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Beyond the palimpsest

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Beyond the palimpsest: Traditions and modernity in urban villages of Shenzhen, China

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ABSTRACT

This study uses the palimpsest analogy to explore the interactions between traditions and modernity in Chinese urban contexts. Chinese megacities including Shenzhen have undergone continually radical and dramatic transformations. The palimpsest notion, a layered, overwritten surface with traces of earlier content, enables us to unravel historical and cultural layers from the past in the present readings. Shenzhen is then conceptualised as a palimpsest, illustrating its uneven stratification process in which urban villages contain deep descriptive layers, encompassing both traditional myths and futuristic modern ideas. The case study of Pingshan village through a close examination of specific locations via ethnographic mapping demonstrates that each particular space is an accumulation of various ways of palimpsest. This gives a glimpse of the traditions that being handed down and how they intersect with modern influences to produce hybrid spaces. These traditions are the forms of practice embedded in the everyday lives of residents, including long-term villagers and arrived migrants. The study concludes by proposing a framework for creating the potential of hybridisation to inform a more inclusive approach to urban planning and design.

1. Introduction

As a multi-layered, complex system, a city may be seen as a palimpsest: a layered, overwritten surface with traces of earlier content (Corboz, 1983; Liu et al., 2020). The palimpsest analogy has been employed in urban studies to investigate urban forms and the multiple historical layers of meaning that cities have accumulated, from their origins to the present (Crang, 1996; Khirfan, 2010; Turgut, 2021). This study extends the application of the palimpsest analogy to a Chinese urban context to inform a more inclusive approach to understanding cities before acting on or planning. This approach entails recognising cities' deep-rooted rural histories, analysing the interactions between traditions (past) and modernity (present), and exploring the potential to fuse them to address various problems in urban planning, such as social-spatial segregation.

The unprecedented and rapid development and urbanisation China has experienced since the economic reforms of the 1980s are closely linked to the state's ideology of accelerated modernisation and a quantitative urban planning system. As an integral part of global modernity, Chinese urban society demonstrates its own trajectories, discourses, social institutions, and references (Lu, 2012). This modernity

encompasses revolutionary changes and reforms in technology, knowledge, economics, and society within a socialist context (Buzan & Lawson, 2020), driven by a vision of creating a new world (Lu, 2006). These changes include a reform of the old urban planning system (inherited from the former Soviet Union in 1949) in the 1990s with an expansion to include regional planning (Hu, 2016; Wu, 2015). The new urban planning system has been used as a tool for growth, incorporating ecological environment protection and transportation development. Applying the quantitative land-use or hyper-functional approach, different government departments delineated and managed different functional zones (e.g., ecological, residential, industrial, public lands), in their independent systems (Curien, 2014; Liu & Zhou, 2021). The absence of a unified spatial planning system has caused many problems, including overlapping social conflicts, excessive land development, and imbalanced regional development (Liu & Zhou, 2021). Such planning methods also contributed to social divisions with the emergence of new urban poverty (Madrazo & van Kempen, 2012; Zhang, 2007; Zhang et al., 2023).

These urban problems are observable in Shenzhen, a city as a laboratory to test modernisation strategies and interventions that were then disseminated across China. Constant destruction and construction, akin to erasure and new writing in the palimpsest analogy, led by the state as

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well as residents, transformed the territory, both physically and culturally. Despite its historical heritage, as evidenced by its changing names over time, Shenzhen is often perceived to be a new city or a city on a *tabula rasa* due to the well-known literature about its progressive development over the past decade (Lei et al., 2021; Sun & Xue, 2020; Wang & Liu, 2015). Rem Koolhaas, for example, described it as a 'generic city', meaning a city without history (Koolhaas, 1995, pp. 1239–1264; Sala, 2016).

Few studies have recognised Shenzhen's past and lingering historical traces (O'Donnell, 2017), nor investigated its traditions and how they coexist with Chinese modernity. Nevertheless, if we look at Shenzhen as a whole, its history is still evident via the persistence of its hundred-year-old villages – now called 'urban villages' – and their sacred and productive landscapes. These villages are bound by certain daily practices (e.g., agricultural cultivation, worship) that are closely tied to their geographical conditions (e.g., being close to mountains, springs, and ponds). Such places offer a glimpse of traditions and also reveal the resistance of traditions to the imposition of modernity, rural urbanisation, and formal urban planning. Additionally, these villages have developed their own paths in construction, produced informal economies, and formed 'flexible spaces that operate within existing urban regimes' (Kochan, 2015, p. 928), with the government's tolerance (Zhang, 2023). Moreover, as these spaces are ambiguously defined as 'nonplaces' by Kochan (2015), neither urban nor rural, they show great potential for urban rewriting. Now, as China enters a slowdown period after a forty-year boom during which economic viability and spatial homogenisation dominated urban development, the redevelopment and eradication policies that focused on urban villages are facing obstacles. Instead, there is a shift to in situ development and redevelopment, which directly or indirectly highlights the value of heritage and promotes the construction of ecological civilization (Wu et al., 2021). This has led to an increasing demand for inclusive development, making it necessary to thoroughly document both traditions and modernity. Urban planning practices must find a way to balance and fuse them before these villages and their remaining traditions vanish.

The palimpsest analogy allows a nuanced reading and understanding of a place which is an essential step before planning (Corboz, 1983). This paper extends this notion and hypothesises that reading Shenzhen as a palimpsest can help inform a more inclusive approach to urban planning and design. It will address the three questions: 1) How can Shenzhen be conceptualised as comprising different layers? 2) What are the interactions between traditions and modernity in Shenzhen, as observed through the analysis of an urban village? 3) After reading Shenzhen's landscapes, is it possible to envision hybrid potentials that go beyond the palimpsest?

The study selects an urban village – a space that has accumulated deep layers of history and meanings during its 'autonomous' urbanisation process (Bach, 2010) – as a case study. Using a combined methodology of observations, interviews, and ethnographic mapping, it closely examines spatial configurations and the lifestyles of residents, including original villagers and arrived migrants, in three areas of focus: the village core, the extended village, and the village's industrial park. Reflecting on the empirical case, the paper presents an alternative approach to the redevelopment of the urban village, proposing a future hybridisation scenario that blends traditions with the new inscriptions made by modern science and technology.

2. Theoretical and methodological perspective

2.1. Literature review: urban palimpsest and beyond

The palimpsest analogy has been widely used for reading cities and places in a more comprehensive manner. Corboz (1983) introduced the concept of 'the land as palimpsest', acknowledging the scarcity of land and the necessity of reusing and rewriting it. This reuse requires soil scraping, involving destruction and construction to allow for the

'inscriptions of new ideas and ideals of new, emerging worlds' (Johannessen, 2013, p. xvi), as was observed globally in the era of rapid industrial growth. Embracing the idea of 'longue durée', land is considered to result from 'lengthy and slow stratification' processes with new inscriptions constantly added by inhabitants, planners, and natural factors (Cavaliere & Cogato Lanza, 2020; Corboz, 1983, p. 32). This echoes geographer Sauer's view of landscapes and places as being 'in [a] continuous process of development or of dissolution and replacement' (Sauer, 1963, p. 333).

Examination of the process of layering and contestation in cities has found that the traceable past is not static; rather, it is actively engaging with the present, even as the new meaning becomes dominant or 'superinscribed' upon it (Colwell, 2022; Duara, 1988; Turgut, 2021). The inscriptions from various historical eras coexist, alongside others being erased and ones yet to be written, producing multiple interwoven meanings in a place. The past may symbolise an enduring spirit amidst the constant changes and restructuring of urban forms (Khurfan, 2010).

The simultaneous coexistence of all inscriptions and the non-linear accumulation that connects the past to the present contribute to recognising various traditions within modern practices in Chinese urban contexts. As some scholars have observed, Chinese contemporary life was engulfed in thick layers of accumulated history (Huang & van Weesep, 2019; Ji, 2015; Lu, 2012) while being guided by future-oriented state ideologies in an era of high modernity (Scott, 1998). Some scholars of everyday urbanism have shown that people exhibit diverse attitudes towards introduced modern technologies, planning projects, or institutions, including acceptance, resistance, or adaptation (Goldstein, 2006; Heynen, 2000); their attitudes are often associated with traditional beliefs and habits. A new form can also emerge from the hybridisation of the old and new, as exemplified by the urban form *danwei*, which blends influences from both Soviet modernity and traditional Chinese spaces (Lu, 2006). The everyday then serve as a platform for critical investigations of modernity and how it has been experienced in particular contexts.

