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Shenzhen Shuiwei 3D Community: From Urban Defects to Vibrant Affordable Housing Community

Submitted By: International Mayor Communication Centre Limited, on behalf of DOFFICE



Organization Profile

Organization Name: People's Government of Futian District, Shenzhen Municipality

Organization Type: Subnational government

Website: www.szft.gov.cn/en/

Practice Details

Country(ies): China

City(ies): Shenzhen

Start Year: 2015 **Ongoing:** No **End Year:** 2025

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:



Relevant SDGs:



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Problem & Context

The reform and opening-up policies initiated in the early 1980s triggered a dual development trajectory for Shenzhen Special Economic Zone and local villages, with the villages quickly being surrounded by the modern city and known as "urban villages." These areas provided cheap housing for low-income laborers and starters. The villages accommodated more than 60% of the population, playing a crucial role in Shenzhen's economic development. However, its safety, sanitation, and social problems have become persistent challenges that are difficult to be fully resolved.

In the past decade, urban renewal concerning urban villages often means mass demolition, a total eradication of any traces from the past, an abrupt replacement by brand new complexes with malls, offices and residential areas. The urban villages in Shenzhen, which were over 300 in the early 1980s, have rapidly decreased to around 200 today and are gradually disappearing.

Solution Developed

Due to limited land resources and the complexity of urban renewal, it is very challenging for the government to provide sufficient affordable housing for newcomers in city center in a short time. This project serves as Shenzhen's first pilot experiment to revitalize "handshake buildings" in urban villages into affordable housing community of young starters.

The project area is located in Shuiwei Village within Shenzhen's central district, covering an area of 8,000 square meters. It consists of 35 villager buildings, with 29 of them transformed into 504 apartments. Upgrades were made to fire safety, municipal facilities, and elevators to create a modern, livable space. Commerce and housing were integrated three-dimensionally. A comprehensive planning approach was employed to build a functional spatial framework, attracting collective participation from different stakeholders.

We preserve the urban texture, cultural legacy, and collective memory, infuse new vitality and value into the old village, and try to create a platform through the integration of old buildings and new culture to stimulate the participation and interaction among residents of both old and new communities.

Implementation

The government authority initiated the revitalization masterplan. Shum Yip Group, a State-owned company, followed up to rent the villagers' handshake tower blocks and renovate them into affordable apartments, rented to the housing authority as subsidized units for young starters working in the central district. DOFFICE designed the renovation project.

Through the collaboration among the government, enterprises, and villagers, the villagers have secured stable rental income; corporations have built positive social image and gained centrally located talent housing; the government have resolved safety and fire problems in the old village;

young people can afford decent and cozy apartment in city centre; community shop owners can operated with low cost at prime location; and the residents have got decent communal facilities and preserved local cultural context. This cooperative effort results in multiple benefits for all parties involved.

A brief timeline of the project:

- 2015: Masterplanning was initiated, setting up a 10-year experiment.
- 2016: Implementation commenced.
- 2018: Construction was completed, and operation started.
- 2025: The 10-year experiment comes to an end. The government and the State-owned company return the property for market-oriented operation.

Enablers & Obstacles

Over the past 40 years, China's codes and policies were mainly focused on urban development of new cities. It is the turn for China to shift from newly built urbanization to a phase of urban renewal that emphasizes upgrading and revitalization of existing structures. Compared to other affordable housing developments, this project is the first one of its kind. It is the first time the government has leased property from villagers to convert them into affordable housing.

This project involved collective forces and effort of local government authorities, social enterprises, architects, and villagers.

This project holds important demonstrative significance and value for policy making and standardization. It also encourages public and private sectors to participate in the preservation and revitalization of urban villages, promoting improvements in policies to provide better guidance for future projects and maximize the social value of existing buildings through innovative approaches.

Results & Impact

To provide 504 rental units for around 900 residents, the residential layout was reconfigured and upgraded.

Our intervention is not so much happening inside the towers, but rather in-between. In these voids between the towers we created an infrastructural system with seven elevators inter-connected by a lateral system of sky corridors on the fifth and seventh floor. Each elevator has its entrance courtyard, so there is no main entrance, and this is an open community.

This 3-D circulation system forms an important public space. The color coding divides this infrastructure into service clusters to enhance the way finding within the labyrinth. During the design process, the withdrawal from participation of a few landlords, owners of six towers and several units from different towers, gave a rhizomatic twist to this web of sky corridors.

The roofscapes, the fifth façade of this project, accommodate laundry rooms, vegetable gardens and lounges.

The communal space on the fifth floor is a 200-sqm Communal Living Room created by connecting two building blocks, equipped with gym, library, tea lounge, multipurpose gathering space and a communal kitchen with dining room.

Based on the structural grid of the towers and the target of the client, there are 18 different unit typologies ranging from 15 to 55sqm.

This project gives the handshake tower blocks a second life and creates awareness that re-use of buildings is a serious and interesting option.

Replication & Scale Up

The urban villages are like sponges, absorbing more than 60% of the Shenzhen population by providing affordable accommodation and living, and become the collective memory of its citizens. As the city is shifting from newly built urbanization to a renovative urban renewal, this project has become a significant alternative development model for urban villages, and attracted tremendous amount of participants from public and private sectors.

Renovation or gentrification of all these villages into the same jacket is defiantly not a wise choice. The key factors contributing to the success of the project include respecting the local context, collaboration of the top-down masterplan and bottom-up communal engagement, precise cost control, sustainable market operation, and community building.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has informed or been partially integrated into policy discussions, strategies, or pilot-level policy instruments.

The project is a 10-year pilot experiment turning private-owned village blocks into an affordable housing community. On the one hand, its success has prompted the authorities to formulate Trade Guidelines for comprehensive renovation of urban villages, policies for financing models and investment interfaces, and Standardized Guidelines and Implementation Roadmaps for future revitalization practices. On the other hand, this paradigm, initiated by authority and triggering market-oriented participation, will drive the evolution into a diverse generation of new models.

Lessons & Takeaways

From this practice, we discovered the value of urban villages lies in their diversity and inclusiveness.

Apart from affordable housing, we think that it will be much more meaningful and realizable to approach these revitalizations from both top-down planning and bottom-up community engagement, to invite the collective strength from both public and private sectors, to incorporate different programs and spatial typologies, to respect the local legacies, and to result in not just a housing project, but a much more lively, diverse and inclusive community.