

Planum. The Journal of Urbanism n.29 vol II/2014

WITHIN THE LIMITS OF SCARCITY

RETHINKING SPACE, CITY AND PRACTICES

Edited by
Barbara Ascher
Isis Nunez Ferrera
Michael Klein

Special Issue in collaboration with **SCIBE**



Planum. The Journal of Urbanism n.29 vol II/2014
in collaboration with **SCIBE** Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment
Peer Reviewed Articles 

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Published by
Planum. The Journal of Urbanism no.29, vol. II/2014
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ISSN 1723-0993
Registered by the Court of Rome on 04/12/2001
Under the number 514-2001

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Territorial Compromises: Informal back alley food market in a shadow of an industrial compound across and at the back are worker dormitories. Shipai, Dongguan, China, 2008 © Tomaz Pipan



#rural urbanization
#urban order
#dongguan china

Territorial compromises: limits of morphological and civic negotiation

1. Introduction

Shortage and scarcity breeds competition, cooperation and ingenuity. It is almost ironic that the supposedly most egalitarian system of communist China created a condition of land-use with such a high degree of scarcity. From the *bukou residence system* to the *Great Leap Forward*, these and other ‘special’ policies contributed to a fractured social landscape with uneven distribution of resources and rights. In an allegedly egalitarian society it does not get more ‘special’ than a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), an incubator of free market and global economy. Such a political act in 1978 transformed the Shenzhen village into the first SEZ, and soon after a wider area known as Pearl River Delta (PRD) followed, creating a special economic region (SER) a resource of liberal capitalism – an utterly scarce resource in otherwise socialist China¹.

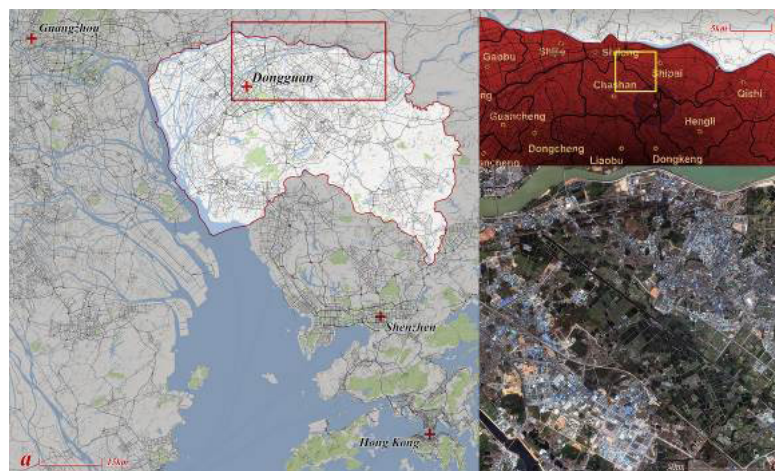


Figure 1. Location of the research area in reference to the Pearl River Delta, Dongguan prefecture and local townships.

(All images by Google, additional manipulation by Tomaz Pipan)

- 1 On the 11th Plenary Session of Central Committee of PRC in 1978, the Chinese government decided to reform the socialistically planned economy by opening up specific carefully selected areas to overseas markets. One of the instruments was a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) that facilitates economic exchange between China and global markets featuring favourable laws to attract foreign investors and producers. In 1980, Shenzhen in PRD, by then a village, was designated as one of the first SEZs. The economic success quickly grew and so did the area. By 1988 the whole region of PRD was designated as PRD Economic Zone. For the purposes of this paper, we shall name this Special Economic Region (SER), to distinguish it from the smaller area of Shenzhen – the initial Special Economic Zone (SEZ) of the PRD region.

This special situation and its exclusive character made the PRD (figure 1a) highly desirable. We could say that for China, this kind of condition was scarce indeed. The following thirty years witnessed an unprecedented rural urbanization that fuelled a wild social, cultural and spatial experiment. A deregulated ‘land of plenty’ within the PRD experienced intense pressures and transformations and a subsequent creation of some of the most unique urban patterns we can imagine. This is most apparent in industrialized areas, where agriculture is being replaced with Processing and Assembly (P&A) industry as showcased in the research area – a rural-industrial conglomerate in Dongguan prefecture (figure 1b and 1c)².

