Reimaging Urban Boundaries and Rethinking Community Space:

A Design Proposal for a Community Center in *Baishizhou, Shenzhen, China*

By

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family and especially my parents, who have always encouraged me and believed in whatever I do. I am fully indebted to both of them, for their selfless love, their understanding, their wisdom, their patience, and their support.
Abstract

Public community space is pivotal in the making and sustenance of a collective lifestyle and value in an urban neighborhood. *Baishizhou*, one of the most prominent urban villages in Shenzhen, China and home to some 150,000 people, is facing a dilemma in which chaotic land use and poorly-maintained border spaces have become increasingly problematic issues that contradict an image of an optimal residential environment. In light of the vast scholarly research and precedent studies, this thesis proposes a design intervention that envisions a community based and socially inclusive community center on the originally underused neighborhood border space. It intends to —through a functional and efficient venue— provide amenities for a community that has been historically underserved and to reinstate and reinforce a unique lifestyle and a culture that has been overlooked. This user-oriented design will hopefully shed light on future planning and policy-making in similar urban communities to harness the differentiation, individuality, and meaning of life in Chinese urban villages.
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Introduction

The idea of “village” is deeply rooted in the human psyche; it has become an emblem for a lost community and a disappearing lifestyle of simplicity. Even though the majority of the world’s population has been categorized into “urban,” being “urban” is fundamentally an ambiguous notion when villages of various types have long been on the cityscape worldwide. In China, countless villages have become integral components of the emerging cities amidst the rapid urbanization. These villages no longer resemble an idyllic image of farm life; instead, they portray a collision of urban scheme against a rural backdrop (Bolchover and Lin 186). These so-called “urban villages” have become an idiosyncratic spatial phenotype in the contemporary Chinese urban culture. They are, in definition, informal settlements in the city, whose emergences are caused by the inevitable gaps in the policy changes of the rural-to-urban land system that allow property managed under rural ownership rules to develop incoherently free from the cities that engulfed them. Because of this inherited separation of property and rights and the general lack of top down regulation, urban villages — symbolized by features such as over-development, infrastructure insufficiency, and chaotic land use — have mostly evolved and grown into peculiar neighborhoods like no others in the city. Within these freely developed spaces, spontaneous and ephemeral public spaces emerge and recede at a rapid pace as cities undergo massive physical changes (Gaubatz 82). In hopes of generating a more vigorous ecosystem and conceiving a cityscape that is more aesthetically and experientially pleasing, this thesis intends to propose a user-oriented, community based, and socially inclusive design of a community center that provides amenities for an underserved urban neighborhood; while on a bigger picture, it is also an attempt to use functional architecture and space to bring people
together to what was originally a neglected border and to engage them as a collective whole so as to clarify and underpin the notion of a “community lifestyle.”

My fundamental curiosity in this topic of interest is how urban villages are both physically and socioculturally influenced by urban boundaries, and how a design intervention can reclaim the borderline as a symbol of community. Walls and other markers of separation have long been fundamental to cities around the world, and they have helped frame borders, boundaries, and enclaves that would come to establish and reinforce significant spatial and sociocultural qualities of one place. Such enclave urbanism has profound historical roots in China, from the earliest form of ancient residence to a more contemporary mosaic of urban enclaves such as gated communities and urban villages. Borders are omnipresent in almost every single city; they create a cellular landscape of partial spaces that are often cut off from one another (Hassenpflug 48). They help constitute an increasingly anonymous urban fabric, in which citizens become gradually detached from each other. Certainly, boundary is not merely the physical structure that signifies it; it denotes and encapsulates a variety of notions in modern cities such as the metamorphosis of urban culture, the dynamism of urban reorientation, the ever-changing form of governance, and, most importantly, citizens’ perception of cities and urban lifestyles. Having a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between urban form and social fabric allows me to envisage a better design that would possess more practical spatial qualities and stronger sociocultural implications.

Urban phenomena of this scale have understandably drawn much scholarly attention. The broader context for the definition, evolution, administration, redevelopment policy, and living conditions have been widely examined, reviewed, and discussed. Stefan Al’s book, for
example, provides a rather comprehensive examination on the informal settlements in South China. An intriguing result of a research and design collaborative, Bolchover and Lin’s work sheds new light on the inter-relation between urban and rural processes to help understand a Chinese landscape that has been in a constant state of transition. Vlassenrood’s book and its collected works investigate the various urban mechanism behind the fast-paced urbanization of Shenzhen. Many other relevant scholarly researches have also contributed the rising discussion of urban villages. Eijk’s thesis, for instance, examines the social and physical borders of the neighborhood of Baishizhou and proposes a project that reimagines the spatial reconfiguration of this particular neighborhood. Offering a completely new perspective to urban planning and urban renewal, Song, Pan, and Chen’s insightful work addresses urban nightlife as an integral part of modern living in contemporary urban villages in the Pearl River Delta region. Notwithstanding the amount of scholarly resources on urban villages, the issue of community borders, the provision of peripheral public spaces, and understanding of relevant topics have not received much research attention. It is to my hope that this thesis, in light of the vast scholarly resources, can highlight a discourse of city, borders, and space and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding and appreciation of Chinese urban villages.

The overarching objective of this design thesis is to use architecture to respond to a much broader understanding of not only the mechanism of territorial urbanization but also of the vital themes that are associated with a community lifestyle that often goes unnoticed. With a proposal of a local community center, I am hoping to address and respond to the contextual issues that have surfaced through my research and to attempt to envision and program a better alternative than what already exists, one that would hopefully create a dynamic dialogue.
between research and design so as to conceive spaces that would vigorously devote to the future transformation of the area.

