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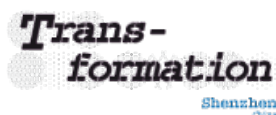
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INTERNATIONAL NEW TOWN INSTITUTE

Living in Shenzhen: attractive for creatives?

Article by Marco Bontje



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Like many cities across the globe, Shenzhen is attempting to redevelop itself as a 'creative city'. This policy concept can mean different things to different people. Strategies aiming at becoming a 'creative city' refer to attracting and developing cultural and creative industries like architecture, design, media, games, advertising, and of course, the arts. In this sense, creativity is often combined with affiliated concepts like innovation or knowledge-intensive business. But a 'creative city' is also often associated with having many cultural venues (museums, theatres, galleries, concert halls) and events (festivals, exhibitions), and with being a welcoming city for people from different backgrounds, with different lifestyles: a diverse and tolerant city. Most of all, 'creative city' strategies are about city branding: putting your city on the map as a hub of creative people, companies and ideas, which then hopefully will make your city more competitive and speed up its economic growth.



photo: Marco Bontje

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Creative Park OCT-LOFT (photo: Marco Bontje)

Shenzhen sees itself as one of the leading centers of design in China, and has good reasons for doing so. Shenzhen's special history of being built 'from scratch' in only a few decades and being a testing ground of 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics' made it an attractive place for designers. Design has many different categories in Shenzhen. In a recent publication, the architect and urban design scholar Liauw lists 14 variations on the design theme: "graphic design, industrial design, fashion design, toy design, handicraft design, timepiece design, jewelry design, package design, architecture and urban design, interior design, animation design, game design, communication design, software design". [1] So in the view of Shenzhen's economic policy-makers, 'design' is almost a synonym for what we would call 'cultural and creative industries'.

The creative city program Shenzhen has developed so far is almost exclusively about cultural and creative companies. It focuses on developing attractive locations where these companies should cluster ('creative parks'), giving subsidies

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to creative start-up companies, organizing national and international events (like the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Biennale of Urbanism / Architecture and 'Creative December'), and marketing the city worldwide as a city of design. [2] However, this is not yet a 'creative city' program, because: where are the people? Shenzhen's policies so far are about companies, company locations, and above all about economic growth; not about the people starting creative companies or working for those companies. These people do not only need a good work location, but also a nice place to live and attractive amenities like places to shop, go out, relax, exercise, learn etc.

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Creative Park F518 Idea Land (photo: Marco Bontje)

So far very little is known about what types of homes and what kinds of living environments people working in creative industries in China prefer. Research done on this topic so far mainly focused on North American and European locations. Are Chinese creative workers different? A sabbatical leave at City University Hong Kong in late 2012 enabled me to start to explore this in Shenzhen. Assisted by the Shenzhen-based architecture firm URBANUS, I have interviewed 35 people working in creative companies in Shenzhen. The interviews took place in four 'creative parks': OCT-LOFT, F518, Animation World and NH e-Cool. Only F518 included some live-work buildings for artists at their creative park site; the other three were purely work locations, though places to live were never far from the parks. Most of the people we interviewed lived relatively close to their workplace or had a good public transport connection; however, some also said they had to travel an hour or more from home to work. In Shenzhen it can make a big difference whether or not your home and your workplace are close to a metro station. The metro is quick, efficient and frequent; but if you have to take buses or your own car instead, your trip through this city of long distances and crowded highways can easily take hours.



Creative Park OCT-LOFT (photo: Marco Bontje)

OCT-LOFT is quite centrally located in Shenzhen, well connected by metro and highway to the CBD of Futian and close to several theme parks. It is one of the best-known creative sites of Shenzhen and attracts a lot of visitors. Next to architecture, design and creative consultancy firms, the complex also features many shops for creative products and some bars and restaurants. The well-designed public space also attracts Shenzhen residents, since quality public space is still quite scarce in the city. F518, Animation World and NH e-Cool are a bit more remote, in the west of the city, closer to the port of Shekou and the airport. These parks are most of all workspaces and less attractive for visitors than OCT-LOFT. Animation World is mostly specialized in animation and 3D movie industries; the other two parks have a more mixed profile.



Creative Park Animation World (photo: Marco Bontje)

The stories of the creative workers were maybe not 'typically creative', but rather reflecting more general trends of Shenzhen's changing population and economy. Even though about half of Shenzhen's working population was employed in manufacturing in 2010, the service sectors have grown much faster than the manufacturing sector in the past decade. Mass production is increasingly leaving the city for cheaper parts of China or cheaper countries like Vietnam, the Philippines or Bangladesh. Shenzhen's economy is modernizing, as part of the trend in Chinese coastal provinces 'from made in China to created in China'. Shenzhen's working population is becoming higher educated and 'white-collar' jobs quickly replace 'blue-collar' jobs. This goes along with the emergence of a middle class. Some of our interview respondents clearly belonged to this middle class: living in quite spacious 3- or 4-room apartments either alone or with their partner (sometimes also with children) and being quite demanding about their home and living environment. Some of our respondents could even be called upper middle class, living in big apartments in luxury complexes and/or having more than one place to live in the city or its outskirts.