These strained conditions unleashed a spontaneous creativity that produced a new urban topography (figure 1c), one that accommodates change well and is highly flexible. Here traditional communities as well as migrant workers from other rural areas came face to face with technological and economic pressures of liberal capitalism. Rice paddies and fish farms were transformed overnight into a new industrial-rural landscape consisting of kilometres upon kilometres of fragments – interlocking low-end housing, factories, rudimentary services, walled villa estates and agriculture (figure 2).



Figure 2. 1. Gardens, 2. New middle class development, 3. High End developments, 4. Linear Housing along new roads, 5. Themed Condos, 6. Small Industrial Compound, 7. Village, 8. Rice paddies, 9. Large Industrial Compound, 10. Shaking-hands villages (all images by Google)

These industrialized areas have a particular morphological structure, which allows for local and global claims to be accommodated within small area. The conflicting pressures exerted on the territory have provoked spontaneously-created or improvised topographies that at the same time ‘culturally’ refer to, what is later in the text defined as traditional and techno-capitalistic orders. These landscapes are assembled from typological fragments through which local historical villages and young regional infrastructural corridors can be connected and ‘stitched’ together. This creates zones of ambiguity in which competing claims are negotiated without reference to an overall planning policy. This meshwork landscape is as varied in its social life as it is in its physical appearance. From afar it looks hopelessly disorganized and mishandled. However, the result is not as chaotic as might be suspected.

² Within PRD SER, Dongguan is one of the most famous cases of rural urbanization as it experienced an incredible growth from the onset of its accession to the special economic status in 1985. Dongguan city proper was very successful in attracting foreign direct investment and due to this grew economically and in population. With the economic success its prestige and standing amongst neighbouring cities progressed. Dongguan was first upgraded to county level city in 1985 and finally to prefecture level city in 1988. This also brought about higher degree of administrative freedom that local level governments (like village committees) at different levels have.

This paper will look closer at the morphological organization and further into the patterns of civic negotiation to outline a unique cohabitation of local grassroots and state official decision making. The case study will show that, in the competition between state-managed infrastructure and traditional settlements there arises a curious ambiguity of actual practices and potentially new institutions, not always, or not yet, realised. The scarcity of land and uniqueness of situation requires a consensual nature of these territories so to accommodate two orders that are so different. The paper will therefore look at the capacity of fragments and describe how these fragments comprise an unorthodox urban topography; further the paper will attempt to evaluate their ability to support a new civic order. This will be done through identification and description of typical situations.

2. Description of typical situations and conditions

Firstly we have to describe typical conditions and situations that constitute this landscape. These typical fragments and the kinds of life they enable are identified on the basis of what kind of order they support and are a part of.

The swiftly industrialized areas of Dongguan give a unique opportunity to study effects and consequences of a conflict that lies at the heart of contemporary culture not restricted to China – an apparently unresolvable dispute between fragmented reality of technology on one side and the continuities of traditional order, on the other. For example, the experience of history has changed from the continual re-interpretation of what were deemed original conditions to a perception apparently inspired by technological innovation: death-and-replacement oriented to an open, ever-deferred condition of betterment. Vesely poses this conflict as a question, “how to reconcile the inventions and achievements of modern technology, which have already established their autonomy, with the conditions of human life, our inherited culture, and the natural world.” (Vesely 2004: 7) For the purposes of this paper, I am designating two orders in conflict: the techno-capitalistic and the traditional order. As implied by Vesely, we can distinguish these two orders by the fundamental difference in their understanding of their relation to the natural environment. Contemporary fragmented reality promotes multiple interpretations of nature, all apparently of equal value (usually utilitarian). We can say that nature has in the contemporary culture different incarnations, from scientific and technical descriptions of material processes with emphasis upon efficiency, to political and moral concerns for sustainability, to sentimental attachments to views, to animals and to holidays (that are themselves another “industry”). Establishing communication between these readings remains an open problem.

Traditional order

Within this duality, nature as understood in traditional order has a unique quality of concrete engagement with situations, objects and people. This condition of engagement spawns from cycles of praxis usually connected to agriculture, which are informative regarding how much land is available, what are the water and weather conditions, when to plant crops, when to harvest, how to store grain etc. Moreover, the cycles of praxis are not limited to matters of production, but are inscribed in rites and ceremonies that include family genealogies, law, religion and art, therefore consequently instrumental in establishing culture, civic life, architecture. In the context of rural China, this translates into ancestral worship, Taoism, Confucianism, belief in supernatural forces, etc.