I begin my thesis with a concise introduction of the context and perimeter in the first section, where I present the concept of urban villages in modern China and discuss the area of study. After establishing a backdrop, I proceed to identify and review some of the precedent studies that are more or less informative to my design approach. I then elaborate on a complete design proposal with detailed explanations figures and illustrations in the third section. In the conclusion, I use my project to reflect upon issues in the bigger picture and discuss how effective design and planning should be valuable assets to a city, for they mediate conflicts and better society.

Setting the Background: Urban Villages in the Context of Contemporary China

It is, first and foremost, imperative to understand the concept of urban villages in the context of contemporary China. In an urbanized China where drones of skyscrapers prevail the cityscapes, strolling through these urban villages —often referred to as *chengzhongcun* in Chinese— interestingly suggests an alternative insight of modernity. These hyper-dense inner city settlements are the distinct warrens that interrupt the monotone cityscape filled with high-rises. Urban villages are not generic in their livability and building fabric; they are, however, often collectively characterized by extremely high population density, relatively low standard of living, and substandard hygiene conditions. Some universal spatial qualities of urban villages are dark and narrow alleyways with electric wire tangling above and surrounding handshake buildings that create an urban mass separated by thin crevices of light. Kögel recounts these
spaces as “migrant villages in the city [that] form their own social cores and developed without formal help from the city administration. In the grey area of legal and illegal, under bad framework conditions, on the basis of small family business, a vast variety of service and production enterprises emerged” (Hassenpflug 124). These urban neighborhoods not only provide affordable housing for a great number of the cities’ floating population but also anchor an extensive network of economy that is not often seen elsewhere in the city. Most of these villages are inhabited by the underprivileged and disenfranchised, and as such are often associated with squalor, overcrowding, and other social problems. To some extent, urban villages in China are comparable to informal settlements elsewhere in the world, such as shantytowns in Argentina or favelas in Brazil. Nonetheless, one should not perceive urban villages —as beautifully chaotic as they seem— as Chinese equivalent to urban slums or ghettos because they are integral parts to society and the economy. Schoon’s description, for example, of these neighborhoods as “slum-areas with miserable living conditions” is certainly exaggerated and inaccurate (Verbeelen 6). Urban villages are often among the most vibrant and
liveliest areas in many cities and their inhabitants have contributed a great deal to both the sociocultural and economic developments of their respective city.

Figure 1.1 Aerial view of an urban village (source: Hu)

Figure 1.2 Inside one of the narrow alleys (source: Zhou)
As noted, nowhere else is the contemporary rural-urban imbrication more conspicuous than in Shenzhen (O’Donnell et al. 8). It would be impossible to understand the context of urban villages without acknowledging the short but remarkable history of Shenzhen. A major coastal city in the province of Guangdong, Shenzhen has developed rapidly from an obscure fishing village into one of the youngest and most vibrant Chinese cities in less than four decades despite having a shallow urban history. Before urbanization roared on this fertile coastal area, Bao’an county — which later became Shenzhen — had an original population at around 300,000, who were distributed among 2,000 rural villages on geographically diverse agricultural land (Vlassenrood 70). With thousands of years of regional history, these villagers have lived, farmed, fished, and traded on this arable land for generations. Shenzhen’s urban history was first recorded as late as the 1980s, when the rising metropolis became one of the very first Chinese cities to adapt to a capitalist approach. Reckoning that a centrally planned economy was negatively affecting the Chinese society, the government introduced a more liberal approach and adopted macro-control policies (Verbeelen 7). The growth of the city was furthered by the “open door” policy and the implementation of the Special Economic Zones (SEZs), when the central government decided to liberalize economic policy to a larger extent in 1980 (O’Donnell, 2). By this time, China’s coastline had transformed from “a unitary industrial cluster” into “polynary coastal city groups” (Al 44). Soon after the establishment of Shenzhen as a Special Economy Zone, the central government made every effort to appropriate every inch of land and to designate all land as “urban.” Notwithstanding the effort, the process of negotiation with each village did not go as smoothly as what was initially hoped because of the government’s limited financial resources. Many previously rural villages were left parcels of
land known as Home-Based-Land and were allowed a limited form of autonomy (Vlassenrood 71). In such a way, when the era of rapid urbanization hit, many of these villages have survived and remained on the landscape and have become impetuses for the industrialization and modernization of the city. To this day, the urban configuration of Shenzhen has still been constantly changing and the strategy of the government has always been to re-use and redevelop areas that are not as efficiently utilized — such as urban villages that are now occupied by a large floating population. Hence, neighborhoods such as urban villages have become controversial topics and led to heated discussions in terms of metropolitan development and urban renewal.

