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Article

Socio-Spatial ‘Tabula Rasa’ and Punctual Preservation: The Case Study of Measurable Compensation in Lijiao Village

Edoardo Bruno 

Department of Architecture and Design (DAD), China Room, Politecnico di Torino, 10125 Torino, Italy; edoardo.bruno@polito.it

Abstract: Villages in the cities (VICs) exhibit all the contradictions of contemporary Chinese urbanisation. These historic settlements attracted large floating populations during the booming urban economy, which redefined their morphological assets. Moreover, their urban persistence reflects the social and cultural modifications occurring within metropolises. Municipal governments’ attention was drawn to the extraordinary densification process, triggering negotiation regarding urban upgrades and social engagement alongside the overall transformation of VICs. Despite the broad scientific literature on VIC redevelopment, especially from urban and social studies perspectives, little attention has been paid to the spatial and monetary compensation awarded for forced or planned demolitions. The transition from informal agglomerations to residential compounds implies the action of local authorities cooperating with real estate developers to make existing house ownership the basis of compensation for measurable spaces in new typological configurations defined by radical social shifts. Lijiao village in Guangzhou was selected as a case study to observe how its urban renewal programme affected the evaluation of historic building preservation versus large selective demolition. Cultural heritage and spatial compensation have become the cornerstones for reconfiguring the village’s morphology and the everyday life experiences framed by interested local groups’ mediation.

Keywords: urban villages; Chinese urbanisation; spatial compensation; stakeholders’ negotiation



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1. Introduction

The intensity of Chinese urban transformation has changed the face of urban areas and undermined the relationship between such consolidated centres and the surrounding countryside. This new complex geography has resulted from a series of political [1–3], economic [4–7], and administrative [8–11] reforms aimed at establishing mechanisms by which public and collective land ownership can be made attractive to the real estate market [12–14]. Furthermore, land use transfers have caused serious clashes [15,16] between local inhabitants, real estate investors, and officials. Therefore, managing the relations between actors with different perspectives is a key element of contemporary China’s urban transition process; urban planning prerogatives, urban planning programmes, real estate investor profits, and monetisation opportunities for local owners represent the central issues of the negotiations.

The socio-spatial characteristics of Chinese urban transformation address the study, prioritizing the interactions between differing drivers at the local level [17] as the determinants of spatial formation. The control of land-use utilization, the encouragement of land-leasing mechanisms, and the growing competitiveness between urban spaces [18] represent the background where public and private actors influence, and inextricably link each other’s, image of the contemporary Chinese cities. The investigation of these processes means adopting a holistic approach requiring the cooperation of disciplines able to unpack the ties between space, politics, and market [19].

The most emblematic case is that of villages in cities (VICs), known as *chengzhongcun* in Chinese. VICs have been widely studied because their formation was caused by extreme Chinese metropolitan expansion, which engulfed local rural collectives and incorporated them into the urban sphere. As argued by many scholars [20–24], the study of VICs offers an interesting perspective on China’s recent urban revolution, which led to a need for ambitious political and economic programmes to be negotiated according to local spatial conditions and social group interests.

Guangdong Province, and the Pearl River Delta (PRD) in particular—one of the first areas to experiment with market reforms [25–27], is awash with local stories about VICs. The VICs in this province exhibited repeated patterns and singular trajectories of spatial modification. The socio-spatial structure of the PRD villages, in which local morphologies overlap with familial lineages, benefitted from economic growth that led to the development of enclaves of migrant workers.

The consequent densification, which sometimes reached mind-boggling intensity, prompted local governments to promote sanitisation programmes in areas that suffered from degradation and failed to comply with contemporary urban planning standards [28]. However, these programmes resulted in the extensive demolition of various localities [29,30], resulting in compensation for villagers in the best cases and forced demolitions in the worst cases through the transfer of collective land ownership from villages to the state and the use of land for new development projects by real estate companies.

Although the Chinese urban planning has been defined as the representation of the governing force [31], in fact, it is part of that deregulation process which resulted in bringing it under the sphere of local influence [32]. It was part of a general intention to increase the coherence with local contexts, but at the same time, it legitimated instruments used by local bureaucratic and market elites to fulfil their objectives [33]. For this reason, local policies need to be evaluated as experimental and situated instruments [34], which are generalizable within the scope of the collective they represent.

The urban renovation policies considered in this studio portray the privileged point of view through mapping the interactions and rules that legitimate spatial modifications. They have been intended where the decisions of heterogeneous groups become vivid, arguing a socio-spatial interpretative model of the recent Chinese urban transformation. In this way, the power fragmentation between central and local, both public and private—in its transparent or opaque connotations, has been observed by measurable spatial traces.

This article examines the relationship between local negotiation and spatial transformations by analysing the story of a particular VIC—the village of Lijiao, in the city of Guangzhou, Haizhu District, China—during its most intense project discussions between 2013 and 2016. The data analysed in this article originated from fieldwork research conducted in the village of Lijiao between 2015 and 2017, based on interviews with local experts, villagers, and actors involved in the transformation project. After 2016, despite the villagers voting in favour of the resettlement scheme, construction work did not start immediately, except in some peripheral areas of the village.

The lowering of the commercialized buildings in the city of Guangzhou (Table 1) (suggesting a general decline in the real estate sector), the enormous size of the transformation project, and difficulties in obtaining approvals from the municipal Urban Planning Bureau were given as reasons for the involved stakeholders to postpone extensive intervention.

Even if the regeneration of Lijiao is primarily considered by the Guangzhou government—inserting it within the ‘Guangzhou 2022 Key Construction Project Plan’ [35]—after 2017, it entered a new phase. Recently, invited experts are implementing the project according to the regulations, adjusting quantities, and spatial disposition to prepare the ground for commercial purposes.

Studies of urban villages typically focus on sociological and anthropological perspectives related to urban studies. Such studies highlight important topics—for example, urban village transitions framed by the rural–urban divide [36,37], villages’ capability to attract many migrants [21,38–40], and the main clashes and legal disputes between dwellers and

institutional bodies [41,42], besides reporting on, or even denouncing, forced demolitions as examples of state power imposed on local conditions.

By contrast, the spatial quantification underpinning the associated negotiation processes have attracted little attention [43]. One reason may be the difficulty of obtaining detailed information on processes that are often opaque [37,44] and may involve conflicting parties. Housing demolitions represent one of the most critical social conflicts within the Chinese urbanization process and, in some cases, interviews need to remain anonymous [45]; moreover, reference to specific locations requires the utilization of pseudonyms [46,47]. Law studies have widely investigated the procedures involved in urban transitions—for example, the magazine *Chinese Law and Government* has published detailed juridical reports on disputes over relocations, expropriations, demolitions, and failures to compensate [48], without connecting specific cases to the implications of spatial transformations.

Table 1. Main indicators of real estate projects in Guangzhou (2013–2019). Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China.

Year	Investment Completed (100 Million Yuan)	Floor Space of Buildings under Construction (10,000 sqm)	Floor Space of Buildings Completed (10,000 sqm)	Floor Space of Commercialized Buildings Sold (10,000 sqm)	Average Selling Price of Commercialized Buildings (Yuan/sqm)
2013	1572.43	8159.31	1141.30	1699.98	15,330
2014	1816.15	9369.93	1919.46	1540.02	15,719
2015	2137.59	9345.57	1511.49	1653.07	14,612
2016	2540.85	10,061.92	1202.24	1949.10	16,384
2017	2702.89	10,658.49	1320.66	1757.75	17,633
2018	2701.93	10,999.01	1523.98	1550.28	20,014
2019	3102.26	11,985.91	2899.19	1464.64	22,363

This article addresses its analytical framework concerning studies which started to investigate VIC transformation from a spatial point of view [43,49–51]. They correlate the consistency of local settlements, which involve the recognition of historical urban fabric arranged over time by local communities, and the emergence of resettlement programs where a group of actors plans intensive transformations.

The lack of spatial readings in contemporary Chinese cities has critical scientific implications in detecting urban transformations [34]. It is more evident in the case of VICs, as their informal consistency and the sensitivity in releasing information to the public do not permit comprehensively mapping the modifications. A spatial perspective permits to verify the relationships between local interested groups—‘bureaucratic entrepreneurs’ and ‘market entrepreneurs’ [19]—and site transformation. In this sense, within the specific urban regeneration policy, it is possible to trace the emergence of local networks around the decision-making processes disseminated between local corporatism and clientele relationship [52]. Their strategic role in shaping the post-reform period, mismatching bureaucratic and market forces [53], and generating cooperation and conflicts next to significant capital accumulation [54] lies next to Lijiao’s spatial formation. In this sense, the policies dedicated to VIC transformation have socio-spatial implications, defining the legal arena where urban projects and stakeholders collide.

From a broader theoretical point of view, they frame this research by referring to Pirie’s concept of understanding ‘space as process’ [55], as well as underlining how a regeneration program promoted by authorities entails Soja’s perspective about spatial justice [56] and socio-spatial dialectic [57]. Furthermore, Dideç’s contributions reinforce the idea that space is the repository of external forces characterised by domination and inseparable from specific contingencies [58]. The nodal point of space as a conflicting arena described by Brenner [59] improves the famous lefebvrian sentence ‘(social) space is a (social) product’. Its adoption creates the favourable conditions to intend space as embedded and not put aside, thus becoming ‘a tool for the analysis of society’ [60]. The socio-spatial perspective surrounding the implications of urban regeneration programmes has been positioned as

essential to understanding the Chinese context in the study by Mc Gee et al. [19] amidst the rapid urbanisation process.