Moving beyond the palimpsest as simply a concept to describe and read the land over time, this paper aspires to interpret the interactions of traditions and modernity, the values of the past and present, to inform a hybridization scenario. Although there are numerous efforts to this end in specific architectural projects led by architects or research collaboratives utilising local materials and vernacular knowledge in experimental designs (Bolchover & Lin, 2013; Wang, 2013), few attempts have been made in urban planning. Even in those architectural experiments, the architect's visions of rural and possible modern life often overlooked the local lives that are actually shaping spaces (Qian & Lu, 2022). Planners and designers are also trying to revive or remake traditions to develop urban cultural tourism. The common practice is creating ancient villages by introducing festival shows and markets, renovating houses, and opening museums (Lang et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2022). However, without understanding the past (and contested) layers, traditional elements are reduced to general forms that are added to the existing landscape and serve as tools for tourism.

2.2. Shenzhen as a palimpsest

Shenzhen, often viewed as a model city for testing Deng Xiaoping's market socialism in China, has been at the forefront of experimenting with new foreign ideas, interventions, and transformation strategies. Since 1979, when Bao'an County was elevated to a city and renamed Shenzhen, the land has undergone continual, radical and dramatic transformations. A series of new urban layers have been superimposed on previous ones, bringing with them the spirit of modern science and technology. Its histories, its rural origin and roots, are being unevenly obscured and obliterated.

By revisiting its development trajectories, Shenzhen can be conceptualised as a palimpsest composed of overlapping, contested layers that represent both physical and cultural aspects. The territory is

characterised by its mountainous topography, rivers and streams, and an extensive coastline. Three layers (layers 1–3), namely the village, sacred landscape, and productive landscape, were established in the past within the framework of myths backed by traditional and religious beliefs and practices (Li, 2018). Greatly influenced by the landscape and cultural factors (Rapoport, 1969), early clan-based communities established settlements primarily near the mountains or along the coast; some villages were dispersed between the two, along rivers and streams. While adhering to the existing landscapes, they also actively altered them to create new ones including sacred and productive landscapes. Sacred landscapes are omnipresent: there are religious temples in the mountains and small communal temples and ancestral halls in villages. Productive landscapes are strongly associated with settlements: while coastal settlers (mainly Cantonese and Danga) practised fishing, oyster farming, and salt production, the mountain settlers (Cantonese and Hakka) used riverplains and slopes for agriculture, including the cultivation of rice, sugarcane, and lychees.

Layers 4–6, namely industries and infrastructure, campuses, and redevelopment projects, were driven by a utopian imagination backed by modern technology and science. This separates the new era, especially of reforms of the 1980s' onward, from the past. Shenzhen's rapid industrialisation and migration-related urbanisation propelled the expansion of industrial parks, infrastructure, new residential apartments, and other high-rise buildings. At this early stage, land conversion, land expropriation, and privatisation were common practices. Much of Bao'an's topography and agricultural fields, especially along its coastline, were flattened and filled in to implement the urban Special Economic Zone (SEZ) (Ma & Blackwell, 2017). Some villages also underwent demolition-led redevelopment and were partially or totally replaced by different zones. The remaining agricultural villages were reclassified as urban villages (*chengzhongcun*), as an efficient 'spatial fix' for under-urbanisation (Song et al., 2008). To accelerate educational modernisation, universities from across China began to establish campuses in Shenzhen in the early 2000s. With the construction of the University Town of Shenzhen, the former recreational area of Xili Lake (a reservoir built in 1960) and the surrounding mountainous landscape became a haven for scholars and students. Football fields, stadiums, libraries, and other residential buildings replaced the original villages, along with their orchards and sacred sites such as cemeteries. The 2010s saw an ideological shift towards creating an ecological, innovative, and liveable city. There has been a boom of creative centres, innovation parks, and makerspaces that are remaking former industrial facilities (Fu et al., 2022), serving as incubators to foster diverse types of businesses and attract talent workers. A new redevelopment initiative aimed at comprehensively improving urban villages was launched in 2018, with the goal of rehabilitating housing to improve residents' quality of life and preserve cultural identity.

Clearly, the modernisation process occurs in three simultaneous and interconnected ways: 1) The first involves total replacement as the new is superimposed on the old in such a way as to remove most evidence of the past (Bailey, 2007); 2) The second involves partial replacement, in which new layers are written on top of each other, thus creating a space where the overlap, contrast, or concealment of multiple layers can be perceived; 3) The third involves 'holes' left by brutal erasure (Corboz, 1983, p. 33), where the past is absent. Among the most conspicuous examples of this last process in Shenzhen are hundreds of reservoirs that were created by removing forests, excavating, demolishing villages, and relocating residents, as well as very limited historical archives or documents from before the 1980s that have survived.

These surviving villages and their lands that have experienced the transformation process bear the imprints of all layers, 1–6. They emerge as ideal sites to read as palimpsests and discuss how the intersection of traditional and modern layers creates a potential hybridity. On the one hand, they are connected to the rapid and large-scale changes that occurred locally and globally, and on the other hand, they retain a deeply layered description of the site. These villages collectively connect

the city's past, present, and possible future, reflecting both traditional myths and futurist modern ideas. The villages' urbanisation process and enduring ancestral halls – located between new shopping malls and high-rise apartments – serve as a reminder of the many historical layers that have accumulated over time. The villages' names, always rooted in the local topography, like mountains and rivers, or carrying blessings from the first settlers, convey a depth of cultural thickness that is often overlooked. The label 'urban village', or '*chengzhongcun*', despite its negative connotations with outdated stereotypes and social discrimination and its implication of being 'backwards' or 'behind' on progress and modernisation, encapsulates a mixed or ambiguous identity that is neither urban nor rural.

3. Methods and materials collection

The study takes Pingshan village as a case study, which is attached to mountains and Sha River, one of the important rivers that feed the city. The research investigates the living spaces and daily practices of its residents, including original villagers and arrived migrants, within the context of their real lives (Yin, 2017, p. 18). The results of this research can be a reference for the future research in other villages that have the same natural and social conditions. Since 2001, when 'University Town' became a new landmark in the area, broad boulevards, fancy shopping malls and hotels, high-rise middle-class apartments, and university campuses and institutions have intersected with stigmatised neighbourhoods predominantly populated by lower- and middle-income populations with lower educational attainment. The spatial layers of the old village, new village, and surrounding new urban spaces epitomise how Shenzhen's rural origins have been encompassed by a larger city (O'Donnell, 2017).

According to the inscription (*beiji*) in the village's main ancestral hall, the village was first established in 1565 by the Fang family, which migrated from Henan province, passed through Fujian province, and settled in Guangdong province. The process of selecting sites and establishing settlements reflected the wisdom of ancestors who gave importance to the mountains, a legacy that has been carried on through the village's name which means mountains serve as a fence for protecting the village. Despite challenges in the 1950s and 1960s, when many villagers driven by the allure of its capitalist regime sought to flee to neighbouring Hong Kong, the village grew to have 200 households before the economic reforms of the 1980s, with a residential area of 1.2 ha. At present, this village, including its extended area, has a population of about 17,000 residents, more than 90 % of whom are migrants from Guangdong and other Chinese provinces.

Following the principle of temporal and spatial layering that is central to the palimpsest methodology, the case study proceeds by examining the very dense village core – the old village (*jiucun*), which was established more than 500 years ago; the extended village – the new village (*xincun*) formed in the 1980s; and the industrial area of the village named Maker Town, which was first established in the 1990s. These spatial layers, each with its own density, have developed over time in processes of expansion and densification. Five locations were selected in order to represent diverse spaces and the daily practices of different groups of people, including local villagers, an older generation of migrants and a younger generation of migrants (Fig. 1).