Figure 1.3 Shenzhen in three decades (source: Wang)
With an overall population of 12 million over nearly 800 square miles of land—numbers which have been continuously growing—Shenzhen is currently home to some 200 urban villages, making it an ideal city to examine such unique spatial phenomena (Wikipedia). Urban growth of Shenzhen has resulted in numerous urban villages in the forms of settlement fragments, legacies of the original farming and fishing communities scattered throughout the cityscape that altogether accommodate more than 7 million people (Hao et al. 3400). In fact, much of Shenzhen’s urban fabric is regarded as disassociated. Smith describes the city as “a patchwork of disjointed spaces, hastily thrown together as the city’s development careens ahead” (Al 38). It is without a doubt an intriguing place with thrills and opportunities, but the city’s shallow roots and history can be alienating and overwhelming at times. Ironically, given external migration and investment as motors for development, it is really in the urban villages that one could get a better sense of the city life, the local culture, the long-standing history, and
spaces with intimate value. Amsterdam-based Japanese architect Yushi Uehara recounts his first experience in urban villages as “unreal reality, big simulacra of pure possibilities” (Uehara 55). Song Dong, a Chinese conceptual artist, metaphorizes urban villages as “the probiotics of the city (城市的益生菌);” he stresses that a city would be pulseless and without content if all bacteria were cleansed (Song 3). Indeed, the natural formation and unfettered development of urban villages represent less of a meticulously planned and controlled scheme and more of an organic surge of life and vitality. However, these urban villages should be neither romanticized nor nostalgized as they are roots for many legitimate social and spatial problems.

Clearly, the notion of village here is a discursive category that lives on in many ways long after casting off its original function and form (O’Donnell et al. 140). These urban villages in Shenzhen have maintained “a mix of rural privilege and urban dynamism,” however disparate they are from the rest of society; they exert much significance that is not to be neglected in any way (O’Donnell et al. 8). The challenge, here, is to identify ways in which these villages can be better socioculturally integrated into the city fabric for them to become a genuine source of exuberance, meaning, and a sense of belonging that would counteract the increasing disunity and disengagement in the Chinese society.
This design thesis primarily addresses spaces within the neighborhood of *Baishizhou*.

Out of hundreds of urban villages in Shenzhen, *Baishizhou* has historically been one of the biggest and the most prominent ones on the cityscape. It is, in fact, an organic agglomeration of
five smaller communities that has for decades served as an enclave for not only the original villagers but also increasing numbers of newcomers such as migrant workers and immigrants in the heart of the city (Veeken, 21). Urban villages such as Baishizhou are registered as rural land despite their physical locations within the city and respective jurisdictional boundaries. Unlike that of the municipality of Shenzhen, the history of Baishizhou dates further back on the timeline. Baishizhou used to be a small fisherman’s and farmers’ village—it is believed that the first farmer arrived there during the 1950s and built small dormitories, ones that are still present today (Eijk, 14). In the 1970s, changes began to knock on the doors when this area of land was collectivized by the Chinese state into an agricultural commune that was owned by those who were residing there at the time (Feng, 3). Later on, the government purchased the farmland for a relatively small amount of money when the surrounding area began to urbanize at an ever-increasing rate. Caught in the midst of the rapid urbanization, Baishizhou gradually moved away from its agricultural roots. The villagers lost their agricultural land, but not their residential space; they were allowed a limited form of self-governance in the village committee. Meanwhile, eagerly seeking for other sustainable means of livelihood, villagers had soon found it extremely lucrative to offer affordable rooms to millions of migrants that had been swamping into the city (Bontje, 1). Most original villagers have taken advantage of their land’s prime location and exploited via highly profitable rental to migrants, which turn them into “de facto landlords with unrestricted tenure” (Hao et al. 176). These rural-to-urban migrants flood into the city in hopes for better jobs and opportunities, turning urban villages into a Chinese version of “concrete jungle where dreams are made of.” In such a way, Baishizhou has become not only a residential enclave but also integral local economies. The shift from a traditional structure of
historic layers to a market-oriented urban quarter is, more or less, abrupt; it represents the incredible urban growth of the city, while also underlines the potential problems that it has to face along the process.

Figure 1.7 A top down view of the main streets in Baishizhou (source: Zhao)

Urban villages are integral elements of the urban terrain of erasure and transformation. A Google earth view of this piece of the city reveals a distinctive urban morphology — nebulous arrays of densely packed houses occupy a visibly large area in the city. *Baishizhou*, one of Shenzhen’s last remaining urban villages in the city center, is home to approximately 150,000 people, who all cramp over an area of a mere 0.23 square miles of land (Bolchover and Lin 24).
Baishizhou has manifested itself as a vital urban community in the heart of the city. With respect to the geographical layout of Shenzhen, Baishizhou is located at the intersection of Futian district and Nanshan district, which are two of the city’s most prospering districts. It adjoins the Shennan Avenue, which is the main west-east traffic axis of the metropolitan area, and is within close proximity to two major metro stations (Window of the World and Baishizhou) (Bontje 3). Spatially, it sits in is a rather well-developed area. Nearby there are theme parks, an upscale shopping center, a golf course, a university campus, and a high-tech park. Even though Baishizhou is surrounded by communities populated by predominantly middle and upper class inhabitants, the interaction between them is minimal due the absence of a social facilitator and the presence of walls that exist in both the physical and the mental sphere. Thus, the results are increasingly anonymous and homogenous neighborhoods with different degrees of publicity within the urban fabric (Eijk 16).