In fact, the stratification of conflictual relations between central and peripheral governing apparatus in China [61] leaves measurable traces in how they manage urban transformations and establish dedicated alliances. They are linked to local project managerialism, depicting a precise trajectory of the Chinese context where politics, market, and social groups contribute to defining a personal meaning of ‘urbanism’ [34].

In order to prioritise the role of spatial contingency to re-frame the discussion about Lijiao transformation and surpass the issues related to limited access to public data and maps, this study was based on field research that cross-referenced the information received from different actors. More specifically, the study’s goals were as follows:

- (1) To obtain data on Lijiao’s existing spatial consistency and create a map of places susceptible to extensive demolition operations;
- (2) To obtain information on the project presented by the real estate company;
- (3) To compare the village’s existing morphology with the proposed project;
- (4) To compare the quantities involved in the transformation to measure the extent of the demolitions and evaluate the new spatial organisation of built-up areas and land occupation;
- (5) To unpack the resettlement compensation schemes to overview the mechanisms governing the monetisation of spaces under demolition.

The transition from an existing spatial arrangement to one prepared by a real estate company involves a mechanism whereby spatial complexity, including cultural assets, publicly registered properties, and illegal construction, is reduced to a quantifiable and transferable asset. Demolitions and compensation procedures are governed by the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (2004 revision) [62], which states in Articles 10 and 13 that ‘the State may, for public interest uses, expropriate or requisition land [Article 10]/private property [Article 13] and make compensation in accordance with the provisions of the law’. Furthermore, many local norms, which are often contradictory and incompatible with national legislation, make it challenging to establish a unified method for compensating villagers and landlords [63], often giving rise to authoritarianism and abuse because the existing compensation mechanism is mainly based on economic factors [64].

For these reasons, this article examines quantification and norms alongside the negotiation between different stakeholders to conceptualise VICs as the result of exchanges between different interest groups. This article discusses selective demolition in terms of spatial quantities, local rules, institutional roles, municipal plans, and economic benefits.

The most important research contributions regarding Lijiao concern: (i) the comparison of the morphology of the village before and after the proposed conversion; (ii) the role played by heritage sites in the redefinition of the municipal urban-planning grid; (iii) the implications of specific resettlement rules that convert existing spaces into monetisable goods; and (iv), in terms of methodology, the use of multiscalar spatial data (from urban master plans to single artefacts) and multi-agency analysis to map and frame the negotiation surrounding VIC conversions.

The study’s rationale utilizes an in-depth spatial observation about Lijiao regeneration to demonstrate how local consistency and stakeholders’ network represent a single negotiation arena, demonstrating the experimental and situated path of contemporary Chinese spatial formation. Negotiations are related to the spatial quantities in play, and the actors involved in the process modify their agency according to the forms inserted in urban projects. In this sense, the study argues how precise spatial knowledge of Chinese case studies can represent a privileged point of view in enriching the contemporary debate. Moreover, the results from the minute observation stimulate social and spatial disciplines to cooperate in unpacking the stratified and conflictual arena of Chinese urbanization processes.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. The next section situates the Lijiao case study in the context of Guangzhou’s urban expansion. By investigating municipal

recovery policies and programmes, it shows how local community spaces are redefined in municipal urban master plans. The third section discusses the research methodology and the primary data collected during the fieldwork. The fourth section compares starting and final quantification, and examines the calculation principles underpinning the resettlement procedures. The fifth section discusses the results, highlighting that extensive demolition in the village coexisted with local support structures. The concluding section argues that future research the intimate relationship between local deliberative power and monetizable spaces as a means to study VICs' evolution.

2. Background Information

The village of Lijiao, located in the Haizhu District, is a historical centre dating back at least 800 years and is located on the main southern branch of the Pearl River, which crosses Guangzhou (Figure 1). The relationship with water is a distinctive feature of the local history of Lijiao, the name of which refers to the Chinese characters *li*, meaning 'to drain', and *jiao*, meaning 'branch of the river'. The village was formed by progressively reclaiming land from the Pearl River Delta. Lijiao's historical growth was based on the expansion of agricultural activities, an improvement in river transportation, and the addition of new buildings to support the development of the local market.



Figure 1. Location of Lijiao village in the Haizhu District, Guangzhou, China. The red line represents the hypothesis of the 6 km urban axis connecting the village with the Central Business District of Zhujiang New Town.

The resulting Lijiao village's morphology resembled, from the air, a tree with local houses located along the main 'branches', which is of particular interest for the preservation of the cultural and environmental heritage in PRD territory. The village's settlement is based on a familial social structure, which organises community spaces according to family lineage. For example, temples and ancestral homes, where powerful local representatives deliberate on the most significant decisions, are positioned next to a group of houses belonging to a particular family. The profound relationship between built spaces and lineage is the main feature of Lijiao's unique context and was therefore a pivotal issue when external actors proposed its profound transformation.

However, it is important not to conceptualise VICs (even the most historically relevant ones) as spatial structures that have remained unchanged over time. The village's position on the outskirts of the large urban centre, Guangzhou, meant that Lijiao's spatial structure was repeatedly affected by China's tremendous political and economic changes. The transformation of the land regime into rural collectives from 1949 onwards, the progressive industrialisation and mechanisation of local farming, and vehicular mobility programmes limiting water transportation are all contributory factors for the contemporary stratification of Lijiao.

Furthermore, the 1978 market reforms substantially changed the village's economic outlook. Lijiao, like many other neighbouring villages, has become a prime destination for many migrants from the countryside seeking employment. This floating population, which is largely unrecorded in official statistics [65], has transformed Lijiao, and other villages in the PRD, into preferred locations with affordable housing. The attractiveness of its emerging real estate market has pushed local owners to densify its physical structure (Figure 2) through the uncontrolled demolition of existing buildings. According to the information received by the experts invited to participate in the negotiation process and conduct surveys on local heritage, an uncountable portion of Lijiao's historical urban fabric has been lost during the densification process (Figure 3). Their substitution with buildings, deemed illegal by local authorities, caused sanitation problems and reduced public safety, negatively affecting public opinion. Consequently, the inherited spatial features undermined the administrative discourse, which has often referred to VICs as the 'cancer of the contemporary Chinese city' [66,67].

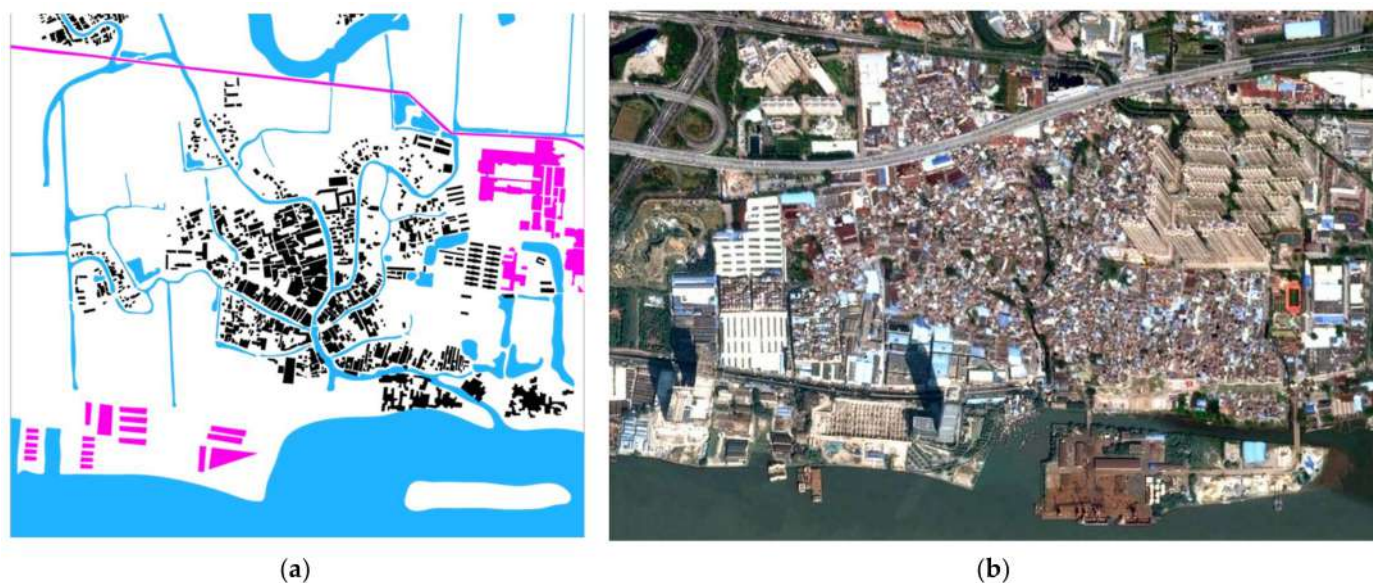


Figure 2. Comparison between Lijiao village morphology in 1978 (a) and in 2016 (b). The data contained in (a) have been obtained from the large photographic publication *Atlas of historical images of Guangzhou in 1978*; Guangzhou Urban development Archives: Guangzhou, 2008. The study was aimed to spatially represent the consistency of the Guangzhou urban area right before the beginning of the economic reforms promoted by Deng Xiaoping. The map offers the possibility to appreciate the intense urban restructuring that happened in Lijiao village over the last forty years, with the densification of the historical village, the surrounding infrastructural upgrade, and the insertion of new residential gated communities and industrial buildings.