Qualitative data was collected between 1 March and 30 May 2023 through intensive fieldwork. During the research period, the first author stayed in a renovated industrial park in the village, which allowed the researcher to quickly and steadily immerse in the community and local environment. The researcher also volunteered in the community and was therefore welcomed by the community work office (*shequ gongzuo bangongshi*), where the researcher explained this study and its purpose and received permission to take pictures and conduct interviews in the village.

Initial observations entailed daily walks within and around Pingshan village to gain a comprehensive understanding of its spatial

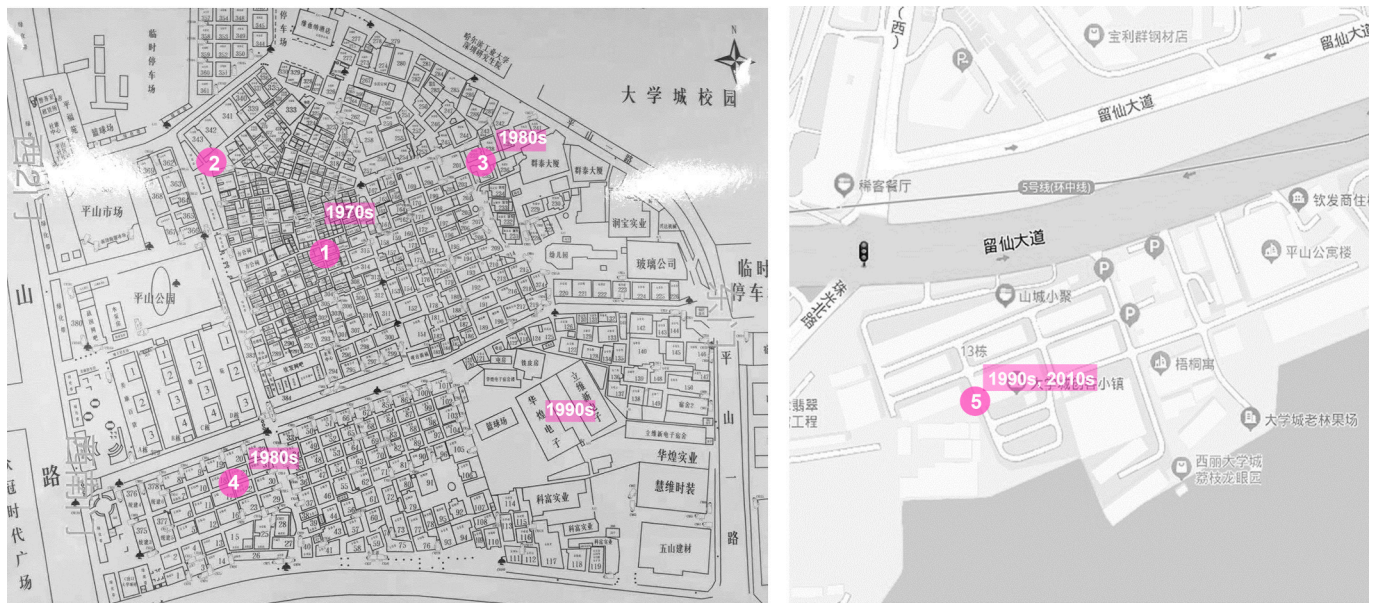


Fig. 1. Selected five points that represent different spatial structures, including 1) the village core, 2) edge of the core, 3) loose-pattern extended area, 4) rigid-pattern extended area, 5) village owned makerspace (former industrial park).

Source: Shenzhen Government, statutory plan; and Baidu map manipulated by authors with notation of years.

configuration, population density, residents' social dynamics, and the rhythm of social engagements and daily activities. Gradually, the focuses shifted to specific public and semi-public spaces to explore the built environment and how individuals interact with it. Field notes were recorded, both in text and through sketches.

A series of interviews were conducted with different groups. In the first phase numerous visits were made to the community work office to delve into the village's history including its lineage, demographics, and the ongoing 'Talent Town' redevelopment project. The majority of the research time was then spent speaking with residents to probe a deeper understanding of the everyday lived experiences of local villagers and migrants. Narrative interviews (Ayres, 2008; Squire, 2013) were conducted with a total of 48 individuals, of which 16 engaged in extensive dialogues lasting several hours each. They are intercepted during observations at random, though intention was given to cover a diverse population, consisting of elderly and middle-aged villagers and migrants of various occupations and ages. Also, a planning official and construction workers were met and the site tours they provided allowed me to learn about the ongoing redevelopment plan and its motivations, and to understand residents' diverse expectations.

The preliminary sketches made on site were subsequently refined into ethnographic drawings during and after the fieldwork. Ethnographic drawings, as described by Kaijima et al. (2018) were used to visually map the observed spatial characteristics and interactions among individuals and their surroundings, as well as aid in the analysis of everyday practices at specific locations. These drawings were a fundamental tool for translating abstract information into tangible visual forms encompassing spatial elements such as buildings, paths, and yards. Creating these drawings on site helped facilitate encounters with residents, from which interviews followed naturally. To address privacy and ethical considerations, all personal characteristics are anonymised in the drawings, and pseudonyms are used in place of actual names.

4. Past and present of Pingshan: neither urban nor rural

4.1. The village core: paths as 'collectors'

Within the village core, the urban tissues are highly compact and dense, typically comprising built structures ranging from one to three

stories and non-built spaces, including a mess of paths. For first-time observers entering the village core, it often feels like a maze, an impression they repeatedly shared. There are hundreds of possible routes to take, each with a multitude of activities occurring along the way. However, for a teenager who has grown up here as a second-generation, rural-urban migrant, 'every route leads to another; any route is good to take'. This compact urban morphology and the zig-zagging paths infuse meaning into living and moving in and through the village, contributing to the creation and enhancement of social interactions. The teenager prefers not to take the most direct route home after her apprenticeship at a copy shop within the village's extended area, but rather to detour to visit her old school friends.

The myriad routes were not originally used for only passing; rather, they represent the interstitial spaces between built structures. In the past, three ancient southwest-northeast paths traversed this area, following the topography and connecting the village's front and back. However, they were disrupted by the urbanisation process marked by house demolitions and reconstructions that occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s. The informal and gradual expansion of housing encroached on common and pedestrian spaces, including ditches that ran along the paths for water drainage. This formed the current, maze-like alleys, some of which are so narrow that only one person can pass, while others are wide and semi-enclosed (Fig. 2).

Each route that people take serves not only to connect destinations but is also a collection of distinct points or featured spaces. Consider, for example, an ancient path that starts from the ancestral hall of Fang family XI and extends to the village's rear (Fig. 2). As individuals journey along this path, they can encounter different writings or traces from various historical periods. For instance, there is an old house from the late Qing Dynasty that has a sloped wooden roof, a high wall made of blue and black bricks (*qingzhuan*), and a humble gate (*qiangmen*)¹ framed by 38 cm-thick stone. There is an image of Mao that was painted on the house in the 1950s to replace the previous trace of religious beliefs; although faded and partially obstructed by exposed electrical wires, it nevertheless reminds villagers and careful observers of the

¹ The *qiangmen* gate style in the imperial time was popular for the families who have a certain wealth but nobody serve as officials.

