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**Publication date**

2016

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Shenzhen: from factory of the world to world city

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Bontje, M. (2016). Living in Shenzhen: attractive for creatives? In L. Vlassenrood (Ed.), *Shenzhen: from factory of the world to world city* (pp. 165-171). International New Town Institute.

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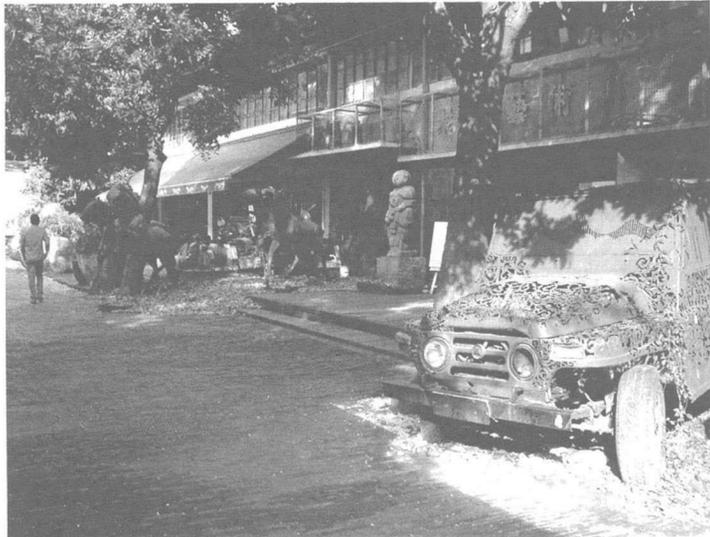
Creative Park OCT-Loft  
(photo: Marco Bontje)

Marco Bontje

## Living in Shenzhen: Attractive for Creatives?

Like many cities across the globe, Shenzhen tries 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. Often creativity in this sense is 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, music stages) and events (festivals, exhibitions), and with being a welcoming city for people from different backgrounds and with different lifestyles: a diverse and tolerant city. Most of all, 'creative city' strategies eventually 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.

The UK was the first country to develop policy programs to promote the creative industries in the late 1990s. Soon afterwards the creative industries hype spread across the globe, and the initially mostly economic strategies were expanded to urban (re)development strategies. China joined this trend around 2004, when policy slogans like 'from made in China to created in China' were launched. China saw the creative industries as one of the crucial industries for the modernization of its economy. In 2009, creative industries became a key element of China's national economic strategy as one of the new 'pillar industries'. Provincial and local governments were encouraged to develop strategies to make their economies more creative and innovative. Shenzhen used this opportunity: in its 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year-Plans (2007 and 2012), cultural and creative industries were presented as the 'fourth pillar' of Shenzhen's economy, next to high-tech industries, modern logistics and financial services. These four sectors were seen as the economic future of Shenzhen, replacing the industrial low-cost mass production that was increasingly leaving the city.



Creative Park OCT-Loft (photo: Marco Bontje)

1 Laurence Liauw, 'Shenzhen's evolution from tabula rasa laboratory of new Chinese urbanism to creative post-industrial UNESCO City of Design', in: PW. Daniels, K.C. Ho and T.A. Hutton (eds.), *New economic spaces in Asian cities. From industrial restructuring to the cultural turn* (Abingdon, Oxon / New York: Routledge, 2012), 208.

### City of Design

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 publication, the architect and urban design scholar Laurence 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'.<sup>1</sup> So in the view of Shenzhen's economic policy-makers, 'design' is almost a synonym for what we would call 'cultural and creative industries'.