Many studies on the subject of rural urbanization in China show that local village communities are still in part governed by remnants of these traditional norms and practices. (Guldin 1997, Leng and Zhu 2010). The civic space of the village is still enforced through local community, village elders and leaders, that is to an extent organized on basis of rites, strong family ties, communal law, ancestral temples, worship, etc. In 1987 this grassroots village organization was translated into a form of direct democracy by way of an “Organic Law of Village Committees” (Shi 1999). This instituted the right of people with local village hukou – peasants and villagers – to elect village-level governance; village chiefs and village committees. This bottom-up governance is a necessity that enables a state the size of China to operate. The centralistic top-down governance is met by a bottom up grassroots governance on the village level. The immediate land surrounding the village becomes a stage set where traditional (grassroots) and techno-capitalistic (top-down) orders collide. Let us first look at the typical situations of the two orders separately and then describe and evaluate the situations arising from their interaction.

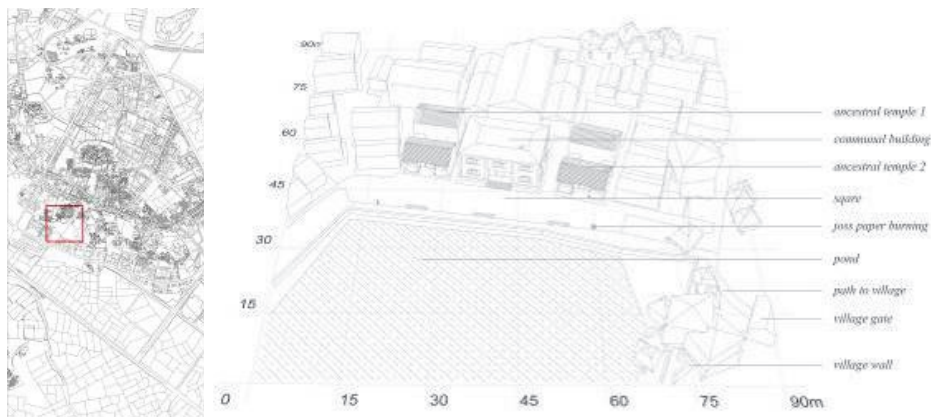


Figure 3. 3a: Location of the fragment. 3b: Birds-eye perspective view of a village fragment (Drawing by Julija Domariska & Tomaz Pipan)



Figure 3c. Village entrance, path, joss burning furnace, playing mah-jong in the community building (Images by Tomaz Pipan)



Figure 3d. Ancestral home, community building, square (Images by Tomaz Pipan)

The typicality of traditional order can be exemplified through a fragment (figure 3b). This is a prominent place of the village, surrounded by a fish pond, two ancestral homes and a public building of the local community. In the communal building locals play cards, mah-jong and shoot pool most of the time; but the community building also acts as a place for communal meetings and decision making on all facets of daily life (figure 3c and 3d). As a whole, this can be read as a political – civic space where disputes and conflicts of the village are discussed and handled. The arrangement of this typicality is an intrinsically rich organization where horizons of engagement orbit around topics dealing with family, ancestral worship, history, culture, management of village, what to do with the land, etc. The morphology and typology of space is ‘geared’ towards this order. The deeper structure is revealed through the layering of elements that constitute the area (figure 3c): the entrance gate has an altar to local gods and an L-shaped entrance, where a visitor has to turn a corner, because evil spirits can only travel in a straight line. A curvy path leads past a joss paper furnace for burning offerings onto a square. Here the most prominent building (the communal building where civic disputes are handled) is lined with ancestral halls (figure 3d), where villagers go to remember and worship their ancestors at special occasions.

This shows that remnants of deeply historical conducts still exist and govern a contemporary traditional order. Even though the contemporary questions orbit around topics ranging from redistribution of land, rent fees extraction, building a new shaking hands village, the way these negotiations are handled carries the authority of tradition. Under these conditions, history is a matter of continual renewal of original – inevitably ‘natural’ conditions. However, the traditional civic space is being challenged by an aggressive techno-capitalist imperative that perceives history in terms of constant change, destruction and replacement; a continual production for the sake of economy.