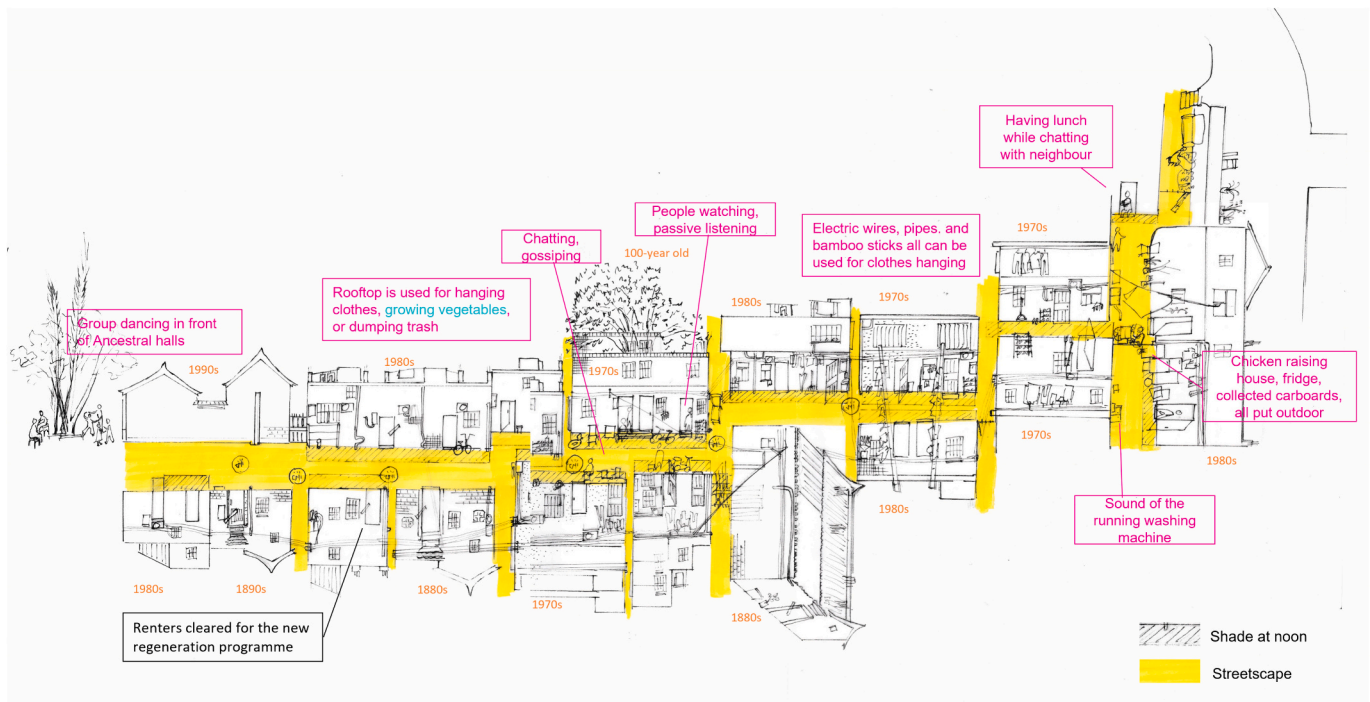


Fig. 2. An ancient path works as a collector of various spaces in between the built structures.
Source: by the lead author 2023.

history. Adjacent to this house there may be one that was rebuilt in the 1980s using the exterior tiles, such as stylish glass mosaic, that were prevalent and fashionable at that time. All new houses have flat roofs, which shifted their traditional courtyard from the ground to the rooftop. If in the past these paths primarily served for transit and draining water, then today they function as 'collectors' (De Meulder & Shannon, 2016). People traverse through these points as in-between spaces, and each point serves as a stage for social interactions and everyday activities: chatting, washing and drying clothes, eating, card playing, garbage sorting, and so on.

The village core is mainly home to the first generation of rural-urban migrants, and those in-between spaces serve as points of encounter for people from different backgrounds. Uncle Zhang, in his early 50s, lives with his wife and daughter in a one-story, brick-built old house with deteriorating lime plaster. He recalls that in the early 1980s 'I used to go to the mountains to cut wood for villagers or harvest vegetables like large white radishes'. He now works as a waste collector and cleaner in the village as a result of the disappearance of extensive agricultural areas and the introduction of sanitation services. He works every morning from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. and every evening from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m., which

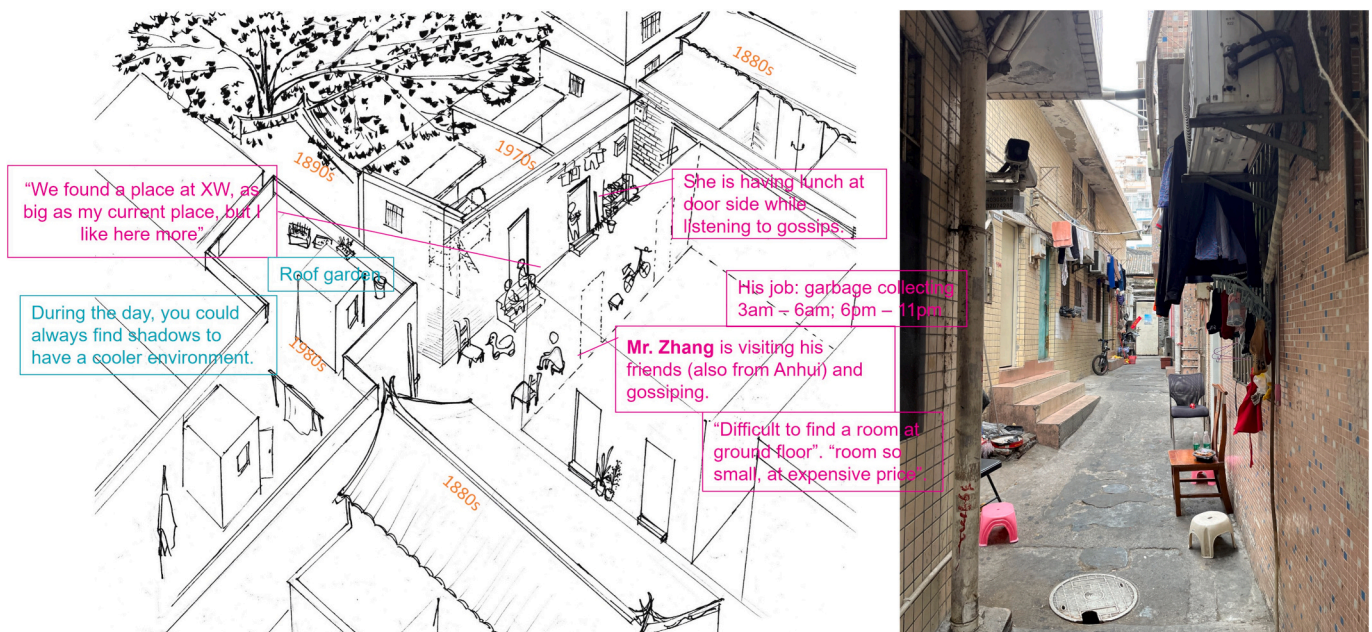


Fig. 3. Point 1: Uncle Zhang's favourite corner inside the village core.
Source: by the lead author 2023.

gives him considerable free time during the day. He often strolls around the village, visits neighbours' homes, or rests while watching people play cards at the small park in front of the collective ancestral temples. One of his favourite spots is a corner just 10 m from his house, where his fellow villager from the same province (*laoxiang*) Du's family lives (Fig. 3). The corner is furnished like other in-between spaces, designed to invite passers-by to slow down or stop by. The furniture typically includes plastic stools, wooden chairs and foldable tables, which are possibly repurposed from restaurants or elsewhere. One morning around 10 a.m., Uncle Zhang grabbed a children's stool and sat in the shade complaining with Du. Other neighbours occasionally joined the chat. Throughout the day, this limited but diverse setting fostered various activities of urban life, including active socialising such as meetings between neighbours and friends, passive listening while individuals went about their own tasks, and parenting. If cities are often viewed as "encounters, as spatial formations resulting from dense networks of interaction and as places of meeting with 'the stranger'" and with his or her 'difference' (Simonsen, 2008, p. 145), the village core here serves a similar purpose.

4.2. The edge of the inside core: the persistence of *ditang*

In the late 1990s, the front edge of the village core underwent significant changes. It was transformed into a broad, paved, two-way vehicular road in the late 1990s. This occurred over phases during which natural soil was changed to concrete and rivers channelled, as part of the state's preference for a more sanitary urban environment. The paved surface, originally called *ditang*, was levelled and compacted earth ground located in front of ancestral halls and houses. As a part of Cantonese culture, *ditang* was used for many purposes, including for drying grains in the sun during harvest season and for leisure activities in the evening, especially when the moonlight illuminated the ground. It also served as a space for ritual events such as weddings and weekly private markets. There were no fixed functions assigned to *ditang*.

