

---

## Models for replacing the urban village in Chinese cities

**John Zacharias**, Department of Geography, Planning and Environment, Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve W., H1255.26 (Hall Building), Montréal, QC H3G 1M8, Canada. E-mail: zachar@alcor.concordia.ca

Government plans to redevelop urban villages (*chengzhongcun* in Mandarin) in South China have been on the books for more than a decade, but it is only in the last few years that these plans have come to fruition. The villages initiated the first wave of redevelopment, mostly respecting the historical street layouts and building footprints, as Lin, De Meulder and Wang (2011) describe in their detailed account of the build-up in one such village in Guangzhou. The replacement projects deserve comment for the radical transformation they propose. Why do these plans consistently describe wholesale destruction of the building fabric and obliteration of any traces of the original layouts? What do they propose in their place?

Many observers have noted that village-initiated redevelopment was a product of the urban-rural divide, enshrined in the Chinese constitution, which essentially granted villagers full control over their lands while denying them access to the benefits of urban citizenship. The village response was to rebuild on the historical layout with the intention of extracting value from the villagers' homes. Cities rolled out new urban plans that were at once modernist, monumental and representational, in stark contrast to the pragmatism of village building practices. At the end of the last decade, those urban plans were mostly complete, resulting in a tissue of grand avenues, super-blocks and high-rise buildings. The villages consist of narrow, winding streets, small blocks and low-rise buildings. Local governments have initiated negotiations with villages in key, central locations to purchase the land rights of the rebuilt villages, with the intention of 'completing' the urban plan. The widely expressed government view is that village developments are essentially pre-modern and have no place in the contemporary Chinese city. While the cities could have proposed compensation commensurate with village revenues, they have chosen instead an alternate implementation plan as the vehicle for negotiation.

The typical approach is for the city to engage a developer in the early stages of the process, quite often a state-owned development company, who then represents the interests of the city. At the same time, the city hires consultants to prepare a plan that presumably represents optimal re-use of the lands. It is this 'optimal' plan that becomes the

object of negotiation. Unconstrained by the density limits of the statutory plan, which does not apply to villages, the proposed densities have been exceptionally high for Yunong and Gangxia villages in Shenzhen and Liede in Guangzhou, the floor area ratio exceeding 7 in all cases. These densities are more than double those in the statutory plan areas surrounding the villages. Higher density means more value is extracted from the development, allowing the city to recover a larger share of the payout to the village. The consultants' plans show bulky and very tall buildings on standardized layouts, in keeping with city desires for an image of advanced modernity. The latest plans for Gangxia village show office buildings 350 m high.

There are tentative attempts by consultants to find an alternative to this model. One approach is to demolish selectively and integrate new, high-rise buildings in the historical layout. Another approach is to preserve the temples, monuments and organic street layouts with an entirely renewed residential building fabric. These approaches have found favour with the villages, in their bid to satisfy government desires for modernization while maintaining control of village space. So far, such approaches have been rejected by the cities that see such plans failing to deliver a wholly integrated plan of contemporary forms. A second wave of village-initiated redevelopment might be feasible and potentially relieve the city of a major financial burden, but such an approach deprives the bureaucracy and the state-owned development companies of significant benefits that flow from city manipulation of the land resource. Thus, the city leadership and the bureaucracy find common cause in sweeping away any reminders of a rural past and a problematic urban-rural dichotomy in the present.

Village redevelopment is in its earliest stages. All the plans proposed by consultants and defended by the cities currently show an extension of the city street grid into the redeveloped villages and the implementation of buildings that are seen as the missing pieces of the large compositions of the urban plan. Bustling local streets are replaced with the quiet, formal gardens of gated communities or vast, landscaped plazas around office blocks. The clan temples, if they are retained, are typically displaced to a location that allows the regular and

---

standardized completion of the rest. In anticipation of government desires to sweep away any reminders of village occupancy, and in the hope that the compensation package will be even richer, some villages have undertaken the demolition of their own temples. So far, cities have focused on a relatively small number of centrally located villages in the larger cities. The costs associated with a single village replacement vastly exceed those of conventional development such that other approaches will be necessary for the vast majority of urban village replacement projects. Even if cities abandoned their obsessive drive to cloak the

city with the trappings of modernity, there remains the problem of two fundamentally different land regimes co-existing uneasily in urban space. Just as that dichotomy drove the first wave of redevelopment, so it greatly influences the next.

### Reference

- Lin, Y., De Meulder, B. and Wang, S. (2011) 'From village to metropolis: a case of morphological transformation in Guangzhou, China', *Urban Morphology* 15, 5-20.

---

## Twentieth International Seminar on Urban Form



**Brisbane Central Business District from Kangaroo Point  
(photograph by Mirko Guaralda).**

ISUF 2013 will take place in Brisbane, Australia from 17 to 20 July 2013. It will be hosted by Queensland University of Technology at the School of Design, Gardens Point Campus, Brisbane. The theme of the conference is 'Urban form at the edge'. Topics to be covered include:

- Cities on the edge – cities in edge conditions, such as at natural limits and political boundaries
- Off centre – urban form in emerging economies and post-colonial countries
- On the edge of the city – peripheral areas and urban form in suburbia
- Edge cities – new urban conditions
- Regional centres – towns and cities with local importance, but at the edge of national or regional urban networks
- Pushing the edge – new technologies and new techniques

The organizers and the Council of ISUF invite participation in the conference by interested academics and professionals. The conference will take advantage of its relative proximity to Africa, India and South-East Asia by giving especial

attention to these areas, directly addressing the challenge to ISUF to develop its presence more fully than hitherto in these parts of the world.

The region of south-east Queensland incorporates both Brisbane and its neighbour the Gold Coast City and is the fastest growing metropolitan region in Australia. The rapid processes of urban transformation have brought challenges comparable to those faced by many developing countries.

Pre-conference excursions will take place in Brisbane and post-conference excursions will take place in Sydney, Melbourne and Auckland.

The conference organizing committee comprises Professor Paul Sanders (Queensland University of Technology), Dr Kai Gu (University of Auckland), Dr Mirko Guaralda (Queensland University of Technology) and Professor Tony Hall (Griffith University). A conference website will be launched shortly. Enquiries and suggestions concerning the conference should be forwarded to Professor Sanders (e-mail: [ps.sanders@qut.edu.au](mailto:ps.sanders@qut.edu.au)).

---