Techno-capitalist order

‘Nature’ as employed by the techno-capitalist order is domain of resource-capitalisation according to criteria of efficiency, economic profits and losses and maximization of production through serialization and optimization. This order rests upon hierarchical planning from afar through deputies and instruments such as policies, aerial plans and drawings, zoning and infrastructure. Decisions are made by the central government in Beijing, later influenced and executed by regional governments and deputies.

Techno-capitalist order, it could be argued, “takes account only of that which is susceptible to mathematical understanding” (Vesely 2004: 241), where infrastructure becomes a vehicle through which this mathematical nature can be envisioned, managed and implemented. Nature becomes an abstract idea that can be manipulated and represented in different ways as flow charts, production targets and quotas. A detachment from the experience of nature as a part of everyday life is the fundamental characteristic not only in the raw instrumentality of the planning but also in the social embodiment of the planning hierarchy. For example, filthy water from the industries is seen neither by the planners in Beijing who merely define a policy that the water has to be clean nor by the local managers of regional government and developers who sip iced tea in fully air conditioned villas.

Calculated, tabulated and graphed, ‘synthetic nature’ enables liberal capitalist world of economy, fuelled by infrastructure, building a contemporary world of urbani-

zation, a “condition of limitlessness and the complete integration of movement and communication brought about by capitalism” (Aureli 2011: 9). In Dongguan, urbanization (as noun) could be divided into ‘infrastructural space’ of migrant workers without decision-making privileges as they do not have a local *hukou* (residence status) and private space of decision making elites that rests upon economic imperatives. This separation removes the political and civic from the public and moves it into domain of the regional officials and well-connected local investors / managers that live in the walled luxurious villa compounds, making deals in restaurants and ‘gentleman clubs’: “...the overt use of money, and spending cause Dongguan’s secret space to be used first for spending into pre-liberation activity; the developers’ spending is a release of communist inhibition.” (Smith in Koolhaas 2001: 314) The power and decision-making structure is based on *guanxi* local connections that play an important role in making business deals, creating new enterprises or securing development land (Yeung 2001).

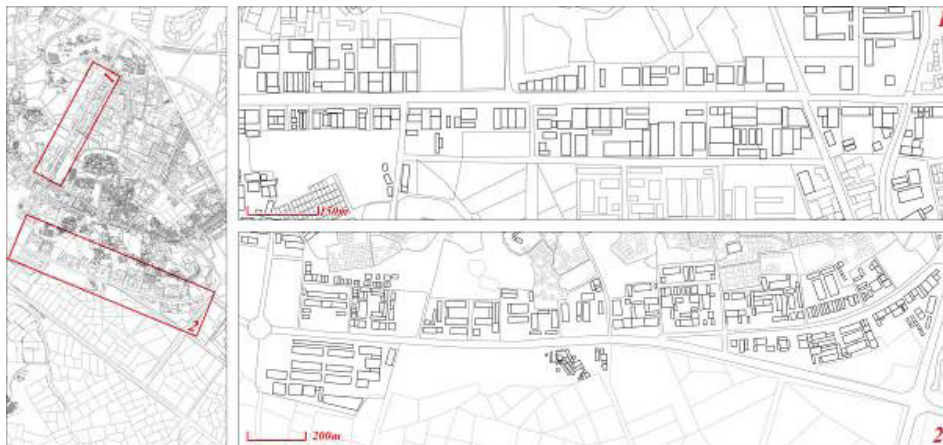


Figure 4. 4a and 4b: Adjacent organization of industrial compounds along regional infrastructure, creating regional corridors.
(Drawing by Tomaz Pipan redrawn from Google orthographic photographs.)

This described order produces a very efficient and economic organization of corridors (figure 6, described later in the text) where regional government dictates everything. The efficiency is morphologically palpable (figure 4a and 4b) and amounts to kilometres of transport infrastructure lined by industrial compounds intermittently populated by housing and rudimentary services. This reproduction of efficiency forms a network for transportation of goods and flow of capital.