Today, the paved surface is patterned and cleaned every day by rural migrants, most of whom are in their 50s and employed by the village through a sanitation company. However, for Granny Zhan, the pavement in front of her single-storey house continues to serve the same purpose as the *ditang* (Fig. 4). In the 1980s, she renovated the 40-square-

metre house with an updated façade in the fashion of that era. She also added two six-floor housing blocks connected to the old one, which was a common practice, and therefore expanded the house to the edge of the village core. By partially enclosing the front space with recycled portable fences, she reclaimed the front area for her continued daily use. As part of her routine, every morning Granny Zhan offers incense to divine beings. After that, she sits outside facing away from the house, soaking up the sun while waiting for her neighbours (a single, middle-aged woman and other elderly villagers) to join her for brief chats. During the Tomb Festival (*Qingming*), which is dedicated for honouring the dead, she set off fireworks and burns incense in front of her house.

During the nationwide 'civilised and sanitary city' movement – as an evaluation mechanism that was launched in 2003 and runs every three years (Shi et al., 2022), outdoor spaces were monitored and inspected to maintain social control and order. In April 2023, conflicts emerged regarding the use of pavement. Activities such as dining at tables, drinking tea, and disordered parking were seen by the state as interrupting the standard use of paved roads and thus the city's image. Instead of openly expressing their frustration and anger towards the state's regulations, the residents here displayed patience. They would sneak out during the late evening and prepare to continue using the space in the same way after restrictions were eased.

From Granny Zhan's vantage point facing the southwest, the river-plain and large-scale agriculture that had been written on the land prior to the 1980s are barely visible. In their place stand imposing urban structures and forms: a mixed-use building with a shopping mall on the plinth and a five-star, 32-storey hotel on top; a middle- and upper-class housing community; a wide vehicular road; a square park; and a few self-built houses. The long, rectangular *fengshui* pond has shrunk in size but remains along the axis of ancestral halls and has become part of a village square park, now equipped with a concrete surface, newly planted plants, and fitness facilities, that was established in 1998. While Granny Zhan appreciates the restored riverbank and the tea restaurant at the shopping mall, she often misses the earlier, quieter environment that was free of traffic noise and housing construction noises.

4.3. Extended area: reusing the yard

The new village is an extended residential area of the core. To the

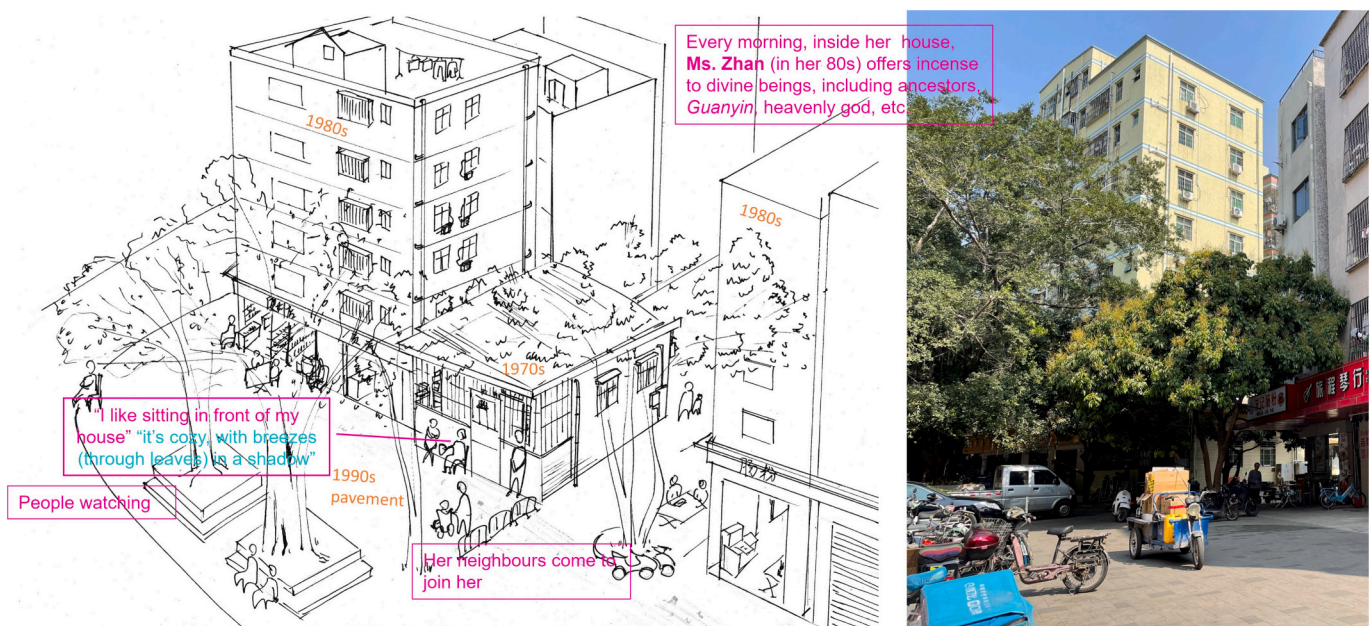


Fig. 4. Point 2: Granny Zhan's house and its front space.
Source: by the lead author 2023.

northeast of the old village is a steep area where self-built houses are relatively sparsely distributed. The area was once covered with forests and orchards that served as a natural defensive barrier and a source of wood resources. The primary ancestor temple, consisting of three halls, is also located there, facing west. The housing units built in the new village in the 1980s and 1990s were initially for families. The distances between them vary, influenced both by the topography and traditional family-based settlement patterns. Villagers maintained the tradition of having yards: each building has its own yard, terrace, or balcony of a different size and shape. Some yards are fully enclosed, while others are partially enclosed and intersected by pathways.

Sister Hua resides on the ground floor of a four-storey house constructed on a slope (Fig. 5) in a spacious room with an open yard. Sister Hua, who was born in Hunan Province in the mid-1980s, moved to Pingshan village about eight years ago for her children's education. She is both a housewife and an entrepreneur. Every day, she drives her two children to and from school, preparing meals and caring for them. Unlike other young couples who often receive grandparental assistance (Croll, 2006), she is raising her children herself as she is determined to apply modern ideas instead of her rural parents' outdated beliefs. As an entrepreneur, she operates her own self-service flower shop.

The building has only four households, each of which occupies one floor. While other households use the access from the basement, Sister Hua has privatised and claimed ownership of the semi-open yard and external stairway. This area has now become a playground for children, an experimental plot for growing vegetables and plants, and the setting for her flower business. Various plants and colourful bouquets that are arranged along the stairway that connects the alley to the outside village attract passers-by, especially university students from the adjacent campus. During the pandemic, especially during the lockdown period in 2022, planting helped her improve her mood after a business failure. 'Though I know it's not my own house, it feels like home. Living here is comfortable, similar to my hometown in the countryside,' she remarked.

4.4. Extended area: 'on and off'

To the southeast side of the old village, there are apartment blocks arranged in a rigid layout that were developed by villagers as a collective community and provide cheap rental housing for rural migrants and other renters such as recent college graduates (Fig. 6). These buildings, known as handshake buildings, were built with seven to eight floors each and were separated by a standard distance of about 2.5 m. However, the informal extension of balconies and windows to maximise indoor space has significantly reduced the distance between buildings, creating a crowded atmosphere. Each floor consists of four households, accommodating a diverse mix of renters. There are two types of units available. The first is a 20-square-metre studio with a kitchen and bathroom that is ideal for the younger generation of migrants, many of whom work in nearby offices. The second type is a 40-square-metres unit with one living room, one bedroom, a kitchen, and a bathroom, which is suitable for migrant families.

Rather than being characterised by the narrowness that gave rise to the handshake name, these buildings and their spaces in-between are better defined by the dynamic of 'on and off' (Kaijima et al., 2001), which regulates peoples' connections to the neighbourhood and village environment. The ground floor, which is filled with a variety of businesses such as barber shops, flower shops, massage parlours, and restaurants, is often 'on', blurring the boundary between private and public. The entire ground floor can be viewed as a single area connected by narrow alleys. The ground floor, which has high ceilings similar to those of older houses in the village core, often functions as space for both working and sleeping, often featuring a mezzanine level. This is exemplified by a family-run barbershop where the loft is used for washing hair in the morning and turns into a bedroom for the family in the evening. In comparison, the rest of the floors are often kept 'off' to maintain private spaces. According to Xiao Mo, a recent graduate in her

mid-twenties from Guangxi, 'When I open my windows and curtains, I am immediately engulfed in an oily, noisy, smoky, and dirty environment. But when I close them, I can have my own world created by myself, private and clean.'