Shenzhen has also received international recognition as a 'city of design': it successfully applied to UNESCO's Creative Cities Network as a 'City of Design' in 2008. Shenzhen was the first Chinese city in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network; meanwhile, several other Chinese cities have joined the network too. Shenzhen is very proud to be part of this network, but how UNESCO decides which cities are eligible for, is not so clear. A city should first nominate itself: the local government should take the initiative, but it should also involve relevant stakeholders from the creative sector. The application file should include an assessment



Creative Park Animation World (photo: Marco Bontje)

2 See also: <http://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/home>, retrieved on 14 June 2016.  
3 For more details about Shenzhen's creative economy and creative city strategies, see Marco Bontje, '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* (2014), vol. 1 (2), 52-67. Available for download at: <http://www.ijcci.net/index.php?option=>

of 'creative assets of the city', a mid-term action plan and a budget. UNESCO then sends anonymous inspectors to the candidate city and decides on the basis of the inspectors' reports. Selection criteria to become a 'UNESCO City of Design' include rather vague items like 'an established design industry', 'cultural landscape fueled by design and the built environment', 'design-driven creative industries' and 'opportunity for local designers and urban planners to take advantage of local materials and urban / natural conditions'. Apparently Shenzhen met these criteria sufficiently.<sup>2</sup>

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 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

### How to accommodate the creative industries?

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

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 attractively designed public space also attracts Shenzhen residents, since public space that is nice to stay or stroll in is still a quite scarce resource 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.

The stories of the creative workers were maybe not 'typically creative', but rather reflected more general trends of Shenzhen's changing population and economy. Shenzhen's economy is modernizing, as part of the trend in Chinese coastal provinces 'from made in China that is created in China'. Shenzhen's working population is becoming higher educated and 'white-collar' jobs 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. China introduced the *hukou* household-registration system in the 1950s; it divides and demarcates the population into urban and rural residents. People who are registered on the countryside, but live and work in the city, do not enjoy the same social welfare benefits as urban residents. 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. Especially flat sharing with friends or colleagues was a frequently mentioned strategy to make living in Shenzhen more affordable.

Several interviewees actually lived in 'urban villages', the former rural villages that transformed into crowded urban neighborhoods for rural-urban migrants since the 1980s. So, urban villages apparently are no longer only home to rural-urban migrants and the original village residents, but also to people at the start of a career in creative industries. For recently graduated and people starting their professional career, large creative companies like architecture firms or animation studios can to some extent 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;<sup>5</sup> others managed to profit from a temporary 'collective *hukou*' as university students or graduates, but may also have to move from university campus to urban village soon. Some others were luckier, for example because their company arranged a 'collective *hukou*' for all its personnel. However, this is also a vulnerable situation; as soon as you lose your job, you may also lose your local urban *hukou*.

### Access to affordable housing

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 made clear, so far only small numbers of affordable housing for these talented workers

5 For the factory  
workers moving from  
the countryside to  
Shenzhen, these urban  
villages were often  
the only place where  
they had access to  
housing. The 'formal'  
urban housing market  
of Shenzhen was not  
accessible to them  
since they lacked the  
local urban *hukou*.



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

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.<sup>6</sup> 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, apparently the government's incentives are not enough to attract private developers to affordable housing projects.