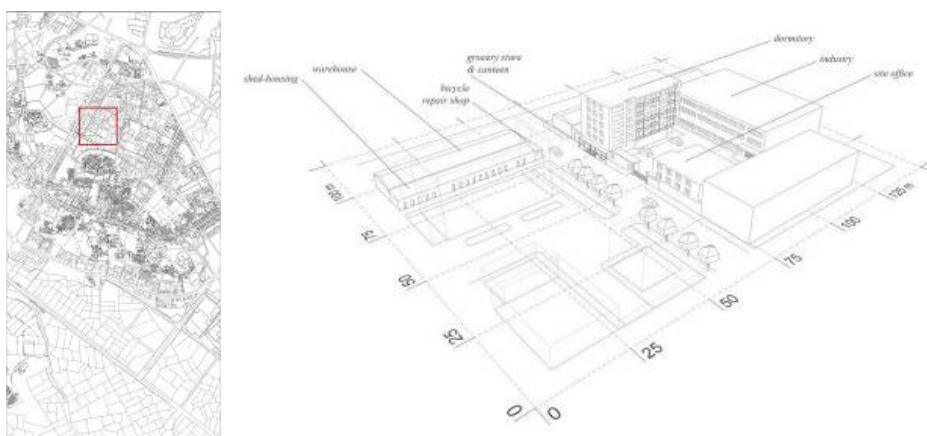


Figure 5. 5a: Location of the fragment. 5b: Birds-eye perspective view of the industrial cluster (Drawing by Kristin Krause & Tomaz Pipan)



Figure 5c. Low-end shed-housing, canteen and grocery shop, industrial compound entrance, bicycle repair shop (Images by Tomaz Pipan)

This curious infrastructural space is a place of anonymous, disenfranchised workers; a fragmented space inhabited by rural-to-urban migrants who have surrendered their traditional culture for wages. The predominant typologies are industry, dormitories and primary services that form clusters of social life infused with capitalist working ethic (figure 5c). Figure 5b shows a typical situation where a cluster is created around a smaller industrial compound with dorms. This cluster comprises additional housing sheds, a bicycle repair shop, canteen and grocery. These services form a centre of localized social activity and life. Workers from nearby dorms come here to eat, fraternise and shoot pool.

All the customary typicalities (like turning a corner at the entrance, the altar, a square with ancestral halls and communal building) are erased and cannot structure the individual's experience. Transport infrastructure and alleys around canteens, grocery stores and make-shift restaurants take over the function of village squares (figure 5c) and communal rooms and are imprinted with historical functions as life demands it – migrant workers are still deeply communal people and their social life was always manifested on village roads and squares. Although the transport infrastructure provides places to socialize, it ceases to support the political and the civic. Furthermore, there are no other symbols that would structure and maintain the organization of a community. Infrastructure, especially as it pertains to contemporary capitalist development, has the potential to represent the anonymous whole, however it does not attract the commitment, solidarity or memory of the traditional city or village.

These two examples show a confrontation between two worlds. An infrastructural system which neither supports nor requires any civic involvement has been superimposed upon traditional topographies structured around places of civic resolution of conflict. The temptation is to suggest that the infrastructural system here embodies a pure form of capitalist development, unpolluted by civic scruples...and therefore that the problem raised by the confrontation is inherent to this style of economy.

On this basis we now move to a third example of typicality, the in-between area that will hopefully show characteristics of both orders and give us a basis for concluding discussion and speculations on a possible new order.

The composite order

When local government started to develop infrastructure for industrialization led by foreign direct investment (FDI), agricultural land was taken away from villagers. They were deprived of a significant portion of their income; and, as compensation, agricultural land immediately next to the village was deregulated and given over to village community for management, use and most importantly ownership. Villagers were now able to build on this land instead of using it solely for growing food. A new morphology of the area started to take shape, which we can observe today (figure 6). Regional corridors, organized along new transport infrastructure (figure 6, light grey line) are managed by central and local governments through delegated

officials. Amidst this graft, we can observe a more loosely connected local topology (figure 6, black line) spawning from traditional, historic villages (figure 6, red fill) and connected by traditional elements like ancient ponds (figure 6, grey fill with red outline) and old roads and paths. Local topology is managed and owned by villages and their myriad grassroots village committees. The difference between the two organizations is quite apparent in the morphology, grain size and in the building typologies as already explained.