4.5. Youth apartment at the industrial park

In 2015, the village-owned industrial park characterised by squat 3- to 4-storey factory buildings became a makerspace called the University Town Maker Town (*Chuangke xiaozhen*) with the aim of fostering the burgeoning trend of mass entrepreneurship (Fig. 7). Not too long before this, in the 1990s, large muddy paddy fields with fishponds were cultivated in this area adjacent to the village, taking advantage of the floodplain of one of the few main rivers in Shenzhen. At the turn of the 21st century, this level land was occupied and several industrial parks for product processing and manufacturing were built on it, mainly with the support of investors from Hong Kong who were buoyed by the Three Import and Compensation Trade (*sanlaiyibu*) policy. Along the foot of the mountain, three industrial parks, each spanning more than 300,000 square metres, were established in the late 1990s. These facilities were broad and spaced apart to facilitate transport; at the same time, a 12-lane east-west boulevard was constructed to run parallel to those parks. However, only a decade later, there arose a need to revitalise and transform these factories.

The gated makerspace covers an area of 50,000 square metres and is now a shared office space. After the exterior of the industrial park was renovated, the interior painted, and roads paved, the industrial park was transformed into coworking space. It now accommodates various offices, including a coffee workshop, logistics firms, and apartments for rent. In comparison with the global model of makerspaces, Chinese innovation spaces are more shaped by 'traditional institutional forces, aiming at providing young creative talent (especially college students) a home for potential entrepreneurial practices' (Fu et al., 2022, p. 5).

The residential inside the makerspace is limited to youth apartments. U Plus is one of the companies that targets young tenants, from new graduates to young professionals with moderate but stable incomes. Seven out of the twenty long-term renters that were spoken with were either entrepreneurs or actively searching for opportunities to establish start-ups. They are actively socialising and networking to connect with like-minded people or peers with whom they can establish business collaborations and mutual support mechanisms. This aligns well with the initial concept of the youth apartment, which was to create a homelike atmosphere for each tenant. The diversity among the tenants in terms of backgrounds and interests contributes to an exchange of ideas.

To maximise the number of renters and their opportunities to exchange ideas, the residential areas include a variety of large common spaces designed for shared activities, including a hall with an open kitchen on the ground floor, a first-floor balcony, and a rooftop, while individual rooms are limited to 12 square metres. Activities, ranging from cooking, watching films, and playing games to cultivating vegetables, fruits, and flowers, bring people together, promote friendships, and create a sense of home, in addition to facilitating networking for entrepreneurship.

5. Discussion

5.1. The handed-down traditions

All of these locations serve as palimpsests that contain history and convey certain facets of it. From the village core to the extended area and the village-owned industrial park, the physical landscape has experienced continuous transformation. The modern land-use categories imposed on the land have had the most significant impact on the current spatial arrangement: a left-behind urban village surrounded by single-use zones, including university campuses, high-rise housing, shopping

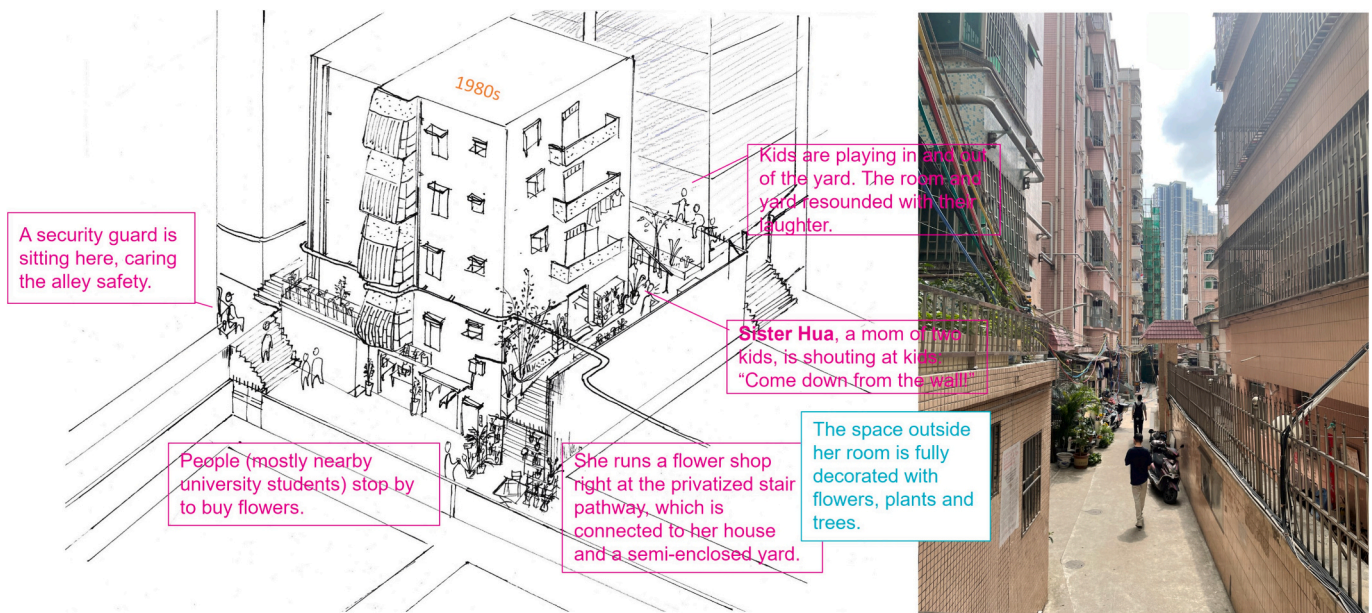


Fig. 5. Points 3: Sister Hua's privatized yard and stair pathway.
Source: by the lead author 2023.

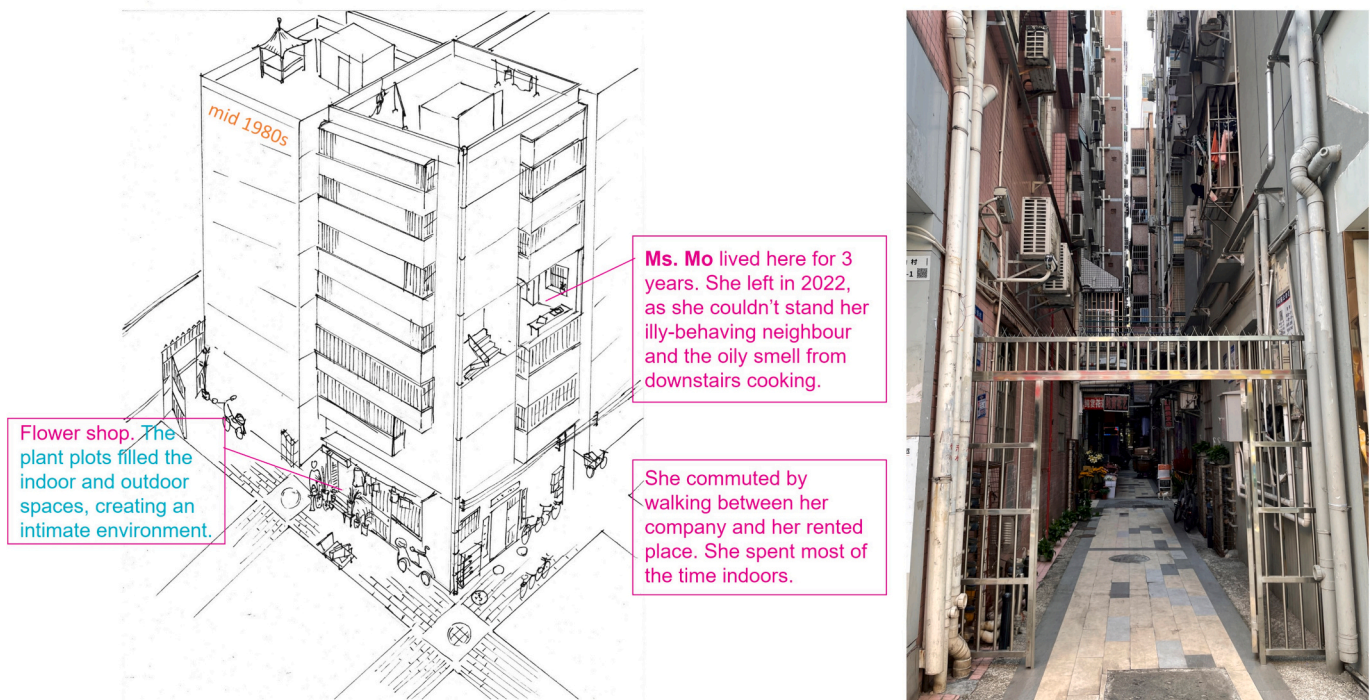


Fig. 6. Point 4: Xiao Mo's apartment at extended area.
Source: by the lead author 2023.

malls, industrial parks, and green spaces. These areas are separated by a hierarchical road system. Muddy roads flanked by trees were widened, straightened and paved as standard traffic and pedestrian lanes, integrated into the extensive urban road system. Waterways are absent from the village, being covered by concrete. Streets are maintained 'clean' so that all objects and activities that deviate from the defined function of providing passage are kept out of sight. This monofunctional zoning is supported by 'civilised and sanitary city' campaigns, which focus on visual cleanliness as well as citizens 'suzhi' (similar to English word quality) that links to behaviours.