Figure 3. The central core of Lijiao village in 2017. Photo credit: Matteo Missaglia.

To achieve greater control of urban planning, Guangdong Province launched the ‘three oldies’ redevelopment policy (*sanjiu gaizao*) in 2008 [68]. The term ‘three oldies’, utilized by provincial and Guangzhou municipal policy makers [28], refers to (1) the urban legacies of the centre’s historic areas (*jiu chengzhen*), (2) former brownfield sites (*jiu changfang*), and (3) historical villages (*jiu cunzhuang*). The goal of the policy, which was among Guangzhou’s urban regeneration tools in 2009, was to establish protocols for the regeneration of such areas, incorporating the spatial features of specific sites within broader municipal master plans. The policy envisioned specific governance for regeneration projects to support the real estate market in the central areas of the metropolis and help overcome the fragmentation of local land ownership. The policy’s underlying objective was to establish an alliance between the public and private sectors to resolve some of the contradictions triggered by rapid metropolitan growth and to establish negotiation between the involved parties. However, the policy was strongly criticised for potentially legitimising extensive demolitions of entire urban areas to the benefit of real estate speculators [49].

The policy was promulgated after a series of attempts experimented in Guangzhou after 2002—‘*Suggestion for Institutional Reform of Villages-In-The-City*’. The policies without a comprehensive negotiating framework did not achieve two main municipal goals: surpassing local land and housing ownership divisions and defining the scheme to quickly transfer the rights to the real estate market sector in search of available urban spaces [28]. Together with the ‘one village, one policy’ declared in 2008, the general institutional framework prioritised the transformation under a socio-spatial perspective. Therefore, further policy implementation needs to consider the significant role played by this model of ‘space negotiation’ [69], defining degrees of political and administrative autonomy in conducting local affairs through planning procedures. Retrospectively, this means that unboxing local masterplanning and extensively mapping local conditions make it possible to re-define the processes of contemporary Chinese spatial formation processes.

Lijiao and six other villages in the Haizhu District were included in a list of 52 urban villages selected by Guangzhou municipality in 2011 for regeneration. The list was part of the *Opinions on accelerating the pace of redevelopment of the ‘three oldies’* [28]. The start of the negotiation procedure entailed a series of activities, such as the formation of a local committee, surveys of existing homes, and the search for a private investor, to create a negotiation platform for local officials, investors, and villagers. The resettlement scheme resulting from the discussion among the different stakeholders had to be confirmed by, in Lijiao’s case, a minimum 80% vote by local inhabitants (Figure 4). Therefore, to avoid disputes, forced

demolitions, or resistance, Lijiao's transformation depended on the municipal 'one village, one policy' initiative, which held that each procedure involving transformation of an urban village had to balance urban master plan aims and local decision-making processes.

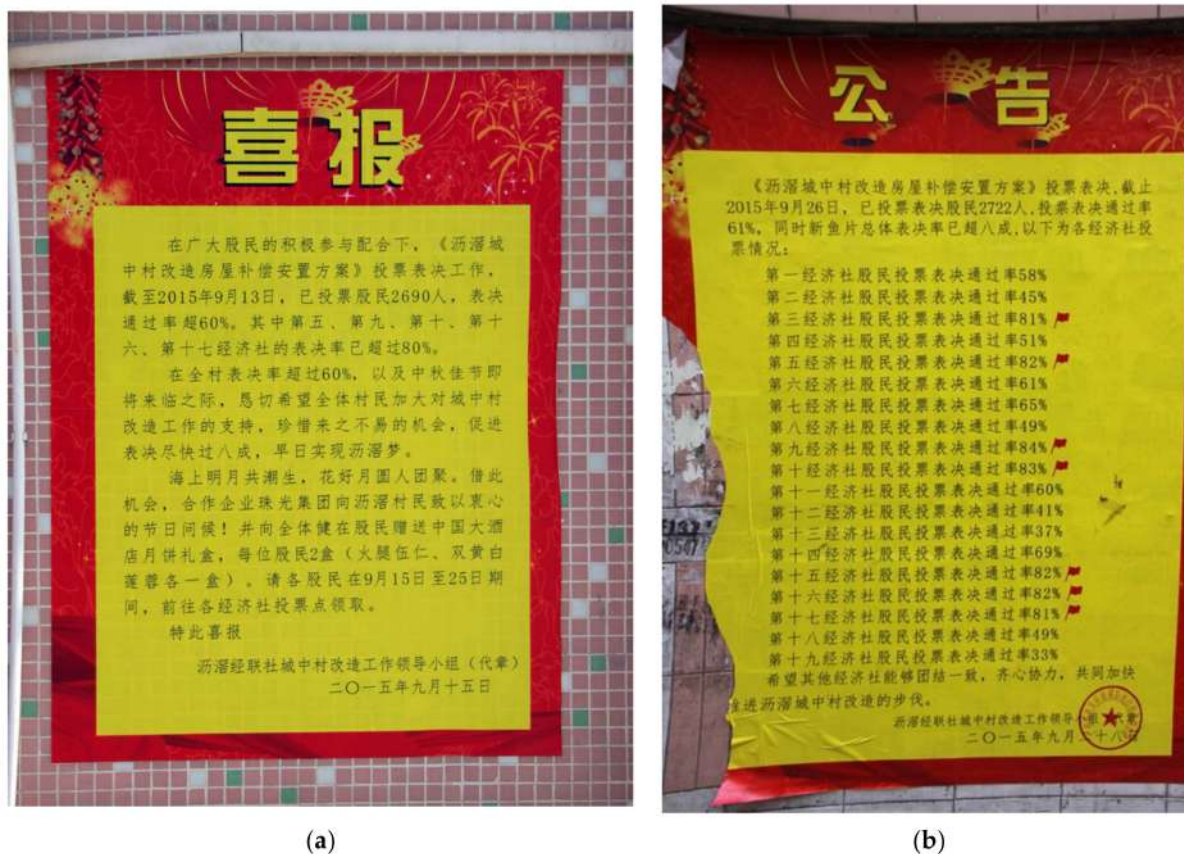


Figure 4. Posters appeared in Lijiao village in 2015, thanking the local community for the positive support along with the voting procedure. (a) The poster mentions “Good news/With the active participation and cooperation of a vast quantity of shareholders, the vote for the “Lijiao urban village housing renovation compensation and resettlement program” has seen 2690 votes from shareholders as of 13 September 2015, with a vote rate of more than 60%. Among the shareholders, the voting rates of the Fifth, Ninth, Tenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Economic Cooperatives have exceeded 80%. On the occasion of a voting rate of over 60%, and the approaching Mid Autumn Festival, we sincerely hope from all villagers your support for the work of the urban village renovation, cherish the hard-won opportunities, and vote as soon as possible to achieve a voting rate of over 80%, so that we can realize the Lijiao Dream earlier. Sea moon tide rise, perfect conjugal bliss of reunion [piece of poetry]. On this occasion, the cooperative enterprise ZhuGuang Group expresses its heartfelt wishes to all the shareholders of Lijiao! It will give moon cake gift boxes from China Grand Hotel to all living shareholders, 2 boxes per shareholder (one ham and nuts flavor, one Double Yolks and Lotus Seed flavor). All shareholders will be invited to the polling points of the economic cooperatives from September 15th to 25th to have the boxes/Thanks/By the association of Lijiao village renovation work leading group/15 September 2015. (b) The poster reports the results of the voting procedure in Lijiao's and quotes “Announcement/As of 26 September 2015, 2722 shareholders had voted on the “Compensation and Resettlement Plan for the Reconstruction of Houses in the Lijiao Village”, and the voting rate was 61%. Meanwhile, the overall voting in the Xinyu area has exceeded 80%, the following is the vote of each Economic Cooperative: First Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 58% approval rate/Second Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 45% approval rate/Third Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 81% approval rate/Fourth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 51% approval rate/Fifth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 82% approval rate/Sixth Econom-

ic Cooperative stockholders voted 61% approval rate/Seventh Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 65% approval rate/Eighth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 49% approval rate/Ninth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 84% approval rate/Tenth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 83% approval rate/Eleventh Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 60% approval rate/Twelfth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 41% approval rate/Thirteenth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 37% approval rate/Fourteenth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 69% approval rate/Fifteenth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 82% approval rate/Sixteenth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 82% approval rate/Seventeenth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 81% approval rate/Eighteenth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 49% approval rate/Nineteenth Economic Cooperative stockholders voted 33% approval rate/Hope that other economic cooperatives will unite and work together to accelerate the pace of transformation of Lijiao Urban Village/Lijiao Economic Cooperative Urban Village Transformation Leading Group/28 September 2015”.

The voting procedure is crucial to understand the socio-spatial implications of the resettlement schemes. Since 2014, it has been carried out by the ‘Lijiao Village Redevelopment Project Work Team’. Supported by the real estate developer, it has been responsible for promoting and diffusing through propagandistic activities the transformation of the village. Thanks to creating a dedicated social media page, the team set a series of actions—regulations updates, public meetings, Q&A sessions, promotional events, and tours on regenerated VICs—to gain the more significant support before any voting procedure. The number of the sessions was not defined from the start, balancing the forces at play towards a collective agreement.