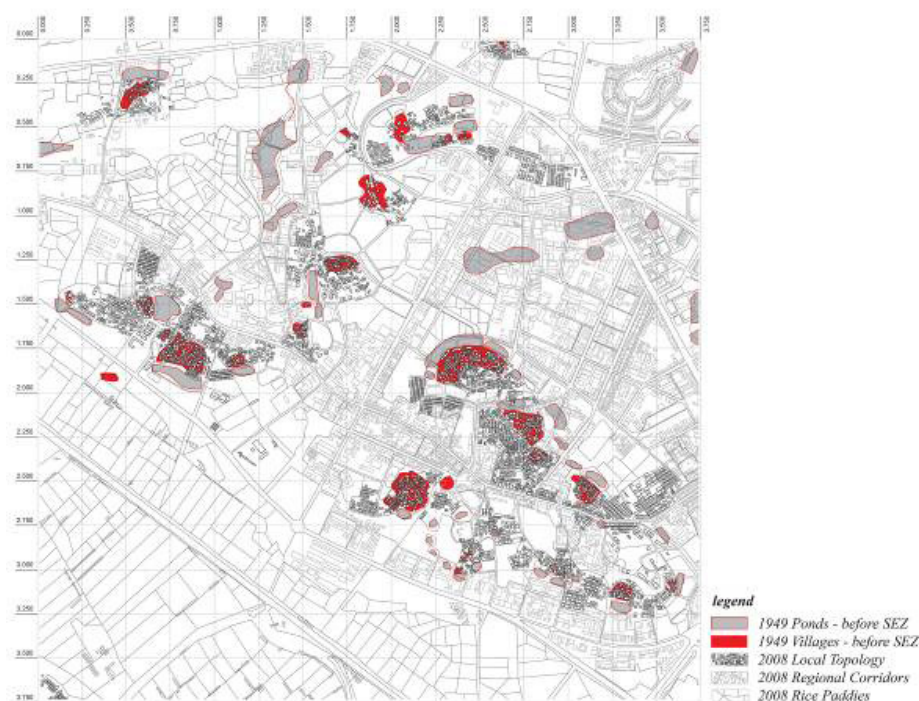


Figure 6. Pattern of negotiation between the Local Topology and Regional Corridor. (Drawing by Tomaz Pipan redrawn from Google orthographic photographs and historical maps from Great Britain War Office)

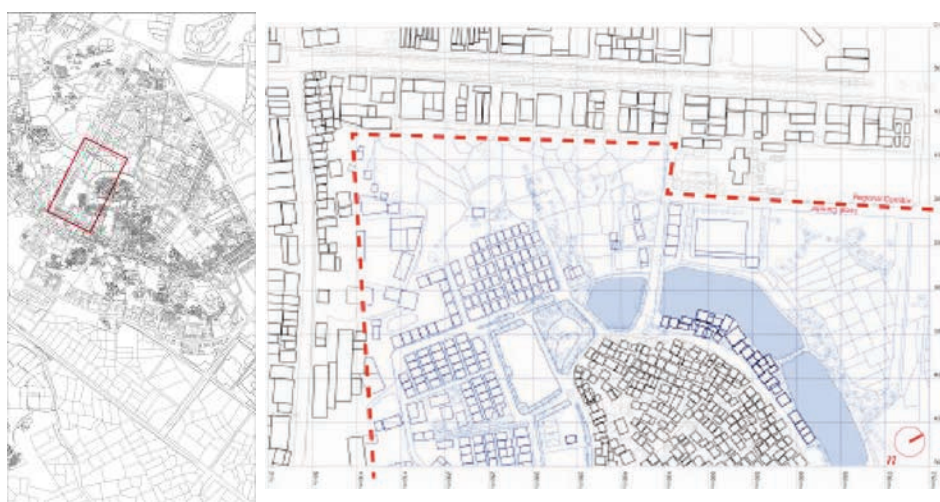


Figure 7. 7a: Location of the fragment. 7b: Deregulated land (blue) where building laws are very relaxed and decision making is in the hands of grassroots village government. (Drawing by Tomaz Pipan redrawn from Google orthographic photographs.)

The deregulated part of land given to local self-governance represents a test bed for a new type of order (figure 7a). Here grassroots village committees are trying to reconcile historical with contemporary economic condition – their traditions with wants and aspirations – by combining virtues and flaws of both orders and finding a middle way. As these areas do not fall under jurisdiction of the state they do not have to abide by the building regulations imposed on the regional corridor. This is at the heart of its morphological fragmentation.