![Figure 1.8 Typical building layout in urban villages (source: Johnson & Frampton)](image-url)
Certainly, it is more or less an understatement to interpret such a level of settlement density and diversity with the term “village.” In this it shares many characteristics of metropolitan enclaves that characterize global splintered urbanism. A description of Paradise Valley in Arizona seems equally suitable for Baishizhou — “A mixture of everything imaginable — including overcrowding, delinquency, and disease. It has glamor, action, religion, pathos. It has brains and organization and business” (Jones 2). A virtual tour in Baishizhou would offer one a more tangible glimpse of what an urban village essentially is. Upon entering Baishizhou from any of its countless entrances, one would come across narrow streets with concrete shells of all functions. A few main streets are car-accessible even though they are neither car- nor pedestrian-friendly; and most alleys exist like cracks in between buildings that sometimes would take much effort to even walk through. On top of family eateries, massage parlors, barber shops and facades too shabby to tell their functions from, wider streets in urban villages are occupied with a variety of commerce that ranges from small and neat storefronts to dim jumbles of clothing, electronics, hardware, furniture, etc. The omnipresence of density and closeness is overwhelming: people, stores, buildings, and different senses all linger between the cheering vibrancy and the dizzying confinement of proximity (O’Donnell et al. 150). Walking past the hustle and bustle of the commercial streets, one would be left disoriented amidst the countless handshake buildings — so called because one can literally shake his or her neighbor’s hand by simply reaching out of the windows. These buildings are mostly illegal structures in a sense that they have violated many of the city’s building codes. The crevices created by these imposing buildings are often filled with drain pipes, electric wires, clothes hanger, and chaotic arrays of A/C units that suspend from the wall — an utterly stifling scene that would panic a
claustrophobe. Such a condition does not deter *Baishizhou* from being variegated in the possibility of a vibrant urban life: there are night markets, karaoke bars, house churches, pool tables, food stands, and, if one were to look more observantly, erotic services and gambling dens. Like many other informal settlements in global cities, urban villages are also havens for the city’s extensive grey economy, in which its perpetuity is sustained by both the residents/customers and the physical infrastructure that urban villages provide.

*Figure 1.9 Outdoor market in Baishizhou (Source: Lam)*
A boundary is most often an artificial feature that is institutionalized as a symbol of separation and dissociation. In the case of urban villages, the stigmas attached to it, well-founded or not, have prompted other citizens to make effort to distance themselves from these neighborhoods. The surrounding urban fabric around Baishizhou consists of patches of gated and privatized developments. The most prominent one is Portofino, a luxury residential enclave modeled on an Italianate villa theme (Bolchover and Lin 35). To this date, it remains one of Shenzhen’s most extravagant and upscale gated communities for the affluent upper-class.
Physical boundaries were erected to divide Portofino and its surrounding sites. In this case, a 14-foot-high wall stands in between Baishizhou and Portofino, imposing an edge that nobody shall cross. These walls in the neighborhood, though varying by physical appearances, not only forge visual and spatial borders but also serve to further separate the already disparate social groups and networks. The consequence is an urban neighborhood that is extremely polarized between people of different social statuses, which further stimulates the proliferation of privatized territorial islands amid a discontinuous urban public realm (Bolchover and Lin 35). Breaking down the wall, which had been my initial intention for this thesis, turns out to be too impractical; it is then necessary to reflect upon the current dilemmas created by these boundaries and to envision a better way to utilize what is already there.

Every design stems from curiosity. Personally, my interest in urban villages is deeply engrained in my upbringing and personal experiences. Having grown up around these neighborhoods in a city where I proudly call home, I have always been intrigued and curious about them but had never gotten any opportunity to fully understand and appreciate urban villages as urban phenomena. I was told that these places were filthy, dangerous, and chaotic, which, true or not, are negative connotations that have been embedded in the general perception of these neighborhoods. The notion of “urban villages” and their inhabitants have long been stigmatized by the host society, much like most other informal settlements in the world. Fundamentally, however, urban villages are not as much informal and irregular as they are human settlements. They are, above all, habitats made by the people for the people and should be regarded equally to other communities in the city when it comes to community- and space-building.
Notwithstanding the centrality of their locations, urban villages are often physically disparate—though not necessarily spatially marginalized—from the city by apparent differences in building, order and even walls. They are also distinct in space, services and identities—given their private developments, there has been little, if any, emphasis on "community" spaces or facilities, much less a dialogue with the larger city. Barry Wilson, a Shenzhen-based urban designer, straightforwardly characterizes urban villages as “highly vibrant places [with] almost no public space” (Wilson 2). Despite being a spatially cramped neighborhood, Baishizhou does not lack space, per se. It does, however, lack functional and well maintained public space to serve its vast number of inhabitants.

Figure 2.1 The dividing wall between Portofino and Baishizhou (source: Zhou)
The wall that marks the boundary between Baishizhou and Portofino creates different pockets of space that are mostly ambiguous in their programming. Unlike the heavily monitored public spaces in planned development elsewhere in the city, these indeterminate spaces are often used for various activities and events that change according to the time of day or the desires of the inhabitants (Bolchover and Lin 36). What is certain (and problematic) is that these pocket spaces are critical features in this particular urban village; yet the majority of them are unclear in their functions and equivocal in their meanings. Emblematic of these spaces is an irregularly shaped lot on the northeast corner of the neighborhood that has essentially become an urban backyard dump—divided by a wall from luxurious and elegant villas and with unclear and damaging uses. My proposal, then, is to turn this back end of the neighborhood into a center, an edge into a node, and a neglected border to a place of service and a space for community formation. Such a place should be temporal, spatial, and personal (Jones 10). There is so much more to a notion of place than its simple physical manifestation; it is very much about attachment, what surrounds it, what constitutes it, what happens in it, and what will happen in it. Thus, the adaptation of a physical environment should take consideration of the quality of the specific place to produce a space that can facilitate the social interaction of the people and maintain cultural identity of the place (Qu and Dorst 9). Throughout the process of design, I have constantly reminded myself of the fundamental qualities of the place to conceive a community space that increases integration and reduces anonymous streets, a space that is replete with a culture, its longstanding traditions, its histories, and its memories.
Precedent Study and Analysis

I have reviewed and examined multiple cases studies and precedent designs in order to have a greater comprehension of the notion of community and the space that denotes it. These precedent studies allow me to investigate contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts, and they have subsequently informed and influenced my design approach.