Lijiao has been divided into nineteen voting districts. Since they almost overlap the village’s lineage structure, this gave the investors the chance to organize meetings and negotiations with specific families. The deliberative power is strictly connected to groups located in precise areas of the village, demonstrating how the socio-spatial structure of Lijiao is at the core of the negotiations between the actors involved. Figure 5 shows a map derived from data obtained by the real estate investors, where it is possible to appreciate how Lijiao’s historic core refused to support the transformation. In contrast, in peripheral areas—where economic interests are low and the possible monetization from the operation attracted many stakeholders, the quota of 80% was already surpassed in 2016.



Figure 5. Positive votes geographically distributed in Lijiao among the nineteen voting districts (9 September 2016). Red: over 80%, yellow: over 60%, blue: over 50%, and green: under 50%.

Besides community support, urban planning schemes have been constantly updated considering municipal and local prerogatives. The 2010 Haizhu District Master Plan (Figure 6) revealed that the municipality wanted to replace the village with new areas of urban expansion. The edges of the village were supposed to be incorporated into a planned grid, with only the central strip preserving local heritage sites. A year later, Lijiao Economic Shareholding began preparing its application under the ‘three oldies’ policy without substantially modifying the planning proposal, thus confirming the subdivision plan.

The Haizhu Eco-City Master Plan, launched in 2012, sought to transform the Haizhu District into an area where the preservation of environmental resources would coexist with the promotion of real estate and tourism interventions [70], with the village being absorbed into a municipal urban grid. The plan envisioned connecting Lijiao with the Central Business District of Zhujiang New Town and the landmark of the Canton Tower through a 6-km urban axis. Propagandistically, the village was supposed to become the ‘New South Gate of the City’, and its transformation became a strategic municipal issue.

To handle the bureaucratic procedures, the village invited the ZhuGuang Group (one of the most important real estate companies in Guangzhou) to manage the project; obtain the necessary permits; and, as described in Sections 3 and 4, propose a series of plans for the resettlement of the village. Simultaneously, as requested by the municipal authority of the Guangzhou Culture, Radio, Press, and Publication Bureau, the Haizhu District Media Department needed to strengthen the preservation requirements for its heritage sites and implement top-down governance capable of aligning national (the Third National Relic Survey had just been concluded in 2011), provincial, municipal, and district administrative levels [71].

In 2013, to create a proposal for Lijiao’s preservation of cultural relics, the ZhuGuang Group decided to employ external experts. The plan for Lijiao’s historical core was developed by the Urban Elephant design studio, which had extensive experience in developing urban regeneration projects in Guangzhou. The project separated the vertical development of residential towers from a central core dedicated to historic structures, where new low-density buildings were supposed to be combined with the restoration of historic artefacts on the preservation list (Figure 7). Vehicular traffic was going to be reduced to a minimum, and the new land use was supposed to promote open public spaces and green areas, the recovery of the central Lijiao canal, and the establishment of additional services for the community.

The project organised by the ZhuGuang Group, together with Urban Elephant consultants—produced through negotiation involving the local community, market analysis, municipal planning, and regulations for the preservation of local heritage sites, showed that the transformation would involve selective demolition of the village’s existing urban morphology (Figure 8). Notably, the preservation list placed limits on the extent of real estate development, distributing the intensity of the transformations across different lots.

In the first stage of the project, as will be explored in the following sections, the main objective was to set the principles to give to Lijiao a comprehensive strategy for heritage preservation in combination with the intense real estate project. According to the information received from Urban Elephant experts—involved in the regeneration process in cooperation with the Guangzhou Urban Planning and Design Survey Research Institute (GZPI)—starting from 2018, the plan for Lijiao was modified several times, negotiating with several municipal offices along with the preparation of the regulatory plan.

In the historical centre (Figure 7b), a more rigid infrastructural scheme opened the space for commercial operations in the North area, reconfigured the position of the educational public facilities from semi-independent to more independent land, and redefined the shape of the historical canal in respect of water management issues.

In recent years, the ZhuGuang Group developed peripheral areas of Lijiao. The historic core is still under negotiations between the experts and the Guangzhou Urban Planning Bureau, especially regarding the sensitive topic of heritage conservation along with intense urban transformations. Even if the villagers still support the redevelopment scheme, their social involvement has been paused, prioritizing the legal approvals from all the institutional bodies for this project’s second stage.

In February 2022, the Guangzhou Development and Reform Commission launched the “Guangzhou 2022 Key Construction Project Plan” [28]. The new policy aimed to boost and implement strategic sites within the municipality, promoting industrial and infrastructural upgrades, cultural and public intervention facilities, and environmental implementations, thus confirming the commitment to fulfil the “three oldies policy”. Lijiao village has been inserted into the long list of 650 key construction projects (the plan is composed of

650 key construction projects and 130 preparatory construction projects), supported by an annual investment plan of 364 billion yuan, demonstrating the engagement of public administration in concluding the regeneration of one of the biggest VICs in the city.

The following sections of this paper examine the quantification and rules through which the village's spatial consistency collapsed due to the implications of the negotiation process.

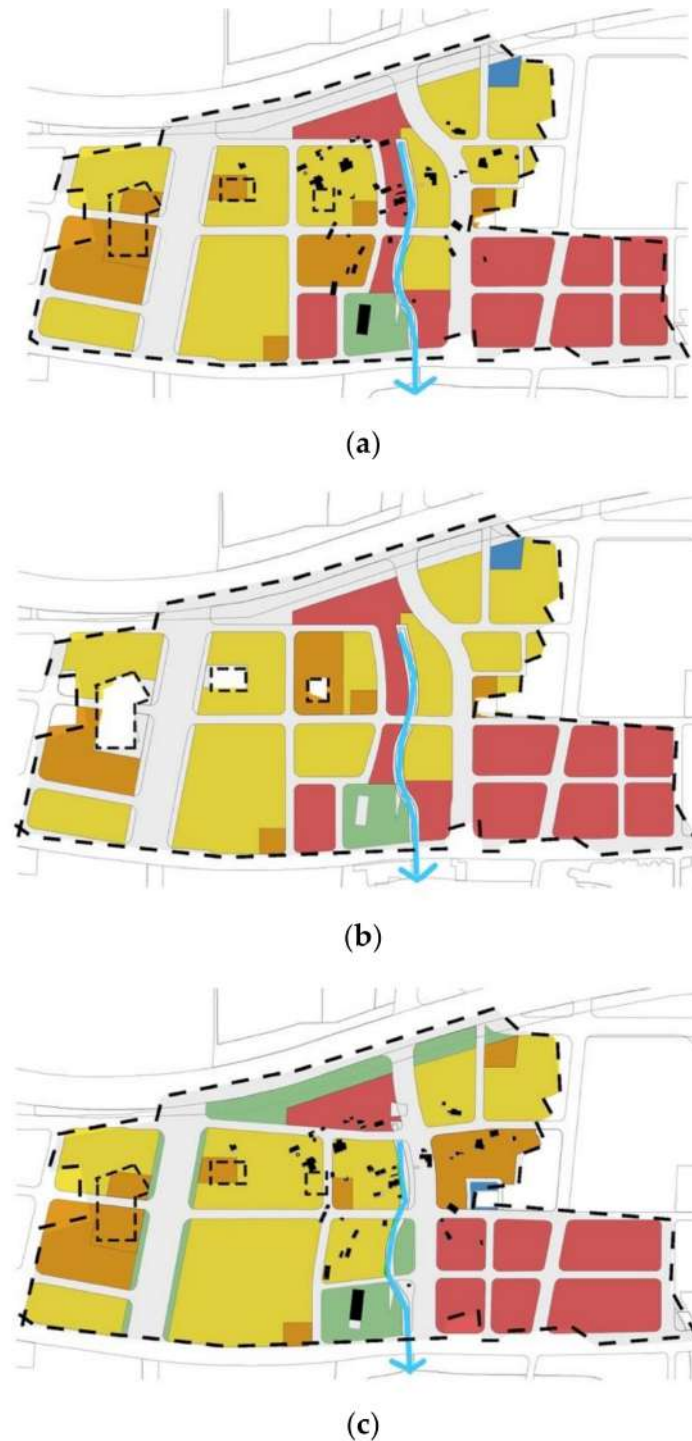


Figure 6. Evolution of the first proposals for the Lijiao ‘3 oldies policy’ redevelopment. Starting from a functional grid based on the 2010 Haizhu Master Plan (a), the urban proposals took into consideration the position of relics under preservation, deforming the land subdivision in the plans arranged by the Lijiao Economic Shareholding in 2011 (b) and by Haizhu Eco-City Master Plan in 2012 (c).



Figure 7. Urban design proposals for the preservation of the historical core of Lijiao developed by the Urban Elephant studio. [source: Urban Elephant].