Figure 8. 8a: Location of fragment. 8b: Birds-eye perspective view of the area. Typologies and typicalities can be attributed to traditional and to techno-capitalistic orders. (Drawings by Tomaz Pipan)



Figure 8c. Public space under a tree, re-allotted gardens with shaking hands village in the background, fish pond, new cardboard factory (Photos by Tomaz Pipan)

This is why typical conditions in these transitional territories are more ambiguous and can be attributed to both of the previously described orders. Figure 8 is another example of such territory. This composite condition consists of an area for elder folk of the village to relax and to converse in the shade of an ancient tree (8c). The area has been recently upgraded and refurbished. Just next to the lounging area are vegetable gardens that locals still use for their personal needs. These have been re-distributed and re-allotted after the last time the village committee decided to rent out additional land parcels to industries. These parts clearly allude to traditional order and to local affinity to agriculture and working with the land. The pond and the big tree are typical entrance markers of ancient villages. Big old tree as a meeting and public village spot is also historically relevant (Knapp 1992). However within this order comes the reality of current economic condition – some of the land was used to build what is called a shaking-hand village that is usually rented out to migrant workers, yet another area was rented out to developers who built a paper cardboard factory.

We can see that the range of engagements is much more diverse and refers to traditional and techno-capitalistic horizons of commitment simultany. This in-between area depends on both orders to exist. It provides the local villagers with means of economic survival and at the same time preserves at least a tenuous connection to the land and cultural attachment to history. Throughout this description we observe

a curious negotiation between the forces of global markets and world economy on one side and aspirations of the local community on the other. The question is whether this composite territory offers a potential for reconciling the two orders, or whether it enhances the conflict.

The local morphology caters for additional housing for migrant workers, the regional corridor gives good access and transport connections that enables local villagers to rent out space also to industries, shopping malls, etc. Due to its position between the two orders the morphology is unique and more diverse than any of the previously described typicalities.

In this territory, negotiation is the matrix within which a fundamental question about the relation of 'culture' to 'nature' is played out; between exploitation of and respect for natural conditions, ultimately a question of a civic order which embodies an ethical interpretation of nature.

3. Discussion

The presented description of orders and their co-habitation opens up many topics for discussion ranging from questions on social order, civic order and freedom and on the other side of the spectrum, questions about typology, urban structure and scale. For the purpose of this paper, we will outline conclusions regarding limits and opportunities these topographies give in regards to understanding of city as civic locus and how these topographies refer to scarcity.

Firstly a general overview and summary of the condition is in order. The topographies we are presented with look like a field of fragments created by superimposition of a non-hierarchical infrastructural system of production on top of ancient pattern of villages...as if the historical sea of rice paddies had suddenly grown factories. This is also evident in the mismatch of scales that is a symptom for a mismatch of meaning, resulting in the conflict between a vast infrastructure oriented to streamlined efficiencies (of supply, of production quantity, speed and low cost) and small nuclei harbouring the remains of an ancient and rich tradition. To this belongs as well a mismatch of political authority or governance, where the production-corridors enjoy regional control, and the villages exercise their few options in the domains left over. The kinds of choices available to the villages are exercised within the over-arching conflict: they can participate in the capitalisation of the land, selling off their heritage for short-term profit, in effect supporting the over-arching motives of an SEA, and they can cultivate surviving customs within the remains of community buildings, temples, archaic trees, fishponds and allotment gardens. Finally, the majority of the population is migrant workers, with no political voice, very austere living-conditions (except for the managers in villas), and no basis for commitment to a particular segment of the field.

In terms of scarcity, the economic condition of capitalised land-use affects everyone. Scarce as it is on the scale of China, it generates intense pressures for everyone establishing a basis for competition (how grassroots communities rent out their land for industry) and sharing (how agricultural land gets re-allotted so that each villager gets a part to keep up the gardening). These new organizational structures show how scarcity initiates questions pertaining to moral horizons and how these might be reconciled. In the case of SER developments in general and the PRD in particular, these horizons are most commonly portrayed as extravagant abuse of agricultural land and local people, customs and way of life for imperatives of liberal capitalism. However, closer inspection reveals a more complex interaction between, on one hand, developers, state managed infrastructure and economy and on the



other, traditional settlements and ways of life. The possible composite topographies – part synthetic and part traditional – show how to think a possible new civic order. Only time will tell if this composite is anything more than a mishmash of typologies and fragments of disparate life. Or in words of Vesely: “... complexity is often the result of an attempt to reconcile different spheres of reality. If reconciliation is successful, the whole situation may be enriched: if it is not, complexity remains as only an unfulfilled promise of richness.” (Vesely 2009: 303)