- Micro Yuan-er, Beijing, China

A children library built in one of the old hutongs in Beijing, Micro Yuan-er is located in a very old-fashioned Chinese courtyard, which, among many others, is still standing despite the government’s effort to completely renovate the area. The architecture is an old communal kitchen space renovated into a delicate micro-library for the local children. The library is small in scale but engages in a much broader conversation of the old and the new. By reimagining a pre-existing structure, the architects here fundamentally recognize the local heritage as a crucial embodiment to the city’s contemporary life. The use of form and material is also of great importance in this project; they speak to the site but also represent a modern alternative, one that envisions a more enriched lifestyle and a more engaging living environment for the new generation in the old neighborhood.
Figure 3.1 Micro Yuan-er (source: Archdaily)
Figure 3.2 Micro Yuan-er (source: Archdaily)

Figure 3.3 Micro Yuan-er (source: Archdaily)
• TLOFT Experience Museum, Shenzhen, China

CM Design puts forward a project that investigates the high-density residential environment in Futian Village — another prominent urban village in Shenzhen. The so-called T-loft experience museum is a product for the whole community, in which functions that are needed and valued in this particular neighborhood are brought together and translated to a space that is highly flexible and multi-functional. The venue that they have created is a very spatially and artistically inspiring space, where spatial forms speak to the integrated functions. This project demonstrates that to design a space that is meaningful requires one to take into consideration the meaning and value of life of a particular community.

Figure 3.4 T-LOFT Museum (source: gooood.hk)
Figure 3.5 T-LOFT Museum (source:gooood.hk)

Figure 3.6 T-LOFT Museum (source: gooood.hk)
The South Yard is part of the “Beautiful Village Reconstruction Project” in Sanjia, which is a rural village in Southern China (Archdaily). The architects turn an old and abandoned house into an open and playful space for the local villagers. The original space was narrow so all the internal walls were removed to achieve a more lightweight space. In addition, brick walls were replaced by glass panels that formed an interior space that was extremely transparent and flexible, which are important spatial qualities to keep in mind when designing a community space. Though many villagers do not come to fully comprehend the newly-erected modern looking architecture, they all appreciate the existence of such a space for the local community. This is a space designated for everybody —children love running around the courtyard, adults enjoy chatting over big wooden tables, and elderly are pleased to have space for tea-drinking and chess-playing. The importance in any design, thus, is to make sense of the way people use space and to envision spaces that speak to different behaviors and actions of different groups of potential users.
Figure 3.7 The South Yard (source: Archdaily)

Figure 3.8 The South Yard (source: Archdaily)
The New Music World, Wuhan, China

The New Music World is an artist center situated in a creative industrial park in Wuhan. The architect somehow manages to fit a lobby, a guestroom, a pantry, and a classroom in a mere 600-square-foot space, which highlights how efficient and intriguing spatial complexity can be attained even with limited space to work with. The addition of two courtyards with multiple points of access adds on to the characters of the space and creates a smoother transition and connection between the in and the out. Roofs are tilted to maximize the amount of natural light that comes into the building. What is also interesting in this project is the use of cast-in-place concrete as the choice of material; it not only is low budget and efficient but also helps establish a building that is neither too imposing nor too negligible on the landscape. This
architecture is —down to its core— a physical manifestation of the artistic lifestyle that it embodies.

Figure 3.10 The New Music World (source: Archdaily)

Figure 3.11 The New Music World (source: Archdaily)
Aiming to address the intertwined issue of identities and built environment, this design of a village community center in Xihe Village sets a new model for rural construction development in China. Architectural interventions, to some degree, can and should be transformative and resist the normal forms of rural-urban disjunction that are prevalent even on a global level (Ren 121). This village center is an enlightening case study for me as a
socially-sustainable and socially-resilient model; it also reminds me of the importance of architectural actions in terms of creating and negotiating peripheral identities. Social engagement should be a fundamental nature of any space; and architecture should offer a community-based and socially-inclusive space for a group of like-minded people to create and negotiate their sociocultural identities.

Figure 3.13 Xihe Village Activity Center (source: Archdaily)
Figure 3.14 Xihe Village Activity Center (source: Archdaily)

Figure 3.15 Xihe Village Activity Center (source: Archdaily)
Design Proposal for a Community Center in *Baishizhou*

Public open space plays a vital role in urban life in virtually every city around the world. The livability of a city is built through social interaction and communities, more so than through building infrastructure, shops, and public transport (Eijk 22). Du claims in her work that public facilities such as parks and plazas are immensely popular with the villagers and many migrant workers alike (Vlassenrood 78). The lacking of such spaces in *Baishizhou* precipitates a dense yet disorganized living environment, in which spatial, infrastructural, and programmatic needs are not well attended to. Li et al. seem to recognize similar issues when they point out that “there are many border spaces among the streets of *Baishizhou* [that] have not been satisfactorily utilized” (Li et al. 175). As do most other urban villages in the city, *Baishizhou*, especially its border spaces, can and should be redeveloped as a vernacular typology of community lifestyles with modernized and upgraded public amenities.