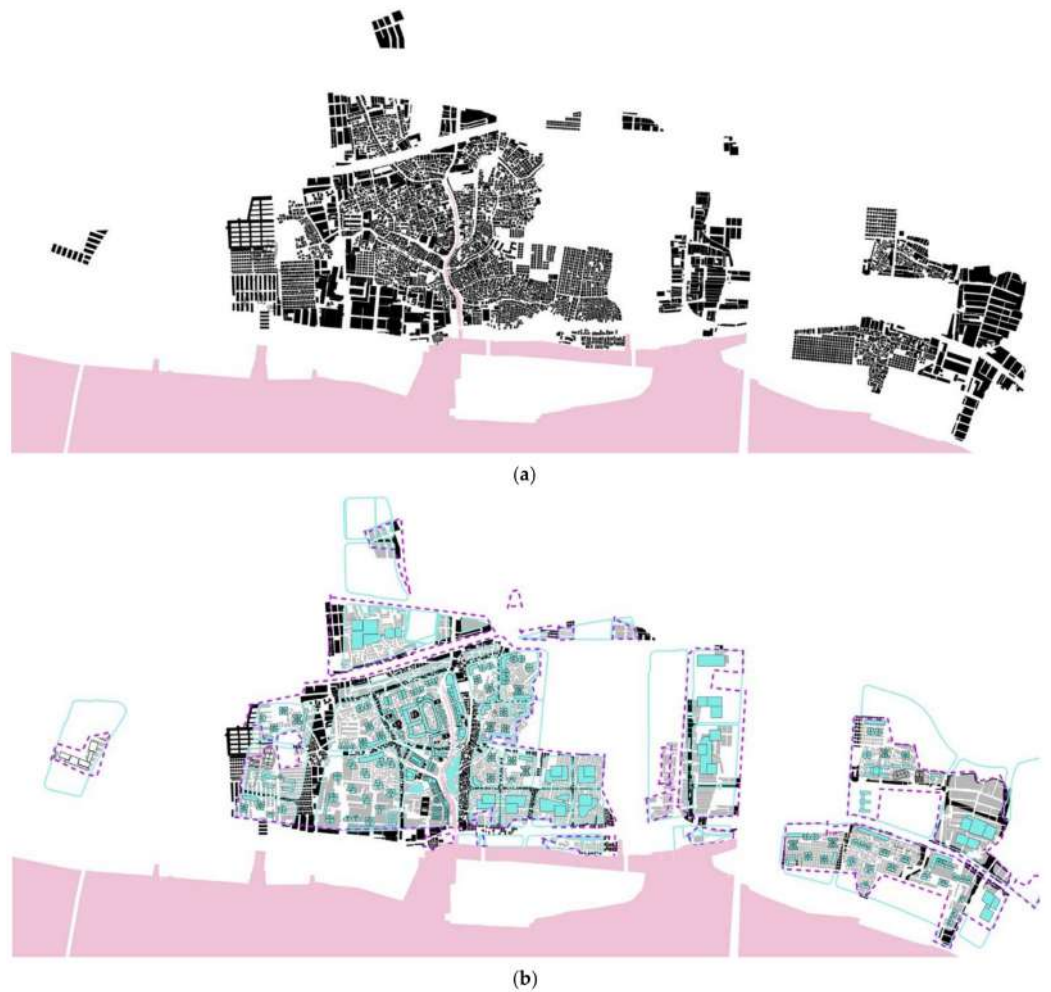


Figure 8. Comparison between the existing morphology in Lijiao (a) and the spatial arrangement designed by the ZhuGuang group and its consultants (b).

3. Materials and Methods

The Lijiao case study represents a privileged point of view of the urban transformation of the metropolis of Guangzhou because it is capable of crossing actors and spaces within a negotiating context. The alignment of local conflicts and municipal goals overlaps transformation scenarios and institutional influences, deciphering the socio-spatial background within which negotiations evolve.

First, its location sets it precisely on the urban development axis of the Haizhu District, giving its transformation a character of urgency that places it within a deliberative framework that binds local and municipal intentions together. Secondly, its vast extension makes it one of the places where the relationship between the project, the construction of local consensus, and the search for maximum benefit by the real estate investor take on generalizable characteristics applicable in other VICs within the metropolis. Finally, the presence of artefacts of significant historical and monumental value included in the official preservation lists allows this study to underline how the transformation of the VICs is not just attributable to extensive demolition processes. On the contrary, the local consistencies play a crucial role in defining the form of the urban project and the changing debate, both at the public and expert levels, concerning the conservation of assets of historical and architectural value.

The *'three oldies policy'* has granted a valuable negotiation autonomy at the local level; together with the *'one village, one policy'*, it has been possible to link the specific spatial conditions of Lijiao to transformation scenarios concerning the negotiating procedure. The current debate on VIC redevelopment and policy implementation cannot disregard the spatial dimensions of the conflicts, soliciting urban studies to reconnect the role played by local elites and their planned outputs.

The aim of the research conducted for the Lijiao case was to map and discuss the available data—firstly to produce a measurable comparison of the existing conditions and the scenario proposed by the real estate company, and secondly to unpack the compensation rules. Overall, the study questioned whether it is possible to frame the transformation of villages as a process in which local owners, government actors, and investors—according to their contingent institutional weights—participate by exchanging and measuring quantities related to the existing urban fabric.

To fulfil this objective, the research has adopted a methodology calling into action both synchronous and diachronic operations, which combine the quantities of the transformation and assess the actors involved in the process. The supporting theoretical framework envisaged to extend the utilization of the concept of 'conformance' and 'performance' of the urban project [72]. The first intends to measure the compliance between urban plans and their spatial outputs. In contrast, the second reframes the power of the project within a larger stakeholder composition. The level of conformance, which recalls a group of studies in applying the 'grid overlay model' to evaluate the level of implementation of urban plans [73], has been tested in Guangzhou by analysing its 2001 master plan. The study by Tian and Shen revealed how external factors such as market forces, central versus peripheral localizations, and local administrative control affected the final spatial outputs at the macro scale. It revealed how conceiving the solely top-down nature of the Chinese urban planning system could not sufficiently describe local deviations. In addition, the study suggested employing the overlapping between the existing conditions in Lijiao and the planned urban changes to investigate the extension of the transformation.

The complementary aspect of the research set a qualitative reading of the transformation process of Lijiao, leveraging a recombination of stakeholders, planning tools, and policies which gather around the urban plan. The description of the different actions and reactions around the project addresses research problem from a diachronic view, taking an iteration of the phenomena of agreement and a clash between the parties involved as crucial points, significantly affecting the outcome.

This approach recalls the assemblage thinking proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in 1987 [74], where relational aspects coexist with the description of reality, prompting a focus

on the possible urban alliances and synergies embedded in the transformation process. Theoretically developed by DeLanda [75], it helps frame urban modifications as part of a multi-scale and multi-directional composition of external influences, which deconstruct top-down and bottom-up approaches into more interconnected hierarchical patterns.

In this sense, the ‘performance’ of the urban project, widely studied by the so-called Dutch School, proposes an analysis of urban projects which surpass the considerations of ‘design outputs’ and demonstrate the generation of ‘outcomes’ that are capable of influencing future urban developments. For example, the Policy Plan/Programme Implementation Process (PIIP), suggested by Alexander and Faludi in 1989 for the assessment of Dutch strategic plans [76], is a reference point for understanding the need to verify that the interactive operation of an entire system of relations towards an urban project is fundamental beyond its spatial declinations. In 1991, Healey, to overcome the restrictions imposed by market-led urban planning analysis, proposed her ‘institutional model’ as a combination of the ‘agency’ and ‘structural’ models [77] to study the levels and types of relationships that can be established between the forces within the project.

The correlation between the theoretical framework of the level of conformance and performance of the urban project suggested that the study should utilize mapping as the principal methodological research tool. It has been intended as the capacity to correlate and highlight both the quantities and forces at play within the transformation process, deciphering the intricate set of influences coming from the actors involved and giving the possibility to reframe local negotiations as social activity entangled with spatial features. From this perspective, tools derived from multiple disciplines can detect actors and spaces under transitions to grasp the socio-spatial dimension of the transformation.

The mapping procedure took into consideration the positions of Denis Wood [78] to recode available spatial traces into configurations that surpass graphic representations, enabling all the omissions to become part of a larger interpretative discourse. The creation of maps intended to ‘make propositions’, ‘arguments’, and ‘propose the existence of things’. The realization of this objective is aimed to build spatial knowledge [79] around the transformation of VICs, overcoming existing difficulties on current scientific understanding of these complex and often opaque [80] urban processes. The ‘critical cartography’ applied in the study of Lijiao, which overlaps the existing spatial conditions with those envisioned by experts and promoters (Figure 8), might assume the radical positions of counter-mapping operations [78], focused on addressing significant and collective spatial-related issues.

In this way, it was possible to strengthen, considering the scarcity of public domain information related to the transformations of the VICs, a perspective linked to what spatial implications are produced beyond the comparison between different social and institutional groups widely treated in the literature of reference. The posters and images on the walls of Lijiao, which represent the sensitive trace of the propaganda in support of the project, only return the final image of the transformation. By eliminating the spatial comparison, the centrality of the transfer of land ownership and subsequent compensation is strengthened. At the same time, the limited accessibility to ongoing negotiations limits the possibility of transmitting information to a broad audience through transparent processes.

The severe pressures associated with the negotiation in VICs did not allow easy access to quantitative and compensation data on the transformation process. The villagers and other actors and experts interviewed during the research process carefully selected public domain data and released only non-sensitive information. Urban Elephant experts provided data on Lijiao’s existing spatial consistency. Having been given the task of mapping the distribution of local heritage sites and their values, the company provided maps of Lijiao’s dense urban fabric. Access to the proposed urban transformation project was provided by the ZhuGuang Group, which made it possible to examine data that were not considered sensitive for the ongoing negotiations with the villagers.

The retrieval of the information kept at the *ShiYaWeiGong* Temple (an important centre for the community to discuss the real estate project) allowed researchers to investigate resettlement compensation schemes. Firstly, the schemes depended on whether the villagers preferred to be compensated monetarily or with new properties in the future real estate project. The division of the compensation scheme into these two categories was one of the main reasons for the slowdown of the entire negotiation process. Those who were not interested in receiving new properties pushed for an increase in monetary compensation, aware that the ZhuGuang Group would receive significant revenues from the entire operation.