At the same time, villagers also held the mentality of pursuing the appearance of progress and modernisation, with a focus on materialities. They modernised their old built environment: traditional brick houses with courtyards were rebuilt into modern 2- to 3-storey concrete house, which in turn have been transformed into mid-rise apartment buildings. And the extension of housing onto previous agricultural land also mimicked the official, rigid planning pattern: they adhered to the minimal standard building interval but with some deviations to maximise living and working spaces. In response to the state's ideology of 'cleanliness', just 20 years after they were constructed, some

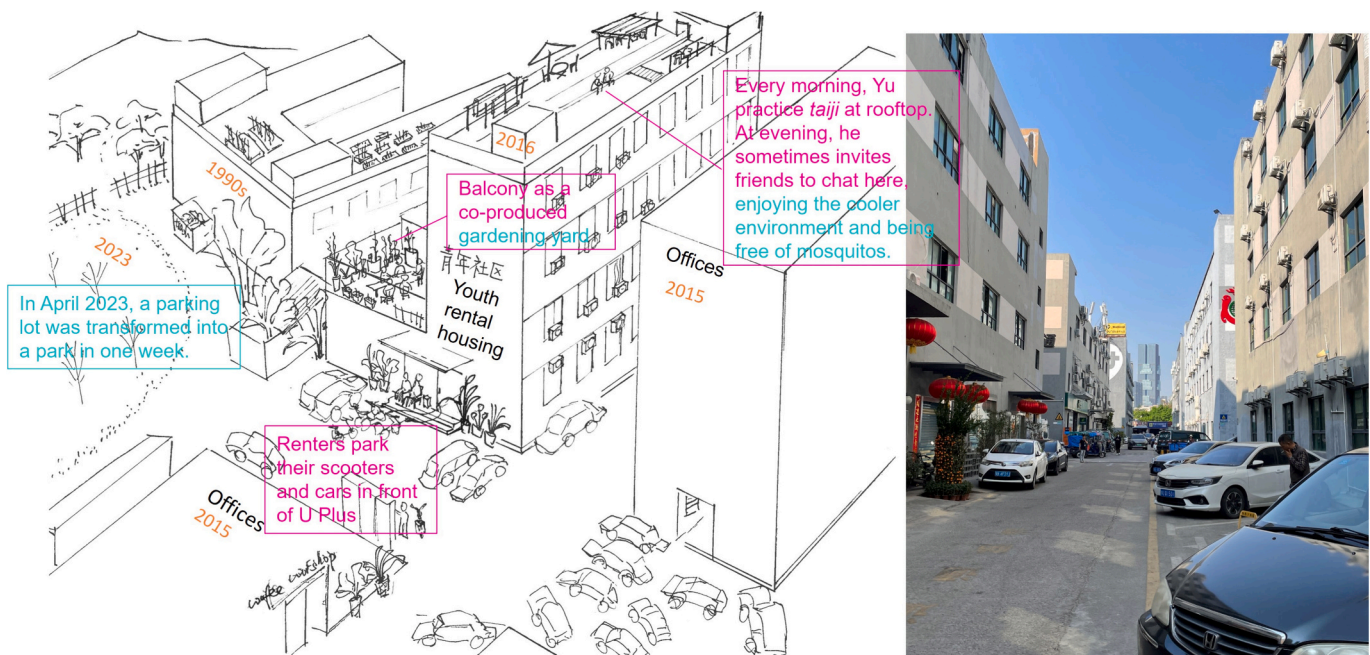


Fig. 7. Point 5: Youth apartment U Plus and activities at the industrial park. Source: by the lead author 2023.

apartments, especially those along the main street, underwent renovations (by developers in cooperation with villagers and the local government) to enhance their aesthetic appeal. At the same time, the village collective hired a private security team to provide 24-hour security and a sanitary team of about 30 people to maintain daily cleanliness.

Nevertheless, the process of de-layering reveals glimpses of traditions that are embedded in names, artefacts, buildings, and most notably, daily practices. The village name *Pingshan* itself reflects the historical practice of settling in relation to the mountains (using mountains as fences). The old village's densely clustered layout that conforms to the topography and its southwestern orientation suggest the *fengshui* principles that influenced. A few old houses retain their decayed façades and traditional forms of *tianjing* (celestial wells). Ancestral halls once marked the front edge of the village and the large earth ground in front of it was necessary for processing agricultural products; it was also a space for leisure activities, ritual events, and private markets.

All these elements recall an agricultural civilisation in which a clan-based village was established near productive landscapes within a framework of myths. Villagers used to grow rice, tend orchards, and raise animals to sustain themselves and generate income. They made ditches, fishponds (including a *fengshui* pond), and water storage areas, creating a typical rural farming landscape. With collective beliefs in family values and ritual practices especially ancestor worship, villagers worshipped deities such as the goddess Guanyin and family ancestors in communal places like temples as well as in their own domestic private spaces. The reverent attitude associated with these worship practices mattered, serving as a way to communicate human emotional needs, often related to family's health and wealth (Li, 2018).

Traditions, defined as that being handed down or transmitted (Shils, 1981), persist in the present. Traditions interact with modernities through the rhythms of daily life, producing various hybrid spatial forms and practices. The first aspect of hybridity identified in this case relates to economic production and labour. As villagers enters the market economy, their practice of cultivation, inherited from an agrarian society, continued, though it changed from 'growing grains' to 'growing houses', which provides both residences for rural migrants and economic commodities (Liu et al., 2010; Zhan, 2018). Today, villagers continue 'growing' buildings in renovated forms under the

governmental-designated labels of 'talent town' and 'maker town'. In such a way, the productive landscape continues to evolve: the village shifted from producing food in an agrarian society to producing diversified businesses, products, and services, as well as young entrepreneurs. At the same time, the cultivation of food persists and has resurged among the younger generation for more diversified purposes, including physical and mental health, and in new forms such as rooftop gardens.

The second aspect relates to the continuous production of ambiguous mixed-use spaces with evolving functions determined by residents' activities. This is largely due to the villagers' self-design of the spaces, which is shaped by their usage patterns; for example, while they have clearly defined the plots of land for houses, they have left other spaces, such as semi-open yards and pathways, loosely defined or ambiguous. Alleys serve more as spaces in between buildings than mere passages; they function as dynamic stages for interactions and exchanges or as extended living spaces (for dining, etc.) (Kochan, 2015). Naturally and as part of their daily routines, the space in front of each house is frequently appropriated for private leisure or communal gatherings by both long-term villagers and migrants. The historical concept of *ditang* remains to be relevant today, albeit through a modern planning form characterised by pavement. The ground floor features the high ceilings that were common in older buildings and remains part of the modern building structure, allowing for the space to accommodate both work and rest functions. The ambiguousness or flexibility of spaces (combining living and working) is often observed in urban villages as an essential living strategy (Chung, 2010, 2017; Liu et al., 2014).

