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Doctoral Dissertation
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Curated in China

**Manipulating the city through the Shenzhen
Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture**

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Summary

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In 2005, the first Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture took place. Since then, eight editions followed: the event has gradually gained popularity, generating a parallel exhibition in neighbouring Hong Kong (becoming thus a Bi-City Biennale) and figuring today among the most renowned global architectural Rendez-Vous.

Meanwhile, the city and the event have cemented a tight, mutual relationship. Intended both as a discursive theoretical platform and an operative tool to trigger tangible spatial transformations, the Shenzhen Biennale represents a case where to investigate the interconnectedness between ephemeral events and urban space in a time when temporary projects and festivals are acquiring relevance - questioning the mainstream conception of permanent planning as a feature of contemporary cities.

The Shenzhen Biennale is, first of all, an exhibition. As cultural events par excellence, biennials represent well-rehearsed forms of dissemination and display of disciplinary knowledge in the fields of architecture and art. Nevertheless, they also epitomise the increasing festivalisation of contemporary urban spaces, entailing multiple dimensions of spectacle and consumption. Generally observed both as global cultural phenomena and marketing tools locally adopted by cities that strive to emerge in the neo-liberal system of the creative economy, biennials, triennials, and the like are now expanding in all directions - reinventing and redefining both disciplinary boundaries and the notion of “event” itself.

Fitting in this framework, the Shenzhen Biennale embodies an aspirational status: it aims at actively building - rather than simply displaying - the relationship between architecture and urban socio-spatial issues. At the threshold between the intellectual parade and the institutional tool, it is a multifaceted object trying to adopt new methods to investigate and transform urban spaces.

The setting up of such an international event in Shenzhen shows how the social and economic context of an emerging Chinese metropolis has instrumentally renegotiated well-codified paradigms belonging to the so-called “Global North” - which have been ruling the cosmopolitan biennials’ circus for a long time - delineating an autonomous ground of experimentation.

The exhibition is an ephemeral three-months show framed in the ‘narrative’ system of the city, epitomising Shenzhen’s ambitions to gain a place on the world-class creative cities’ map.

On the other side, the Biennale also represents a powerful tool to tackle local issues by

directly transforming the cityscape. Throughout eight editions, the exhibition has evolved as a self-defined 'urban catalyst': an instrument to manipulate the city's built fabric through the 'reactivation' of spaces - and to question issues related to Shenzhen's hypertrophic urban development.

Physical spaces transformed by the event propel an idealised, overwhelming narrative of visual delight and urban extravaganza. They witness the interlocking of multiple actors (organisers, Urban Planning Bureau, corporate sponsors, curators and designers) who use the event to pursue different objectives and build a vast network of - often not so frictionless - interactions between the exhibition and the local reality. Allegedly everybody may stroll among the colourful exhibits and enjoy the spectacle in the exhibition's heterotopic space: yet, what is behind - and beyond - the event? To whom?

This research aims at deepening the understanding of the Biennale's spatial nature, trying to disentangle the event's multifaceted nature - and its inherent contradictions - through multiple simultaneous stories and perspectives. The ex-post reading of the exhibition's spatial narratives observes the layered relationship between narration and transformation, which the event has gradually set up. It aims to investigate the Biennale's agency in establishing a relational network within Shenzhen's urban space: a close reading of this specific case study, moreover, sets out a broader framework for understanding the role of biennials - and urban events at large - in contemporary times.

Research questions

The Shenzhen Biennale represents a case-study to investigate the intersection between temporary events and urban space in a time when ephemeral projects and events are gaining growing importance, questioning the mainstream conception of planning as a permanent and fixed feature of contemporary cities.

The research aims at unpacking the agency that the Shenzhen Biennale has acquired throughout eight editions, as a 'worlding' practice and as an urban assemblage: it is both a trans-scalar instrument and a tool of urban transformation in conveying a spectacular vision of the city.

In transforming spaces, the Biennale device has progressively built a parallel city, entailing a dialectical relationship between the staging of an idealised 'doppelgänger' - representing the "Chinese dream"- and the real city. What is the relationship that the Biennale has progressively built within the Shenzhen's cityscape, crossing these two dimensions? How does the Shenzhen "Biennale" work, and what actions has it deployed in reshaping the symbolic and material spaces of the city? What frictions emerge between the narration of the event and its spatial outcomes - when the exhibition leaves the floor to the 'real' city again?

Through the observation of the case study, a broader reflection is possible. Beyond the spatial and temporal compression embedded in the spectacularisation of the exhibitionary space, what is the role of a biennial of contemporary architecture and urban planning? What kind of perspectives contemporary biennials - and ephemeral vents at large - open in understanding and transforming the city, also considering their spread out of the well-rehearsed economic, social and politic environment of the Global North?

Structure of the work

The work is structured in three parts and seven chapters. The research combines the chronological narration of the biennial editions, the thematic analysis of the Biennale's contents and curatorial ambition, and the observation of the exhibition's spatial agency - focusing on the sites that the event has manipulated through time.

PART ONE, "Framing the Object", positions the research's theoretical context and presents the case study, the Shenzhen Biennale.