![Figure 4.1 Children running around in urban villages (source: Asfouri)](image-url)
The site on which I am proposing my design is one of the open spaces created by the wall and its adjacent buildings. In comparison to other countless narrow alleys and walkways in this particular urban village, this long strip of pockets of spaces — being an integral part of the traffic system within Baishizhou — is relatively open and spacious and thus has been sustaining some degree of social activities. Local kids are seen running around, chasing each other in spontaneous games; elderly have found themselves corner spaces to get together, sit, and chat; families on the ground floor would sometimes open up their front doors so that they can watch TV while being outside. Even so, these spaces have neither the quality of public spaces nor the sense of community spaces. In fact, physical environment of these spaces is problematic—
infrastructures are poorly constructed, proper management is lacking, and open space is not well maintained, sometimes to an extent that it becomes a safety hazard for the users of the space. The site of design, for example, is currently being used predominantly as 1) an intermediate space for passersby to get from one point to another and 2) a disposal site for discarded furniture, cardboards, bikes, and other miscellaneous items. Despite its physical location on the outskirt of the neighborhood, the site accommodates a considerable amount of pedestrian flow as it is within one of the fastest routes that take one from the south of Baishizhou to the north, and vice versa. Despite being in close proximity to some of the major traffic axes, the site is, however, not car-accessible, which significantly reduces the noise level and makes it more user-friendly.

Figure 4.3 A collage of photographs of the site (source: author)
The proposal aims at creating a recreational space for the community through adaptive reuse of the existing lots. A community center is envisioned in one of the pocket spaces along the dividing wall. To design a community space and a leisure venue requires me to reflect upon the central factor in the symbolic life of an urban village. In order to create a space where the experiences and daily routines of the inhabitants converge and where the community life can be physically represented, I am to take a user- and demand-oriented approach, in which it is necessary to take into consideration what is valued and what would be needed in terms of spatial features and purposes. Illustration 4.2 shows a preliminary space need diagram, in which three main categories (outdoor, lifestyle, sociocultural immersion) are conceptualized; they each branches out to essentially different programs within the community center. An updated diagram indicates a more refined concept and speaks to the actual layout of the building and the surrounding blocks on the site (Illustration 4.3).
Illustration 4.2 Space need diagram

Demand-oriented:
- Locals
- Kids
- Visitors/Tourists
- Students/Scholars

Illustration 4.3 Massing diagram of the actual layout of the programs
Illustration 4.4 Axonometric drawing of the community center
## SPACE NEEDS PROGRAMMING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Area (ft²)</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>A well-lit and cozy reading space along with a play area on the roof for children</td>
<td>As an individual block; adjacent to the south side of the courtyard and to the multifunctional space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness/Exercise Room</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>An exercise space that promotes a healthy lifestyle through community activities such as Yoga, Tai-chi, etc.</td>
<td>On the first level of the multi-story building; adjacent to the north side of the courtyard and to the lobby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chess/Tea Room</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>A space for prominent local entertainment/activities such as tea, chess, mahjong, etc.</td>
<td>On the second level of the multi-story building; access through stairs or elevator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibition Space</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>A space that exhibits and celebrates local culture and heritage</td>
<td>On the third level of the multi-story building; access through stairs or elevator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-purpose Space</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>A flexible space that can be used to accommodate different events such as lectures, workshops, etc.</td>
<td>Suspended on top of the office space; access through the lobby or the rooftop of the library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office/Administrative Space</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>A small workspace for the administrators of the venue</td>
<td>Underneath the multi-purpose space; access through lobby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobby</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>An intermediate space that facilitates flow of people in and out of the building</td>
<td>Serves as a connecting point; adjacent to both the courtyard and two blocks of buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rooftop Terrace/Lookout*</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>A space that provides a view of the surrounding fabric</td>
<td>On the fourth tier of the building; access through stairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtyard*</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>A semi-open courtyard that highlights socio-spatial issues as well as facilitates social interactions</td>
<td>Have multiple points of access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancestral Shrine*</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>An outdoor space for worship</td>
<td>Situated individually on the side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor Green Space*</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>Ample green space that provides space of relaxation</td>
<td>Surrounds the building site</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Net Internal Area: 3,605 ft²
Gross Floor Area: 3,605 * 1.3 = 4,687 ft²