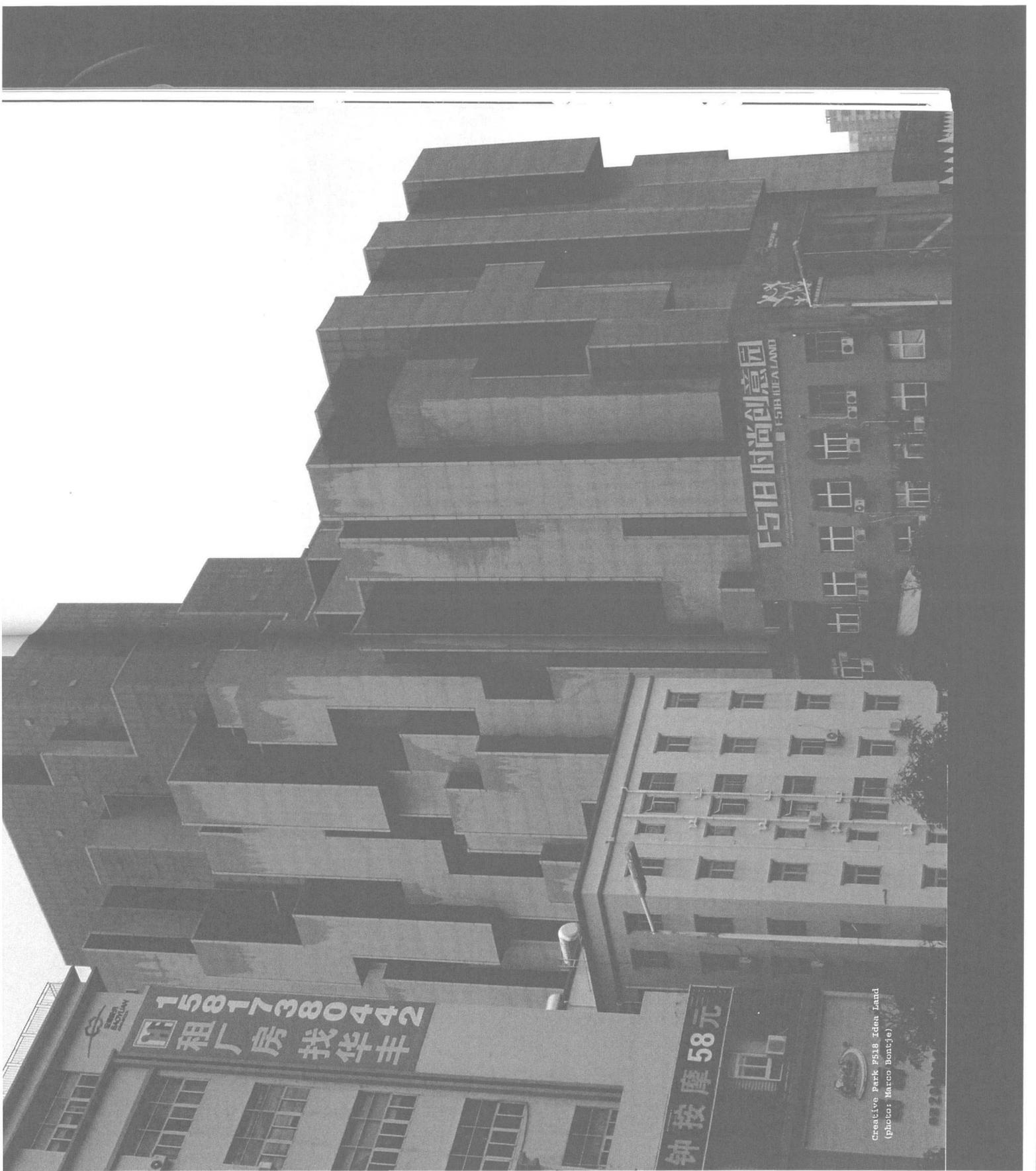
Urban villages may offer part of the solution to the lack of affordable and accessible housing for starting creative workers. Instead of destroying urban villages and replacing them with yet another luxury tower-block complex, some urban villages could be redeveloped into 'creative villages' for those at the start of their creative career. Especially centrally located urban villages like Baishizou, strategically located between Shenzhen University, High-Tech Park, Window of the World and OCT-LOFT, already attract quite some 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 can

<sup>6</sup> Nicola Morrison, 'Building talented worker housing in Shenzhen, China, to sustain place competitiveness', *Urban Studies* (2013) vol. 51 (8) 1539-1558.



Creative Park F518 Idea Land (photo: Marco Bontje)

impossibly be renovated; making the density slightly lower by creating more public space in-between the buildings; and working street-by-street or maybe even building-by-building instead of realizing large-scale plans at one go 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. No matter whether 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.



P518 时尚创意园  
P518 IDEA LAND

15017380442  
租房找华丰

钟按摩 58元

Creative Park P518 Iden Land  
(photo: Marco Bonci)