Chapter 1 frames contemporary architecture biennials as temporary cultural events that try to adopt new investigation tools and display to represent and observe complex urban issues, considering both the global and local networks. The section focuses on the hybridisation of international models in the Asian context, starting from a global overview. Their evolution blurs the boundaries of the biennial as a globalised and monolithic cultural institution, showing how interpretative paradigms typical of geography and economy of the Global North have been manipulated through diverse, multifaceted, socio-economical contexts: in this framework Asian cities - and their turn towards 'creative' policies - position themselves not as subaltern actors, but rather as autonomous contexts of experimentation.

Chapter 2 positions the Shenzhen Biennale case study as the reinterpretation of a global format within a precise geopolitical context. The exhibition is an ephemeral three-month event that is part of a 'narrative' system linked to the international circuit of major exhibitions and cultural events and represents Shenzhen's ambitions as a 'worlding' creative city. The Biennale instrumentally uses spectacle and 'festivalisation' to affirm the city on four interconnected dimensions: the global level, the national level, the regional level and the urban level.

The exhibition deploys 'culture' - and its spatial outcomes - as a means to position Shenzhen on the global 'map' of creative cities not only through the transfer of a model but as a 'situated' practice. The Biennale aims at addressing 'local' issues affecting Shenzhen's - and the Pearl River Delta - urban fabric: throughout different editions, the exhibition has evolved as a self-defined 'urban catalyst', an instrument that intervenes directly on the city's space through their physical transformation - or 'reactivation'.

PART TWO, "Through the Object", represents the core of the research, tackling material and immaterial aspects of the Shenzhen Biennale.

Chapter 3 is the methodological kernel of the research and positions the Shenzhen Biennale as an articulated 'urban' device. Spatial fragments transformed by the event, stand as a result of the interaction between the event and the city, delineating an expanded network of actors.

The evolution of these spaces represent a lens through which to read multiple declensions of the relational complexity between the exhibition's spectacular *locus* and the real city. Crossing narration and transformation, an *ex-post* reading of the Biennale legacy allows to re-trace the history of spaces, their manipulation and their evolution in order to delineate the network of relationships that this peculiar form of exhibition has established with the city. The fragmented transformations injected by the Biennale show both overlaps and deviations between the official narrative and tangible outcomes, defining the exhibition as a spatial 'assemblage'.

Chapter 4, **Chapter 5** and **Chapter 6** delve into the exhibition's spatial narratives through relationship with Shenzhen urban space. Three different declensions of the spectacularization of urban space are detected, corresponding to three different typologies of Shenzhen's distinctive

urban fabrics: the post-industrial sites, urban villages and the Central Business District. These spatial narratives explore the agency of the exhibition throughout its different editions, questioning its transformative capacity.

The exploration of the event's spatial legacy leads to the identification of frictions and tensions brought about the contact between the Biennale and Shenzhen's socio-spatial fabric. It aims at showing how the term 'catalyst' commonly associated to the event defines a vector that crosses diverse dimensions.

Chapter 4 questions the relationship between the Biennale and the post-industrial spaces in the city: by entering the global scenario of biennials, the event displays and uses spaces to re-enact the recent historical memory of the city.

The chapter describes the event's interventions the three post-industrial sites that housed the 2007, 2009, 2013 and 2015 editions - and the subsequent transformations that the spaces went through - trying to highlight the gap between curatorial/design intentions, programmatic statements of public actors and private developers' interests.

Chapter 5 describes the spatial interventions of the 2017 Biennale in the urban villages of Nantou Old Town and Dameisha. The event intervenes in Shenzhen's most sensitive areas, urban villages, as representative locations of the informal cultural and spatial heritage in the city. The Biennale exhibited and made spectacular - the often problematic - relationship between a megalopolis shaped by big transformation plans and its inner areas. Another urban imaginary emerged: a 'global' city which gives value to its 'local' diversity, its physical legacy and its intangible - and cultural one -, projecting a critical gaze on sensitive urban and social issues. The theatrical urban carnival displayed by the 2017 Biennale embodies the coexistence of different tensions between spectacle, the aestheticisation of the informal city, transformation strategies operated by real estate developers, and the attempts made by designers and curators to offer new perspectives on those areas that have been commonly defined as "cancer of the city" (O'Donnell and Wan 2016) - and that are now subjected to massive transformation plans.

Chapter 6 tackles a third type of urban space which strongly characterises Shenzhen's recent urbanisation - and where the Biennale has injected new forms of urban spectacle in the "generic city" (Koolhaas 1995). The chapter focuses on the intervention strategies of the event in the Futian Central Business District, one of the most representative areas of the city, embodying a strong symbolic - and political - value and delineating an ambivalent relationship between the aspirational critical gaze of the exhibition and the institutional powers regulating the city.

PART THREE, "Beyond the Object", is an *ex-post* consideration on the Shenzhen Biennale, questioning its agency and positioning it as a reference to operate a broader reflection on the relationship between ephemeral spatial, artistic practices and the city.

Chapter 7 presents a final reflection on Shenzhen Biennale as a trans-scalar urban assemblage where the re-packing of the different spatial narratives delineates opportunities and tensions. A broader perspective expands on architecture biennials as a tool, as layered contestation of space, economics, art and politics, on their role as active critical platforms, and on their limits and potential to interpret and transform urban reality out of the paradigms of the 'Global North'. The chapter expands on a generalisation on the global phenomenon, reflecting on the notion of 'urban curation' in the framework of biennials and their relationship with urban transformation.