*Outdoor area

**Figure 4.4 A list of programs (source: author)**
With a gross floor area of 4,687 square feet, the community center is to accommodate different types of activities and to be used for different purposes. On the first level, the children library occupies the southern half of the floor area. As previously mentioned, programs are envisioned in hopes of speaking to the needs of the local people. Children in the urban villages often reside in cramped living environments that they are presented with very limited —if any— space to read, study, or interact with peers. These are all crucial activities for the healthy development of children and the absence of spaces that accommodate such activities can have detrimental effects on the well-being of children in urban villages. A designated library space
would tackle this issue by providing space for the local children to come together and find their niche that might not be found elsewhere. Spaces are limited due to the size of the lot but the library, with shelves, desks, computers, and a semi-separated playing area filled with bean bags and stuffed animals, is designed in a way to allow both reading/studying and spontaneous play for younger kids. Pivot doors with glass panels are inserted onto the south façade to maximize sunlight in the winter and facilitate indoor air circulation in the summer. They also create another point of access in addition to the entrance from the west (through the street) and from the north (through the courtyard). Since light is an integral component to any library, various sizes of windows — including a pyramidal skylight on the rooftop — are incorporated on different façades to allow more natural light into the space. A deciduous tree is planted outside of the library that would provide shades in the hot summer months and permit more natural light into the library in the cold winter months for maximum energy efficiency.
North of the library is a small office space for the administrators of the community center. It is adjacent to and accessible through the lobby, and it allows direct view onto both the streets and the courtyard for easy maintenance and management of the space and the people. The lobby serves as an intermediate space between different rooms that facilitates the flow of people within the building. It opens up towards the northern point of entry of the lot, and thus can naturally direct the flow of people into the community space. Situated on the northern half of the floor area, the chess/tea room is a well-furnished space for local elderly people to get together and carry on activities that are part of their lifestyle — playing chess, playing mahjong, playing poker, drinking tea, exchanging gossip — in a space that is specifically designated for that purpose instead of the outdoor “public” space, or the lack thereof, within the tiny crevices of buildings. The space is equipped with a kitchenette and two separate restrooms. This floor, as does every other floor above it, has an elevator and staircases, which provide easy access to the upper floors and the rooftop terrace. Spare spaces within the stairwell can be appropriated for the use of storage and the placement of mechanical units.
The second level of the complex consists of an exercise space, a multi-functional room, and a green rooftop space. Located on the second floor of the multi-story building, the exercise room serves as a space for various fitness programs and activities that locals indulge in such as Yoga, Tai chi, or other forms of Chinese martial art. A suspended walkway on the second level of the lobby allows a natural continuation from the exercise room to the multi-functional room, which is a flexible space conceived to encompass a variety of occasions such as seminars, workshops, talks, lectures, and other group activities. The room has a slightly slanted roof with
a horizontal opening on the taller side that both brings in extra sunlight from the north and—
along with the sliding door on the other side of the room— expedites a high-low air circulation.

On the tilted roof, large solar panels are installed to absorb sunlight as sources of energy, with the aim of constructing a greener and more environmentally sustainable architecture. From the multi-functional room one would be able to have access to the rooftop of the library, which is yet another green space for social gathering. Inspired by the design of Micro Yuan-er, steps of brick cubes are laid out on the exterior of the library to devise a playful structure where children can freely climb up and down.
Having conceived spaces that are predominantly dedicated to the local activities, I proceed to envision a space for both the locals and the visitors outside of this particular community to congregate and expose themselves to elements and matters that might be unfamiliar to them but carry great educational value. An exhibition space occupies the third level where local artists can showcase and exhibit their works that speak to the profoundly rich culture of urban villages. Large windows on all surrounding walls create a well-lit space that is optimal for display and exhibit. The space is left to be flexible and adaptable to different forms and nature of artwork. Facilities and space that have educational values to them are redistributive resources that are important components for social and spatial integration (Liu et al. 17). Visitors of Baishizhou are able to come to this space and appreciate urban villages from a more human and intimate perspective through the lenses of art and craft. Rooftop spaces should also be utilized as venues for community activities (Song 202). On the fourth level is a rooftop terrace, where visitors can have a panoramic view of the surrounding city fabric. Seating areas and vegetation engender a more dynamic environment where different activities can be performed. A chimney with adjustable louvers is placed on the rooftop that facilitates airflow and promotes the ventilation within the building.
Activity spaces in urban villages are extremely limited and facilities are scarce; thus, flexibility in use of spaces seems necessary (Song 202). With multiple points of access and plenty of open space, the courtyard becomes a rather flexible space for different outdoor events and activities such as movie screening or group dancing (Guangchangwu, which has become an increasingly popular pastime for Chinese housewives). Chinese people, especially the older generation, often take the form of group activities as they are heavily influenced by the collectivist value of the previous era. Fitness and leisure activities such as Guangchangwu or Tai Chi generate group identities for people in the same neighborhood (Lu, 146). The unprecedented zeal for these activities have transformed many previously unclaimed spaces within the neighborhood —squares, lawns, or small paved areas— into places with certain sociocultural meaning. The courtyard, unlike most of those ephemeral activity spaces in
Baishizhou, provides a safer, cleaner, better-maintained space that is well attuned to these group activities. It complements the indoor fitness area to present more options for the users to carry out activities that are part of their routines. Parallel to the wall, strips of concrete at incremental height covered with wooden planks serve as tiered seating area for people to congregate, socialize, and have an intimate experience with the space. There are also portable chairs available to use because they attract middle-aged and elderly people to rest and chat (Song et al. 196). Typical of Chinese architecture, elements of water and green are also at play to construct a more diverse and enjoyable environment for the users of the space.

*Illustration 4.9 Isometric drawing of the courtyard*
Figure 4.6 One of the existing shrine next to a garbage disposal station (source: Wan)

Somewhat detached from the main building, an ancestral shrine is placed on the southeastern corner of the site (Illustration 4.5). It is a space designated for local people to gather and pray or worship. Such a space is incorporated into the design because ancestral veneration is an integral aspect of the lifestyle in urban villages, as each village is originally built around a dominant clan or a particular surname lineage (Wang 237). It is part of a traditional patriarchal religion that is centered on a ritual celebration of glorified ancestor in the lineage. Ancestral shrines and halls are physical forms of local religion and beliefs within the urban village that provide spiritual sustenance for the locals; many of them have become prominent
gathering space for religious events and celebrations. However, as Song, Pan, and Chen observe, such traditional activity venues are not well kept in *Baishizhou* (Song et al. 193). Indeed, shrines are scattered in *Baishizhou*; most of them are located in spaces that are not dedicated to religious activities — hidden in a dark corner, placed next to trash piles, or sticking out of a narrow alley. It is thus necessary to allocate a space on the site for such a program to accommodate these spiritual needs. The disconnection of the shrine from the rest of the building is intentional as religious activities are more formal and sacred and thus should be spatially separated from the rest of the programs. However, by placing it within close proximity to the community center, I anticipate a more natural and organic continuation of the space, where potential users could have easy access to all functions.