Second, to deal with the coexistence of legal and illegal construction, local officials aimed to compensate the villagers by comparing the building extensions measured by the Haizhu district in 2009 (measured quantities, MQs) with the data documented by the villagers (certified quantities, CQs). The quantitative difference between the two sources implied alternative compensation scenarios arranged to cover a large number of cases, demonstrating that spatial features played an important role in the negotiation process.

Third, owners who were affected by non-collectable rents due to ongoing construction work were eligible for compensation. Most of the owners no longer lived in Lijiao, and the rental market was their primary source of income. The villagers wanted to be compensated for the losses of rent caused by the construction process, which, as admitted by the ZhuGuang Group, were likely to extend over the three years of construction work. However, as mentioned previously, Lijiao's extension slowed down building operations, exemplifying how strategic the duration of construction was for both the community and investor revenues [81].

As demonstrated in the following section, the compensation rules revealed different scenarios concerning existing building assets, which opened future lines of research; studying VIC transformation meant recognising the heterogeneity of spatial cases and the importance of going beyond interpretations based on mere contrasts between large interest groups. The identification of compensation calculations for the evaluation of new spatial organisations suggested a method for evaluating the transformation of Chinese urban villages that is capable of dealing with the rules and the future urban scenarios selected by actors during the negotiation process.

4. Results

The data obtained from the ZhuGuang Group made it possible to quantify the scope of the Lijiao transformation in detail. The project covers an area of 151.2 hectares, 43.77 of which are dedicated to residential development and 33.38 to commercial activities. The total building construction area amounts to 4.36 million square metres (1.92 million allocated to commercial and 2.43 million to new residential units). The buildings considered suitable for preservation account for 105,000 square metres, and although they represent only 2.4% of the entire real estate operation, their conservation requires special attention. The expropriation and subsequent resettlement process will affect 11,847 inhabitants and 4768 households. It is important to note that the real estate development will not belong to the villagers; rather, 52% of the built area will be transferred to external buyers through sales on the open market.

To evaluate Lijiao's spatial transformation, the so-called B-13 lot has been selected in the ZhuGuang Group's plan (Figure 9). Based on the information received from the Urban Elephant studio, the perimeter of lot B-13 was used to quantify the existing housing stock on the lot: B-13 measures 18,960.57 square metres, and the average number of above-ground floors is 2.41, resulting in a gross floor area (GFA) of 33,674.92 square metres and a land occupation of 58%.



Figure 9. The location of lot B-13 in the ZhuGuang real estate project.

The project prepared by the ZhuGuang Group intends to develop a B-13 lot with a GFA of 96,395.91 square metres, distributed vertically to achieve a significant reduction in land occupancy of 24%. It is evident that the transformation would not only triple the residential surface, approximately, but would also involve the complete eradication of the existing socio-spatial organisation. The new development should reduce the occupation of buildings on the ground and also reduce the density of construction to facilitate new infrastructures and open spaces. The community that previously organised its daily activities on a horizontal plan, where public spaces coincided with a network of pedestrian streets distributed throughout a densely built-up area, is now being transformed into a vertical community with traffic-bearing roads and a significant number of public and green areas. The advertisements on Lijiao's walls (Figure 10) showcased possible benefits by displaying new residential plans to convince villagers to vote in favour of the transformation.

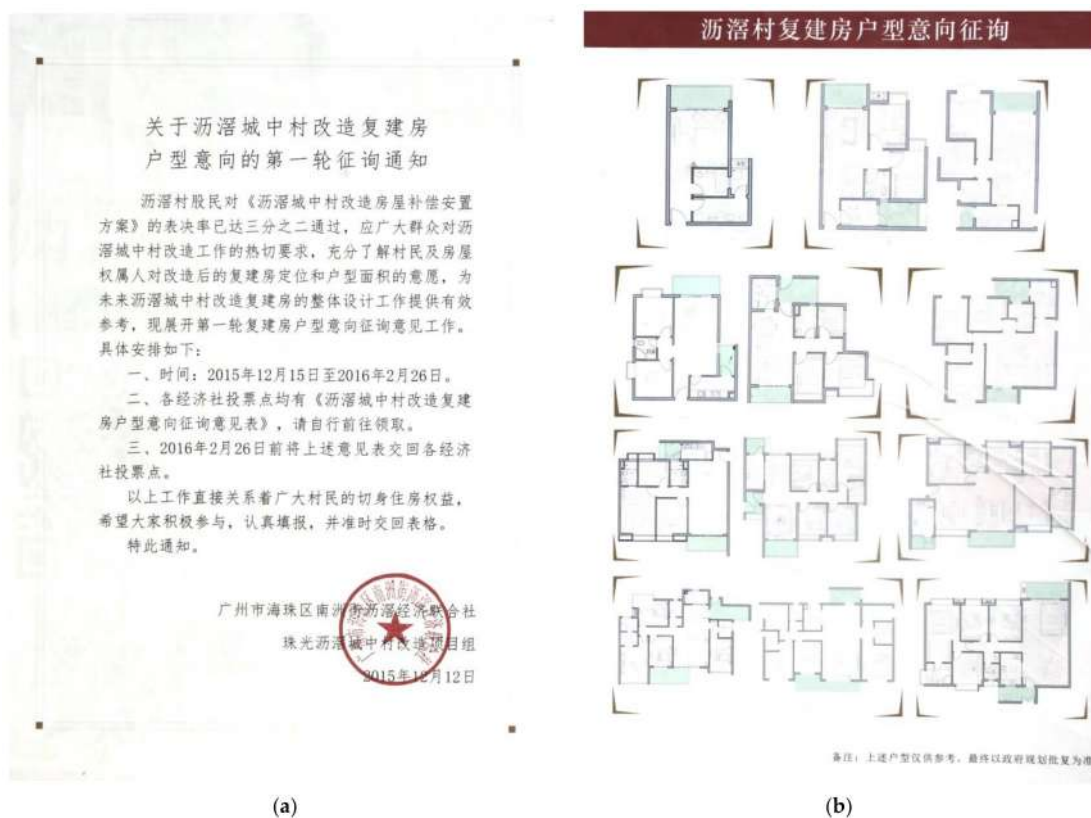


Figure 10. Poster along the streets of Lijiao displaying types of residential plans envisioned for the future real estate project. (a) The poster mentions: “Notice of First Round of Invitation for Expressions

of Interest for Rehabilitated Housing Units in Lijiao Urban Village/A two-thirds approval rate has been achieved for the Lijiao Village Shareholder's vote on the Lijiao Urban Renewal Housing Compensation and Resettlement Scheme. In response to the public's keen interest in the renovation of Lijiao Urban Village, the first round of consultation on the intention of the rehabilitated housing units has been launched in order to fully understand the wishes of villagers and house owners on the positioning and size of the rehabilitated housing units after the renovation, and to provide effective reference for the overall design of the rehabilitated housing units for the future renovation of Lijiao Urban Village. The arrangements are as follows:/1. Time: 15 December 2015 to 26 February 2016/2. All voting points of the Economic Communities are provided with the "Interest Form of Lijiao Urban Village Rehabilitated Housing Units Type". Please pick up your own copy/3. Please return the above-mentioned comment form to the voting points of the Economic Communities by 26 February 2016/The above work is directly related to the immediate housing rights of the villagers. We hope that you will actively participate, fill in the forms carefully and return them on time/Hereby notified/Lijiao Economic Union, Nanzhou Street, Haizhu District, Guangzhou/ZhuGuang Lijiao Urban Village Rehabilitation Project Team/12 December 2015. (b) The plans are displayed under the title "Survey of interest in household types for rehabilitated housing in Lijiao Urban Village". At the bottom of the poster there is a notice warning that "The above household types are for reference only. The final decision is subject to government's planning approval".

The selective demolition encompasses material and immaterial heritage preservation [82] and questions to investigate the socio-spatial consequences around the re-organization of community life into vertical blocks. Without a comprehensive evaluation of the long period, the current debate is associated with settlement models standardizing urban design proposals and real estate market values, aimed to evaluate the efficacy of a quantitative approach toward urban regeneration [83].

As anticipated in the previous paragraph, to understand the transformation process in detail, it was necessary to consider the calculation methodology for the resettlement area (RSA). Different compensation calculations can impact and derail the entire negotiation. In the studied case, the regulatory intervention by the local authority mediated between the positions of the different actors, given the differences between the surface areas certified by the owners (CB), the declared floors (CBf), the totality of the built-up area (CBca), and the surfaces measured by the Haizhu District (i.e., the measured building footprint (MB), the actual number of floors (MBf), and the exact built area of the building (MBca)). The data (Table 2) on the resettlement schemes demonstrated the municipal government's intention to determine values based on which even illegal construction could become a matter for negotiation.

Table 2. Spatial parameters at the base of the resettlement calculations for cases 1a, 1b, 2a, and 2b.

