watch of its planners and the government, while having their own limitations, empowered the maturing city to circumvent some of the pitfalls of other developing megacities such as unfettered expansion of slums and sprawls, clogged roadways, overcrowding and loss of public spaces. Today, the two chief features of Shenzhen that define its urban form are robust infrastructure and vast landscaped areas. The latter comprise swaths of lush gardens, forests and suburban parks, community gardens, shaded boulevards, Bay Parks and leisure/recreation/entertainment plazas.

In this city, the story of landscape goes beyond the conventional model of disjointed and scattered parks; rather the green spaces constitute the very spine around which the city weaves itself. Interestingly, Shenzhen, with its choking 15 million and soaring skylines, has carved out a privileged place for nature. Later on in this essay we attempt to interpret its physical as well as socio-urban life through the singular narrative of its landscape.

PLANNING FOR THE PARKS

Unlike radial cities such as Paris, Moscow or Delhi, which have a dense historical core as the city expands peripherally, Shenzhen has a linear natural landform without a significant historic nucleus; originally a coastline with a network of rivers criss-crossing its topography, it is set amidst

mountainous terrain and the sea. Since creation, its urban form has been guided by three chief masterplans of 1986, 1996 and 2007, configured on a linear + cluster model: a composition of several clusters of residential and business districts connected by linear infrastructure.

Although the chief focus of planning was the development of a road network, public transport and logistics infrastructure for the promotion of business districts and manufacturing units, the masterplans did not undermine the role of parks as significant infrastructure for socio-urban life and sustainable growth. In a city with exponentially rising land prices, compounded by the conflicting process of allocating development land vis-à-vis green areas, Shenzhen's planners took bold and decisive measures in allocating vast green areas and compensating the land value with appropriate FAR (Floor Area Ratio) and an optimised Land Use plan. With these progressive building laws that permit a high FAR, often 6-12 (compared to the dismally low 1.33 of Mumbai in most of its zones), the city's density is distributed vertically with ample land available for landscaped areas.

Early in 1994, Shenzhen was recognised as China's 'National Garden City' and in 2000 was awarded the title of 'International Garden City'; it has often been ranked high on listings of the most liveable cities in China and Asia. In addition to the primary focus of beautifying urban landscape,

The green spaces constitute the very spine around which the city weaves itself



PHOTOS: EVAN CHAKROFF

conservation of wetlands and water ecology, pollution control through varied green initiatives, expansion of pedestrian and bike networks and encouraging active public realm have been nuanced planning considerations to create correlation and functional diversity of the green zones.

PARKS AS PUBLIC SPACES

The process of making cities equal for all is a complex one involving varying disciplines, authorities, planning measures and policies in which landscaped public spaces play a peripheral but vital role. Urban green spaces and leisure/recreational precincts provide essential outdoor venues that diffuse the boundaries of rich and poor, locals and immigrants, automobile owners and those without vehicles, where the city is offered back to its people in the form of a vibrant equitable social realm.

Lianhuashan Park, located centrally on a significant site (and comparable in size to London's Hyde Park) is one such venue. Groups exercise Tai Chi at dawn, couples come for a stroll, families play badminton or fly kites and artists come to paint; a sighting of practicing opera singers or dancers would not be surprising in the park, which is meticulously cared for and affords sweeping vistas of the city. Less easily connected, but a key tourist attraction in the north, is Xianhu Botanical Garden, sprawling over miles of foothills, valleys, rivers and lakes, covering an impressive 588 hectares. Its

Brick, stone and wood paved pedestrian zones, shaded cafes and playful sloping roofs characterise the outdoor spaces of OCT Loft

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mission is to encourage an immersive experience of nature, the dissemination of botanical knowledge and the preservation of plant diversity among other scientific and environmental goals.

Of a rather modest scale in comparison to the panoramic scapes of the former, Ecological Park located in the residential and art district of Overseas Chinese Town (OCT), integrates into the daily lives of the surrounding communities. With sports facilities, cafes as well as art and design studios incorporated in its scheme, everyday scenes comprise of young women chatting over coffee, gorgeous dogs with their walkers, lone joggers and music playing in the distance. Its humble scale and lane-access ensure that the place maintains a sense of community, where passers-by will often know each other, nod across tables and form informal clubs and gatherings.

CITY AS A PLAYGROUND

Although green spaces constitute a large area of public zones, hardscapes of Shenzhen comprising plazas, sidewalks, ledges, street amenities, accessibility ramps and water drainage slopes paved in marble and granite also become active play fields during different times of the day. On weekend evenings, the Guomao Metro Station Plaza comes alive as groups of men and women workout on aerobic dance numbers beside a busy traffic intersection on one side and a mall front on the



Overall Project Plan
The project involves reinventing 15 km of coastline disturbed by repeated landfilling, over-fishing, and toxic waste flowing from the Shenzhen River. The primary goal identified by SWA was to return the City to its roots on the Bay.