Creative industries are probably (not only in China) mostly associated with this (upper) middle class: people that can afford high apartment rents at the 'most wanted' spots in a city. In the specific Chinese context of Shenzhen, one would maybe also expect them to have a local urban *hukou*, giving them easy access to the housing market and local government services like schools and health care. However, a large part of our interview respondents was in a very different situation. They were living with their parents or other relatives or in student dormitories or sharing small flats with friends or colleagues. Flat sharing with friends or colleagues was also frequently mentioned as a strategy to make living in Shenzhen more affordable.



Creative Park NH e-Cool (photo: Marco Bontje)

Several interviewees even lived in 'urban villages', the former rural villages that transformed into crowded urban neighborhoods for rural-urban migrants since the 1980s. For the factory workers moving from the countryside to Shenzhen, these urban villages were often the only place where they could get access to housing. The 'formal' urban housing market of Shenzhen was not accessible to them since they lacked the local urban *hukou*. Meanwhile, urban villages apparently are no longer only home to these factory workers and the original village residents, but also to people at the start of a career in creative industries. For recently graduated and starting workers, large creative companies like architecture firms or animation studios can be compared to factories: they often start with internships or short-term, low-paid contracts, facing a very uncertain career perspective. For some of them, this may be a phase they have to go through towards a better middle class life; for others, this middle class life may well remain a far-fetched dream. Some of the 'creative starters' we interviewed faced comparable *hukou* obstacles as factory workers; others managed to profit from a temporary 'collective *hukou*' as university students or graduates, but may also have to move from a university campus to an urban village soon. Others were luckier, for example because their company arranged a 'collective *hukou*' for all its personnel. However, also this is a vulnerable situation; as soon as you lose your job, you may also lose your local urban *hukou*.

While Shenzhen is probably already a quite attractive place to live for people that have made a career in creativity, the main housing problem to solve is access to affordable housing for starting creatives. It seems like the City of Shenzhen has recognized this problem: it has set up a program for 'talented worker housing'. The municipal government encourages district governments and private developers to build affordable housing for 'talents'; the types of incentives given include land price discounts and subsidies. However, as Nicola Morrison, lecturer and researcher at the University of Cambridge, has recently made clear, so far only small numbers of affordable housing for these talented workers have been built, and they are only accessible for talents that meet restrictive criteria, including having a local urban *hukou* and at least 5 years of working experience. Realizing larger-scale affordable housing, not only for creative workers, would require fundamental changes in China's land ownership and development system. [3] The *hukou* system would have to be changed fundamentally and private developers should be convinced that building affordable housing can also be interesting and profitable for them. So far, the government's incentives are not enough to attract private developers to affordable housing projects.



Live-Work Space of one of the respondents in the creative park F518 Idea Land (photo: Marco Bontje)

Urban villages may offer part of the solution to the lack of affordable and accessible housing for starting creative workers. Instead of destroying urban villages and replacing them with yet another luxury tower-block complex, some urban villages could be redeveloped into 'creative villages' for those at the start of their creative career. Especially centrally located urban villages like Baishizou, strategically located between Shenzhen University, High-Tech Park, Window on the World and OCT-LOFT, already attract creative talents. Shenzhen might find inspiration for redeveloping the urban villages in the urban renewal programs of European cities since the 1970s. Points of departure of such a redevelopment program could then be: renovation instead of demolition; removing only those buildings that cannot be renovated; making the urban village density slightly lower and creating more public space in-between the buildings; and working street-by-street or maybe even building-by-building instead of large-scale plans for entire neighborhoods. Looking at what happened to former working class neighborhoods in Western cities after such a redevelopment, though, the threat that this would ignite a process of gentrification-making the urban villages unaffordable-is real. Whether new affordable creative living milieus in Shenzhen will be newly built or created in redeveloped urban villages, keeping these places affordable will be a big challenge to Shenzhen's urban developers.

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Notes:

[1] Liauw, L.W.W. (2012) Shenzhen's evolution from tabula rasa laboratory of new Chinese urbanism to creative post-industrial UNESCO City of Design. In: P.W. Daniels, K.C. Ho & T.A. Hutton, Eds. *New economic spaces in Asian cities. From industrial restructuring to the cultural turn* (pp. 202-219). Abingdon, Oxon / New York: Routledge. The citation is from p. 208.

[2] For more details about Shenzhen's creative economy and creative city strategies, see Bontje, M. (2014) *Creative Shenzhen? A critical view on Shenzhen's transformation from a low-cost manufacturing hub to a creative megacity*. *International Journal of Cultural and Creative Industries* 1 (2): 52-67. Available for [download](#)

[3] Morrison, N. (2013) *Building talented worker housing in Shenzhen, China, to sustain place competitiveness*. *Urban Studies* 51 (8): 1539-1558.

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