In regards to the limits of what these topographies can and could be. Above all else, they are quite young, and their possible development is still uncertain and widely open. In addition, the physical and ontological flattening infrastructural corridors engender suggests different sets of relations between topography and civic order as those of classical agora, forum or piazza, where the hierarchy culminates in a town centre as a civic locus. The infrastructural identity of presented topography restricts such readings. In a similar manner it is also hard to draw any parallels with rigorously structured Chinese traditional cities where walls meticulously prescribed the order, shape and programs of the whole city and each part. However, within the apparently undifferentiated sprawl of economic efficiency, there are, for example, shops along the roads and markets tucked away in alleys of the regional corridor (figure 9) in which one can find fragments of the sort of life generally supported by towns. The infrastructural urbanization promotes non-hierarchical structuring of the expanse where pockets of town happen almost sporadically. In the best case, we might suggest a comparative reading with mature contemporary rural-industrial conditions like *Ruhrgebiet* in Germany or suburban Milan and try to understand questions regarding the civic and the social through the lens of infrastructural urbanization that does not resort to the cliché of ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’, but instead strives to understand city as an ethical interpretation of the natural conditions.

This brings us to a fundamental question whether this condition can be called “city” at all. In this respect, we believe that examination of the different typicalities from a close range hint of possible evolution into a long-term and sustainable civic order. This appears to be the matter of finding hierarchy – similar to a high street – that achieves cohabitation and continuity with the traditional orders. In addition, the typology of industrial clusters (concrete frame and infill or platforms and sheds with service-yards between them) geared towards economic and production efficiency becomes completely devoid of meaning, which is an advantage. In other words, such organizations are programme and usage non-specific, which makes them extremely flexible and adaptable, accommodating change over time easily. Refurbishing and re-programming old factory compounds has been successful also in mature Chinese cities. Moreover, our concrete example shows that within this sea of infrastructure, a seed of traditional and local life persisting in migrant workers and local communities is always present. This can be seen as a comparative advantage over more settled topographies as it offers beginnings to structure the infrastructure hierarchically. This offers an opportunity to better understand an unresolved question in our own cities – the potential civic nature of what is too-easily generalised as “industry”.

Speculating upon the future development of such topographies is extremely relevant especially due to the fact that the present monofunctional industrial “gold rush” geared toward P&A will not self-perpetuate forever. Dongguan is chronically addicted to FDI which in turn brings in only fresh P&A and no knowledge or sustainable research for independent development. That is why we believe existing pockets of local life, tradition and freedom are so important. They represent the kernels of hie-

rarchical orders that can help these areas adapt to the inevitable changes and avoid collapse. However, in order to achieve a significant change, this monofunctional industrial oriented P&A would need to be connected to research and development (R&D). This shift can be difficult, especially as academics point out that R&D needs prime academic and research institutions (Porter 2000, Lai 2004). In addition P&A so typical for Dongguan does not encourage “knowledge spillovers” which are needed for long term competitiveness, usually attributed to the R&D clusters. Even so, it helps to understand that innovation works best if it is recognized that knowledge is imbedded in the culture whereby the cultures are local and specific. In addition, by retaining agriculture and industrial production, crucial inputs are retained in the form of skills that inform the innovation environment geared towards research of these sectors. Consolidating material cultures that are disappearing (such as fish farming, rice farming, bamboo usage know-how) by preserving the nuclei of traditional civic life, we hope to offer an unorthodox reinterpretation of regional corridors and reading of infrastructural economy as a phenomenon. This suggests a completely different reading of infrastructural landscapes than, for example the private walled-in self-sufficient company towns like Foxconn in Shenzhen. “In addition to its dozens of assembly lines and dormitories, Longhua has a fire brigade, hospital and employee swimming pool [...] More than 500 monitors around the campus show exercise programs, worker-safety videos and company news produced by the in-house television network, Foxconn TV. Even the plant’s manhole covers are stamped ‘Foxconn.’” (Dean 2007). By clustering industry and agriculture with other more civic activities and institutions one may imagine structures of local collaboration able to contend with the shifting currents of capitalism and perhaps even able to again reconcile their vulnerability in history with the natural conditions.

Acknowledgments

This work is supported by the Ad-Futura Foundation. I thank my mentor Peter Carl for unconditional support and help, Thomas Chung and Tim Quiang Diang for contacts, organization and help with the field work and Kristin Krause and Julija Domariska for the help with the drawings.

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