Walls are typically regarded as symbols of an *edge*, but could they instead become a *node*? The design of the community center in *Baishizhou* presents an affirmative answer by bringing a community together and spurring engagement with a previously underused space. The old, unaesthetic wall is painted white for a more aesthetically pleasing environment. The white wall reflects light, which makes the courtyard a more well-lit space for social gathering and interpersonal interactions. Inscriptions are engraved on the wall that display both the name of the community (白石洲, *Baishizhou*) and a slogan of three different words, 关爱, 分享, 凝聚, which in English mean, “to love, to share, and to cohere” respectively. The wall could also be utilized for murals and other forms of art that pertain to the notion of *community* and *togetherness*. In such way, the wall is turned from an alienated object to an existence with
meaning and relevance. This particular section of the wall, unlike most other walls in the city, can convey a sense of belonging and help stimulate a dialogue between the space and its user.

![Illustration 4.10 Section drawing (cut through the multi-story building and the library)](image)

**Reflection**

Community space is fundamentally pivotal in the making and sustenance of a collective lifestyle. Yoshiharu Tsukumoto, a renowned Japanese architect, suggests that *space* (空间) and *human behavior* (行为) are the two most important resources to build a shared vision and aspiration among citizens of a city (Tsukumoto 2). However, public urban spaces in China with both a practical and engaging nature — that are properly designed for human behaviors such as encounter, interaction, gathering, spontaneous playing, or simply for seeing and being seen — are still largely few and far between, not to mention in underprivileged neighborhoods such as urban villages. In *Baishizhou*, an absence of such a designated space has led to an unsound
residential environment, in which exists little emphasis on the notion of human behavior and communal lifestyle, much less on a productive dialogue with the city. The design intervention presented in this thesis has acknowledged the contextual issue of a missing place and responded with a proposal of a community venue that makes use of an underused border space to reclaim a sense of community and to facilitate sociocultural immersion and engagement that is increasingly critical on a divided urban landscape.

In a paper that I had previously written on the topic of socio-territorial fragmentation in China and Argentina, I proposed that we as a society need to redirect and reimagine future planning and developments of the city to go beyond the simple engineering paradigm to reevaluate the issues of priorities and needs (Liu 28). This statement is equally applicable and valuable in the case of Baishizhou and all other urban villages. It is evident that the urban villages of Shenzhen have always been in-between formal policy and informal growth. Thus, a progressive way of thinking is necessary to mediate between the two and initiate complementary processes. Baishizhou, along with other urban villages in Shenzhen, has experienced remarkable moments and shifts in policy, social, and spatial changes. Future planning and design of the site must adequately recognize the dynamic processes of the space and the community so that they can be flexible, active, and responsive. In the case of urban villages, design has the potential to raise awareness that could potentially counteract the skewed arena of representation.

Instead of drawing boundaries between urban villages and the rest of the city, mutual understanding should be established, environments improved, and edges blurred. Shenzhen, as do many other Chinese cities facing similar problems, needs to find the seams where these
neighborhoods can be woven into the city fabric and to transform these enclaves into more outstanding sources of vitality and meaning (Al 39). With quality renovation and regeneration, urban villages can represent a viable model of vernacular urbanism that is uniquely Chinese. Through localized strategic frameworks that allow for incremental planning and design rather than the generalized metropolitan master plans, there is an opportunity to harness the differentiation, individuality, and meaning of life in urban villages. Only till then can people start to fully unveil and appreciate the human-scale, vibrancy, and spontaneity that these neighborhoods encompass.

Afterword

Thea Jones argues that “architecture has to have meaning beyond structures with roofs for sleeping, cooking, dancing, laughing, or crying,” with which I wholeheartedly agree (Jones 7). I intended to do a design thesis because I believe that design often has the power to address and resolve sociocultural issues much more efficiently and directly than other approaches. In urban villages, where destruction rips through the streets in the name of change and attempts to empty all contents, architecture is capable of reinstating the value of a disappearing culture and emulating a sensation that envelopes the past, the present, and the future.

In a modern world where merits and pitfalls manifest themselves at the same time, design can and should be an apparatus of change. It should both reorient physical solutions toward more humane purposes and challenge programmatic assumptions that jeopardize urbanity and better communities (Lozano 7). To nurture a better urbanity requires us to envision better forms of planning and design that would not only epitomize the history and
heritage of the site but, on a more profound level, also underline the existing dilemma and remedy sociocultural dissolution that is becoming increasingly prevalent on a global level.
Appendix

Illustration 7.1 Collage that I made in the early stage of this thesis to explore urban borders and city life

Illustration 7.2 Section drawing
Illustration 7.2 Sketch (courtyard)

Illustration 7.3 Streetscape sketch
Illustration 7.4 Streetscape sketch

Illustration 7.5 Streetscape sketch
Illustration 7.6 Sketch (Playing area in the library)
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