Overall project plan of Shenzhen Bay Park

DRAWING: COURTESY SWA GROUP

other. It is an open party and tourists and bystanders are free to join in.

The wooden roof decks around the creative precinct of OCT Loft, an urban renovation project by Urbanus Architects, are not only a meeting spot for coffee and a saunter, young folks have fun sliding down their steep slopes, while design employees of surrounding studios enjoy bike rides around the brick and stone paved vehicle-free zones. During the late evenings, Windows of the World Metro Station Plaza and The Children's Museum Plaza are reclaimed by boys and girls on their roller skates, practicing stunts on the smooth, paved surfaces. Compared to cities such as Barcelona and New York, which have a vibrant skating scene, smooth marble surfaces on the streets of Shenzhen make it one of the top destinations for street skateboarding and several brands worth their name including Nike have filmed their promotional videos here. Such differentiation of the urban fabric to accommodate multiple users, making the city not only accessible and pedestrian-friendly but also healthy and fun is what scores Shenzhen some brownie points.

URBAN ECOLOGY

A contemporary model of an urban centre and a nature preserve is offered by OCT Bay, which includes a mixed programme of entertainment, leisure, amenities and restaurants as well as wetland ecology conservation, on a total site area of approximately 1.25 square kilometres. The masterplan and landscape, designed by

the international landscape design firm SWA Group, covers an entire city block and connects neighbourhoods through a network of pedestrian routes and varied activities. Additionally, the project delineates 685,000 square-metres of wetland and nature preserve that provides habitat for dozens of aquatic species and is considered China's only inner-city coast mangrove wetland.

Similar in its ecological ambition but far more extensive in size, scope and use is the recently opened Shenzhen Bay Park. As the city was

Winding tracks of Shenzhen Bay Park overlooking the scenic bay water



PHOTO: OSMAN SHARIF



Multilevel lawns, walking routes and bicycle tracks, fishing piers and vantage spots allow a myriad of activities all through the day

Such differentiation of the urban fabric to accommodate multiple users makes the city not only accessible and pedestrian-friendly but also healthy and fun

morphing into a metropolis, the insatiable demand for developable land was fulfilled by mining mountains in order to fill its ocean-side bay for land reclamation. This led to encroachment of the bay water, shrinking of its mangrove forests and endangering of aquatic flora and fauna. Finally, recognising the damage to the local ecologies and socio-cultural relationship of citizens with water, the government proposed an overhaul of the coastline. Following an international competition, the winning team from SWA Group led an exemplary scheme that addresses both waterfront development as a public space and restores the landscape ecologies through a complex richness of programme. The result is a comprehensive bay park stretching along 15 km of the shoreline; it encompasses multilevel lawns and softscapes, meandering walking routes and bicycle tracks, fishing piers, vantage spots, amphitheatres and theme parks looking out to the scenic bay water and Shenzhen skyline, while also restoring the mangrove edges and marsh habitat along the coastline. The whole-hearted assimilation of the park in the daily activities of the local communities shows its success and sets forth a model of creating

a substantial public amenity while also mitigating environmental damage.

ROADSIDE FLORA

While most of the above urban landscapes are nodal, roadways and green-corridors are sinuous forms where Shenzhen's landscape is visible in fleeting moments from buses and cars. Broad central dividers with lush green shrubs, edges, embankments and divider islands are planted with flowering shrubs and land under the widest bridges and pedestrian crossings are covered with green foliage. Committed to the ideal of landscape as infrastructure, current planning for the city includes articulation and inter-connection of green-corridors to encourage safe and convivial pedestrian street-life.

In another momentous case, the city government has proposed, in partnership with SWA Group, to redevelop streetscape and storm water infrastructure at a cost of US\$325 million. The project aims to revamp 33 streets in a new urban core that were designed strictly for automobiles just a few decades ago. Also working on the project is Seattle-based Herrera Environmental Consultants, a water engineering firm with vast experience in sophisticated storm water drainage systems.

Beyond the technical and urban aspirations of the project is the fundamental sensibility of making streets more habitable and comfortable on a pedestrian scale: important for the physical, economic and mental health of the citizens of modern cities. Such mature projects as well as Shenzhen Bay Park embody the agility of the government in seeking out expertise and intervention from international and local experts to take large-scale active and reactive measures attuned to the evolving needs of the city.

GREEN GENE

In a city that grew pretty much without a physical context, over a period of time, the notion of landscape has become so pervasive that it has often become the very context for urban and architectural designs. Renowned architectural projects such Vanke Centre (also called the Horizontal Skyscraper) by Steven Holl take landscaped terrain as the conceptual and literal tabula-rasa. The mountainous topographic character of Ascott Maillen serviced apartments and hotel by Urbanus Architects, orientations, views, heights and strategies of housing colonies and civic structure forms are often guided by landscape axes and patterns of the city. Windows, glazing and terraces of buildings most likely look onto a chiaroscuro of lush green. The omnipresent chlorophyll has become the very gene of the life of the artificial city. ●