Case	Condition a	Condition b	CB [sqm]	MB [sqm]	CBf	MBf	CBca [sqm]	MBca [sqm]
1a	CB > MB	MBf < 4	80	75	3.5	3.5	280	265.5
1b	CB > MB	MBf > 4	80	75	3.5	5	280	375
2a	99 < CB < MB	MBf < 4	110	120	3.5	3.5	380	420
2b	99 < CB < MB	MBf > 4	110	120	3.5	5	385	600
3a	CB < 99 < MB	MBf < 4	80	100	3.5	3.5	280	350
3b	CB < 99 < MB	MBf > 4	80	100	3.5	5	280	500
4a	CB < MB < 99	MBf < 4	80	90	3.5	3.5	280	315
4b	CB < MB < 99	MBf > 4	80	90	3.5	5	280	450

The materials stored at the ShiYaWeiGong Temple, for four specific scenarios (Figure 11), provided the main factors for the calculation of the RSA. The scenarios did not report the economic value of the compensation; rather, they provided a calculation methodology for defining the spatial quota assigned to villagers. The local authority considers all buildings extending over four floors above ground to be the result of informal densification and to therefore be ineligible for compensation. Surfaces above four floors are not included in the RSA calculation, but are covered by material loss compensation (ML), which implies that the local administration essentially recognises the existence of illegal construction and needs to find a way to deal with it. However, all units below the limit of four floors are attributed to households according to a superficial quota called the equity housing area (EHA). This allocation permits the owners to obtain apartments in the ZhuGuang real estate development at subsidised market prices. Furthermore, the housing factor difference (HD) describes the difference between what is defined as a compensation area and the actual surface of the current building. The results of the four scenarios are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Main compensation parameters after the calculation of resettlement schemes.

Case	RSA * [sqm]	HD [sqm]	EHA [sqm]	ML
1a	262.5	−3	37.5	-
1b	300	−75	-	1 floor
2a	390	−30	50	30 sqm
2b	440	−120	-	150 sqm
3a	347	−3	49	3 sqm
3b	396	−104	0	104 sqm
4a	315	0	45	0
4b	360	−90	0	90 sqm

* All RSA need to be augmented by the quota of balconies and terraces (BT).

Case 1 shows what occurs when the measurement of the artefact by the authority is lower than that declared by the inhabitant ($CB > MB$). If the building is less than four floors (Case 1a), then the owner can draw on the EHA for compensation for the unused surface (37.5 square metres in the reported case) and obtain an RSA according to the following formula:

$$RSA (1a) = MB \times CBf = 75 \text{ m}^2 \times 3.5 = 262.5 \text{ m}^2$$

The EHA is based on unused space for constructing a potential fourth floor that corresponds with the size of an open terrace. EHA is calculated using the following formula:

$$EHA (1a) = CB/2 = MB/2 = 75 \text{ m}^2 / 2 = 37.5 \text{ m}^2$$

Therefore, HD is the difference between the RSA and what is built by the owner:

$$HD = RSA - (MB \times MBf) = RSA - MBca = (262.5 - 265.5) \text{ m}^2 = -3 \text{ m}^2$$

The owner receives compensation for 262.5 square metres of the 265.5 square metres built, which amounts to 98.87%.

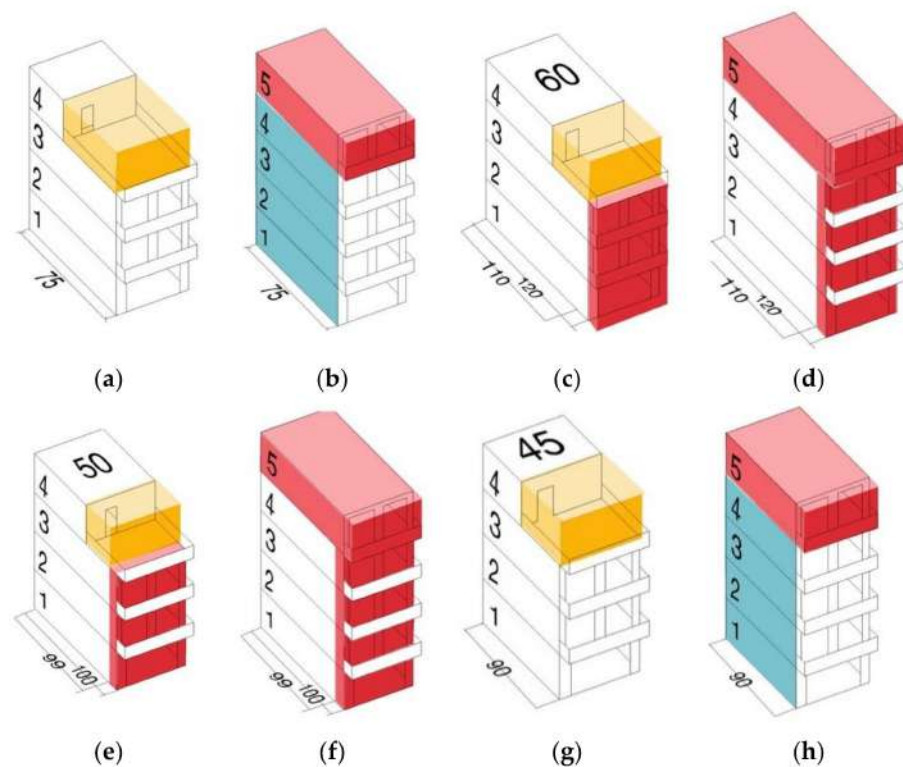


Figure 11. Axonometric representation of the resettlement schemes for cases 1a (a), 1b (b), 2a (c), 2b (d), 3a (e), 3b (f), 4a (g), and 4b (h), retrieved at *ShiYaWeiGong* Temple and elaborated by the author. The schemes display the footprint area of the households expressed in square meters (m^2) and utilized for RSA calculations.

In Case 1b, the owner has a building with five floors above the ground, thus exceeding the limit of four floors. Therefore, the RSA is calculated using only the first four floors, while the fifth floor is compensated for as ML:

$$\text{RSA (1b)} = \text{MB} \times 4 = 75 \text{ m}^2 \times 4 = 300 \text{ m}^2$$

$$\text{ML (1b)} = \text{MB} = 75 \text{ m}^2$$

$$\text{HD (1b)} = \text{RSA} - \text{MBca} = (300 - 375) \text{ m}^2 = 75 \text{ m}^2$$

Cases 2a, 2b, 3a, 3b, 4a, and 4b exemplify what happens when the property space declared by a villager is less than the space measured by the authorities ($\text{CB} < \text{MB}$). Moreover, Case 3 introduces an additional parameter of 99 square metres (K99) of land occupation; for example, in a case in which CB is less and MB is higher than 99 square metres, RSA will consider the measurement of 99 as a starting point. This measure is meant to attract the votes of those who may have built illegally by recognising a share of 99 square metres.

Case 2a considers the occasion of $\text{CB} < \text{MB}$, with both over the quota of 99 square metres. In the case of $\text{CBf} < 4$ (meaning the owner can access EHA), the following formula is used:

$$\text{RSA (2a)} = \text{CB} \times 3 + 60 \text{ m}^2 = (110 \text{ m}^2 \times 3) + 60 \text{ m}^2 = 390 \text{ m}^2$$

$$\text{EHA (2a)} = \text{MB} - 60 \text{ m}^2 = (110 - 60) \text{ m}^2 = 50 \text{ m}^2$$

$$\text{ML (2a)} = (\text{MB} - \text{CB}) \times 3 = (120 - 110) \text{ m}^2 \times 3 = 30 \text{ m}^2$$

$$\text{HD (2a)} = \text{RSA} - \text{MBca} = (390 - 420) \text{ m}^2 = -30 \text{ m}^2$$

Case 2b considers $\text{CBf} > 4$, meaning that EHA is nil:

$$\text{RSA (2b)} = \text{CB} \times 4 = 110 \text{ m}^2 \times 4 = 440 \text{ m}^2$$

$$ML (2b) = (MB - CB) \times 3 + MB = (120 - 110) m^2 \times 3 + 120 m^2 = 150 m^2$$

$$HD (2b) = RSA - MB_{ca} = (440 - 600) m^2 = -120 m^2$$

Case 3a considers $CB < MB$ and less than 99 square metres. In the case of $CB_f < 4$ (meaning that $EHA = 0$), the following formula is used:

$$RSA (3a) = K99 \times 3 + 50 m^2 = (99 m^2 \times 3) + 50 m^2 = 347 m^2$$

$$EHA (3a) = K99 - 50 m^2 = 49 m^2$$

$$ML (3a) = (MB - K99) \times 3 = (100 - 99) m^2 \times 3 = 3 m^2$$

$$HD (3a) = RSA - MB_{ca} = (347 - 350) m^2 = -3 m^2$$

Case 3b considers $CB < MB$ and less than 99 square metres. In the case of $CB_f > 4$ (meaning $EHA = 0$), the following formula is used:

$$RSA (3b) = K99 \times 4 = 99 m^2 \times 4 = 396 m^2$$

$$ML (3b) = (MB - K99) \times 4 + MB = (100 - 99) m^2 \times 4 + 100 m^2 = 104 m^2$$

$$HD (3b) = RSA - MB_{ca} = (396 - 500) m^2 = -104 m^2$$

Case 4a, like Case 1a, considers $CB < MB$, with both being less than 99 square metres. In the case of $CB_f < 4$ (meaning that $EHA = 0$), the unit is considered small, and compensation is measured based on MB rather than CB and $ML = 0$, since no construction is either higher than four floors or greater than 99 square metres:

$$RSA (4a) = MB \times 3 + 45 m^2 = (90 \times 3) m^2 + 45 m^2 = 315 m^2$$

$$EHA (4a) = MB - 45 m^2 = 90 - 45 m^2 = 45 m^2$$

$$HD (4a) = RSA - MB_{ca} = (315 - 315) m^2 = 0 m^2$$

Case 4b considers $CB < MB$, with both being less than 99 square metres. In the case of $CB_f < 4$ (meaning that $EHA = 0$), the following formula is used:

$$RSA (4b) = MB \times 4 = 90 m^2 \times 4 = 360 m^2$$

$$ML (4b) = MB = 90 m^2$$

$$HD (4b) = RSA - MB_{ca} = (360 - 450) m^2 = -90 m^2$$

The above RSAs resulting from the four scenarios must be increased by the surface areas of balconies and terraces, since every space of an existing property is eligible for material compensation as a basis for reaching agreement between the parties involved.