The last aspect is ancestor worship, as collective culture has endured through generations and formed public spaces. Pingshan village's ancestral halls and *Guanyin* temple remain despite having been destroyed several times, by natural disasters and human events such as cultural revolutions; they were rebuilt with improved construction materials and techniques. These spaces continue to represent the village's roots and serve as venues for rituals and community events like elections and group dances. While the planning regime may have redesignated this space as a park, overwriting its religious significance, many people, both long-term villagers and migrants, visit the *Guanyin* temple to pray to the goddess and make wishes for the well-being of the living. During the Tomb Sweeping Festival, the smell of incense and the

sound of firecrackers are omnipresent in the modernised village.

As observed and described from above, traditions have endured as practices that shape people's experiences of modernities, thus allowing for the possibility of moving towards a hybrid scenario. Such practices, such as the ways in which spaces are utilised, encompass 'production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation' (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 33). In the Chinese context, modernisation is about infrastructure (e.g., roads) and regulations (e.g., those regarding distances). However, the ways in which villagers and migrants inhabit and use the village spaces are infused with rural logic. This logic may be described as 'feudal' traditions and is often associated with what authorities and occasionally urban residents, criticise as being of low 'suzhi' (Zhang, 2014). A potential hybrid here then suggests that the status of being a mixture becomes more inclusive, challenging the mindset of being 'corseted into false oppositions such as high or popular, urban or rural, modern or traditional' (Canclini et al., 2005, p. xxiv; Franco, 1992). This hybridisation process stresses achieving originality through coordination between traditional and modern elements (de Souza e Silva, 2006; Guo et al., 2022; Haseeb et al., 2023), rather than simply incorporating contradictory aspects of both origins, as represented by the re-making of ancient towns for modern culture-based tourism (Lang et al., 2016).

5.2. Beyond the palimpsest: hybrid traditions and modernity

The call for hybridisation has arisen in response to rapid changes in space and society generated by technological advances and a mentality that values adapting the old (Haseeb et al., 2023). As the mechanised urban growth of the past created issues such as new urban poverty, social-spatial segregation, and conflicts between local residents and top-down planning (Liu & Zhou, 2021), scholars and practitioners began to explore alternative planning and design approaches aimed at promoting social and ecological inclusiveness. 'Integration' has become a central national strategy in China to address the complex dichotomies between rural and urban, traditions and modernity, and informal and formal. In practice, in-situ development and redevelopment have been advocated for as ways to incorporate traditional heritages and enhance local identity (Wu et al., 2021). Shenzhen's current 'comprehensive improvement' regeneration programme also aims to integrate leftover elements into the surrounding urban standard fabric through micro or organic revitalisation measures, avoiding the brutal erasure of physical traces of the past, seen in previous demolition and redevelopment phases. However, the idea of integration is different from hybridisation. Integration can easily become the assimilation or formalisation of informalities, weakening differences (Zhang, 2023); hybridisation, on the other hand, is a dynamic process of interactions between the spatial-functional features of an urban space, as well as social, and increasingly, digital aspects (Cho et al., 2016; Di Marino et al., 2023). Urban designers and planners must proactively take measures and implement changes to meet the demand for a hybrid urban environment.

Urban villages, characterised by high-dense housing and proximity to urban facilities, often as 'non-places', have become focal points for making a city's new image. A new phase of rehabilitation and formalisation took place in the studied village, which has transformed it into a 'Talent Town' in order to attract and accommodate newly arriving young professionals and college graduates. Key terms such as 'youth', 'single', 'socialising', and 'youth community' are bolded on publicity boards. Talent workers are highly valued and essential for Shenzhen to transition from an economy focused on labour-intensive, export-oriented manufacturing to attracting high-tech manufacturing, information-intensive services, technological innovation, and design-oriented industries (Bontje, 2016). Therefore, affordable housing becomes an important factor for attracting and retaining talent workers (MacLachlan & Gong, 2022).

This 'Talent Town' project followed the dominant top-down approach to land-use categories. There are four designated zones in

the village: 1) a housing zone (extended village area) for low-cost rental housing; 2) a venture capital zone (old village) aimed at promoting or remaking the generalised *lingnan* courtyard culture;² 3) Alumni Street, providing public spaces for socialising; and 4) an innovation park (industrial park) that serves as an entrepreneurship incubator. The existing housing function is cleared and renovation has been approved to highlight its architectural heritage. Visible communal spaces, such as the local market, village park, and grocery, have been identified and categorised as public spaces and relabelled to better align with the context of a youth community. The housing zone is categorised into three groups: family apartments, people-benefit housing, and youth apartments, which are the majority. Within the latter group, all units are classified as one of two types: units for a single person and units for a couple. Both are smaller than 20 square metres, rendering them unsuitable for families – the majority of the current residents. In addition to standardising individual rental units, other common features adopted include adding passages between building, designing pocket gardens, and adding shared youth facilities (e.g., gyms). This physical standardisation imposes spatial separation, hindering the continuous and adaptable spatial practices that have allowed handed-down traditions to remain active in the present. This contrasts with the current village's emphasis on movement and spaces defined by residents' habits.

To move towards hybridisation, several principles are proposed to guide practitioners in adopting a more inclusive approach to urban planning and design. These principles aim to serve as a framework for mediating between state and local actors and between formal plans and informal practices.

Step 1: Reading a place as a network and a series of interconnected points, rather than from a zoning perspective. A delayering analysis of this empirical case revealed three interwoven networks. The first comprises a maze of narrow alleys, which serve as a social nexus where interactions occur and connections are made. The second encompasses the built structure with various typologies, such as clan houses in the dense old village core and a handshake building in the extended village. The third network is the human interactions occurring on top of those physical elements. These networks establish the base for the site investigation as part of the planning and design process. Furthermore, they provide insight into how to integrate or revive the local culture within the spatial structure of the urban village.

Step 2. Recognising the existing values. In the context of a society undergoing rapid changes, urban villages with an automatic mechanism have produced different values as traditions have encountered modernities in a society undergoing rapid changes. The zoning of the 'Talent Town', especially zones 2 and 3, however, ignores the existing open spatial structures that are essential for diverse activities, instead confining the socialisation spaces to a designated street. By eliminating the housing function of the village core and limiting it to a finance hub, it also increases social-spatial segregation. Therefore, rather than assigning functions to specific zones, it is important to disperse functions throughout the village networks to enhance social interactions.

Step 3. (Strategically) embedding or designing the state's vision of programmes and functions with consideration for the networks and layers of a place. For example, the space in front of buildings is ubiquitous throughout the village, serving as a hub for social interactions and for both living and working. Instead of setting a fixed number of housing units, an inhabited area could be designated to

² *Lingnan* is a geographic area in the south of the Nanling Mountains, covering the provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, Hongkong and Macau. As a regional culture, *Lingnan* culture converged with the central Chinese cultures of the Central Plains since the Qin (221 BCE–206 BCE) dynasty but maintained its unique features.

allow for diverse uses of the space or flexibility in its use, including for housing, working, and leisure.

6. Conclusion

The study conceptualises Shenzhen as palimpsest. A close layering analysis of an urban village shows that each particular space has undergone a process of being written, erased, and rewritten, resulting in an accumulation of all types of palimpsests. The process reveals how inherited traditions overlap and interplay with modernity. The past, partially visible and partially invisible, lives within the present, fostering the prospect of a hybridisation process that leads towards a more inclusive form of urbanism.

The study has certain limitations. The period of time the researcher spent in the village was shorter than in the traditional ethnographic approach (Van Maanen, 2011). This timeframe might have limited observations of seasonal events such as ceremonies and festivals. It is also worth noting that the fieldwork was conducted after the COVID-19 waves in early 2023, which were triggered by a sudden lifting of lockdown measures, and the study only coincided with one important religion-related festival, the Tomb Sweeping Festival. Additionally, the village selected for this case study represents only one of the many types of urban villages that are characterised by various factors such as size, density and location. Nonetheless, the processes of self-urbanisation and transformation observed in this case align with findings in other studies.

This study tries to propose a framework for the hybridisation potential in urban planning and design by merging inherited traditions and modernity, and does not provide prescriptive urban redevelopment strategies. Given the well-established palimpsest nature of cities, there is a need for future studies evaluating the current regeneration and (re) development programmes. This research should examine how spatial interventions and changes can be aligned with how and why people use spaces.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Diwen Tan: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Minh Quang Nguyen:** Methodology, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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