5. Discussion

The quantitative analysis of the VIC transformation has shown that Lijiao's current morphological structure will be completely modified by extensive demolition. The future spatial organisation aims to form new spaces based on what has already been tested in other metropolitan areas. Sanitisation efforts would be associated with a drastic reduction in local density, since lower land occupancy can provide collective spaces for new residential gated communities and offer the possibility of implementing a vehicular access grid. The existing community's spatial organisation would morph into a topology in which vertical towers would define new dedicated residential lots characterised by a high floor area ratio (FAR) value. The resulting spaces would be available to the private market, making ZhuGuang Group's real estate project economically sustainable.

Regarding the transformation scenario, the demolition presumes a settlement model inspired by recent gated communities developed by prominent real estate groups operating

in the Chinese market [84], which have led to a spatial continuity with a historic fabric being broken. In the interviews with the ZhuGuang Group, company representatives reiterated that the preservation of local heritage sites is an inevitable cost imposed by the regulations limiting the number of property sales. Therefore, in Lijiao, it is possible to speak of a 'selective substitution', whereby spaces can resist the 'tabula rasa effect' via tripartite negotiation between inhabitants, investors, and local administration, supported by the opinion of experts. Only the heritage assets identified by the invited experts can impede this process of substitution. This is based on a grid that systematically separates the historic sites from new developments and involves an urban layout characterised by low density, pedestrian mobility, and the coexistence of new community services alongside heritage assets.

Nevertheless, this approach toward preservation unleashes the development of high-rise residential blocks next to single-heritage relics, overturning the original morphological structure of Lijiao. In this way, preserved objects assume the role of 'obstacles' legitimated by deputed institutions, aiming to preserve the local cultural asset confronting real estate expansion as much as possible. Their effects on Lijiao's spatial dimension extend to their legitimated sphere of intervention; where preservation lists are ineffective, extensive 'tabula rasa' operations prevail. Mapping Lijiao's spatial transformation demonstrates the existing contradictions within the socio-spatial negotiations of the urban project. The designed traces portray—and duplicate—the power structure embedded around the transformation [85].

The four resettlement scenarios show that the transition from one urban model to another features a resolute eradication of the spatial conditions inherited from recent VIC densification. The acceptance, and therefore the local community's approval expressed through its vote, of the new settlement model involves negotiated and meticulous spatial recognition of single-household properties, as well as the safeguarding of collective interests throughout the transformation process [86]. The RSA data reconcile heterogeneous cases using compensatory parameters, suggesting a strenuous effort by external actors to win broad local support.

All the actors involved are projecting their aspirations over Lijiao's transformation and hope to gain something in return. The municipal government is aiming to finalise its 52-village regeneration programme; the Haizhu District wants to develop its Eco-City Master Plan and boost the local economy; the ZhuGuang Group, despite the local decline in the real estate market, is expecting to have exclusive rights to develop such major project in the core of Guangzhou metropolitan area; and the villagers are conducting negotiations to gain maximum economic benefit and improve community services. The Lijiao case shows that, although extensive demolitions will occur, the transition from one spatial arrangement to another depends on existing conditions, which transform spatial features into exchange values.

6. Conclusions

The study of the transformation of Lijiao led to the conclusion that the demolition processes involve a profound reconfiguration of community spaces. Previous studies have shown that extensive demolitions result from capitalist forces confronting each other in the process of urban growth in southern China [87–92]. The documentation and comparison of existing spatial features and project characteristics allowed the study to deepen the extension of the demolitions and the new quantities in play promoted by the real estate developer.

The overlap of the existing conditions and the future urban plan describes how the transformation of Lijiao comprehends both profound spatial and social changes. On the one hand, the spatial changes will eradicate the dense fabric into a vertical, residential, and gated community replicating the already tested neoliberal approach in VIC redevelopment present in scientific literature [93,94]; on the other hand, the future transfer of land ownership from the village to the municipal body entails a change in local associations

and the social consequences of replacing the previous village committee with emerging homeownership residential associations (HOAs) [95] must be evaluated in the long term.

Measuring and evaluating the transition would not have been possible without a detailed mapping procedure to embed design activities and the community. Comparing the two urban consistencies, the dense fabric inherited by the last forty years of intense urban expansion and the replication of urban planning principles to manage the urban growth can open further discussions about the socio-spatial implications of urban regeneration policies.

Due to the difficulty of accessing public domain information about their spatial features, the discourses about the transformation of VICs reported in the scientific literature insist on the conflictual dimension between the parties involved. On the contrary, the information collected along Lijiao's fieldwork investigation demonstrates how spaces in the transition and their subsequent monetization represent the centre of the negotiations [30]. Furthermore, the investigation of the resettlement compensation schemes reinforces the necessity of exploring a spatial perspective on the regeneration of VICs. Their calculations are profoundly based on existing geometrical parameters and strike a balance with illegal construction, illustrating the importance of calibrating the 'performance' of the urban plan, considering the strategic consolidation of the community's positive support. In this sense, other lines of research might investigate the spatial consequences on VICs in correlation with the 2009 promulgation of the 'three oldies' redevelopment policies. The spatial negotiation principles applied in Lijiao can be compared to other VICs located in Guangzhou, underlining the differences that occurred due to the peculiar relations between selected stakeholders [96] and evaluating how singular processes can be open to different morphological outputs [97]. Measuring the extension and the practices adopted in regeneration processes can verify the conditions for further policy implementation and replication in other Chinese urbanization contexts.

Guangzhou's regeneration policies unfolded an experimental field open to further implementations, prioritizing procedures which can encourage the exchanges at the local level between the stakeholders involved. These processes allow future lines of research to define models around Chinese urban spatial formations, starting from single cases to generalizing the situatedness and legitimation of transformation processes. A more comprehensive range of disciplines is called into action. On the one hand, urban sociology and economy can define interpretative models around actors and quantitative assets involved in spatial modification. On the other hand, urban studies devoted to mapping and investigating urban morphology configurations might verify the spatial implications supported by regeneration policies, evaluating their implications on the current debate on Chinese contemporary urban design and cultural heritage preservation.

In this context, the only element of spatial resistance concerns the preservation of local heritage sites (Figure 12). The intervention of dedicated institutions above the local administrative unit of the village has been able to directly influence future spatial transformation, limiting demolition processes, requiring the invitation of dedicated experts, and suggesting new forms of urban master planning that can integrate the historical core with brand-new residential towers. In addition, the provincial institutions committed to local heritage preservation recalibrate the local decision making between the municipality and the villagers. Previously mentioned scientific studies on Chinese housing demolitions and resettlement programs [28,37,38,41,45] have underlined how the lack of coordination and shared methodology between institutions at the local level is one of the main factors in causing social conflicts. The role of the institutions deputed to heritage conservation, detached from local real estate affairs, might work as a counterbalancing power along with the negotiation procedure.



Figure 12. Front entrance to the Wei ancestors hall. Listed among the provincial immovable historical relics, it represents one of the biggest religious buildings in Lijiao. It stands in the middle of the spatial densification happened in the VIC over the last forty years. Even if the regeneration of Lijiao historical core did not start yet, the Urban Elephant masterplan (Figure 7) envisions the creation of a buffer zone to reposition the ancestor hall as the new main southern gate of the village. Source: made by the author, November 2015.

However, the transition from single buildings to the preservation of the urban fabric does not currently represent an attractive scenario for the real estate market or for municipal master plans [98]. Despite the fact that Guangzhou municipality has experimented other alternative models of urban regeneration, the sustainability of economic returns is seen to depend on involving prominent real estate groups that operate at the national level and are driven by possible self-promotion or political benefits [99]. However, the insertion of Lijiao within the ‘Guangzhou 2022 key project construction plan’ as a strategy to implement the ‘three oldies policy’ represents a significant aspect in considering how the local government aims to find solutions in dealing with its recent past while still supporting economic development.

By observing the role of deputed municipal or district institutions in developing precise spatial transformation scenarios associated with selected investors, it is evident that local communities are not directly involved in real estate projects. Exchanges between the parties involve consultative, informative, and deliberative aspects, but do not involve forms of design autonomy. It is even more evident at the project’s current stage, where experts and dedicated institutional bodies are focused on obtaining all the legal permits to start the construction phase, updating the future layout within multiple sociotechnical exchanges, and configuring local community engagement as part of a preliminary consultation.

Although community participation in negotiation aims to build consensus, the migrant community that currently lives in and defines the microentrepreneurial structure of the village is completely absent from such negotiation. Migrants represent a large group of tenants who will be forced to leave Lijiao for other parts of the city at the end of the negotiation process [100–103]. Therefore, it would be interesting for future research to investigate the actual beneficiaries of the negotiation processes occurring in VICs and to consider the effects of their transformations from a wider socio-spatial perspective. Affordable housing in the PRD metropolis is an increasingly important issue, and the replacement of land

by urbanisation driven solely by market forces and local state entrepreneurship [104] no longer appears to be the only viable model.

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