

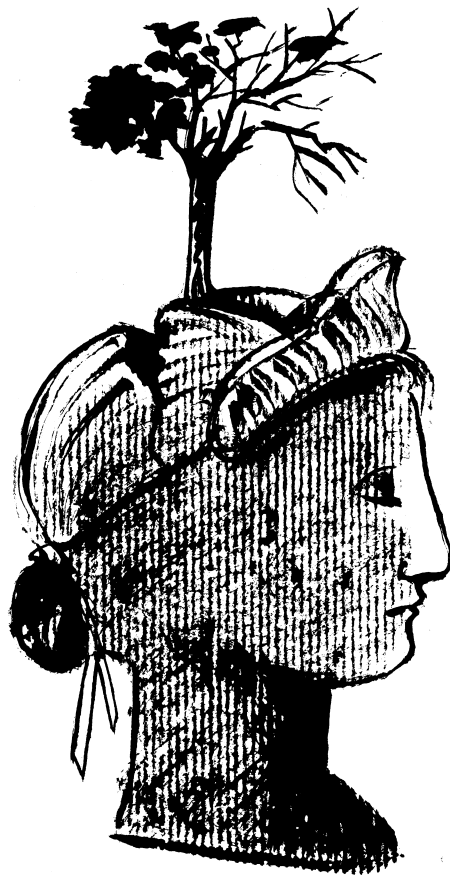


*senseable* city lab:...

Carlo Ratti

## Instant city (Shenzhen, China)

# MICRO



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# Instant city

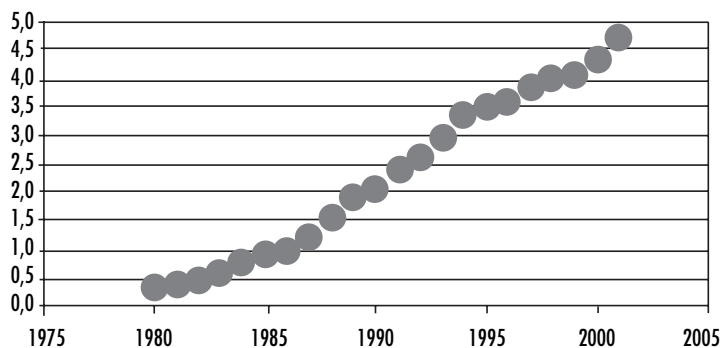
Carlo Ratti

When you arrive at the Chinese city of Shenzhen, just across the border from Hong Kong, it will not be the record-breaking skyscrapers that impress you most, nor the scenic capsule elevators that glide on their glowing façades, or the revolving restaurants and heliports that ostentatiously crown their tops. What will amaze you most is the fact that where today there is a metropolis twice the size of Milan, there was – in the beginning of the 1980s – just a fishing village with a population of thirty thousand.

The numbers of the boom are breathtaking, especially when compared to the drowsy rhythm of western statistics: an extremely young population (the average age is under thirty) which has reached four and a half million and continues to grow exponentially; an average GNP increase of 30% per annum; a container port that in two decades has overtaken Hamburg and is about to equal Rotterdam<sup>1</sup>. And, above all, an unprecedented increase in building construction – “a miracle in the world-wide history of city development,”<sup>2</sup> as deputy mayor Zhuo Qinrui puts it – that questions the very foundations of modern urban planning to the extent of giving rise to a new concept, that of the “instant” or “overnight” city.<sup>3</sup>

The origins of this phenomenon go back to the early eighties and the Chinese “open door” policies promoted by reformist Premier Deng Xiaoping. Shenzhen, together with Zhuhai, Xiamen and Shantou, was selected as Special Economic Zone – partially opened to foreign investment and the market economy. In the words of Deng, “Special Economic Zones are win-

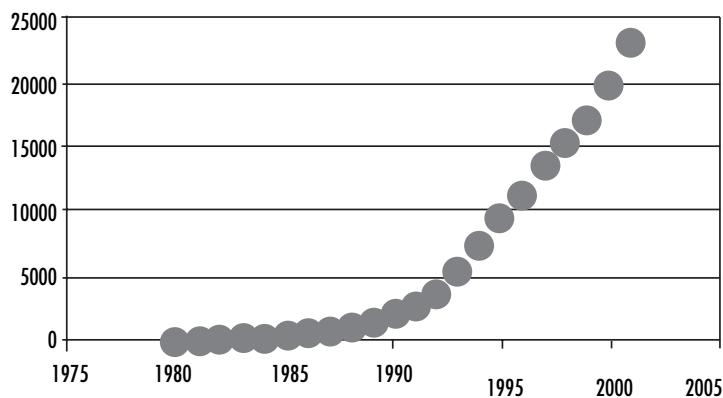
**Popolazione di Shenzhen 1980-2001 (milioni di abitanti)**



Source: *Shenzhen Statistics Yearbook 2002*, published by the Chinese Institute of Statistics.

dows to technology, management, knowledge and foreign policies. They will become a foundation for opening to the outside world.”<sup>4</sup> They were endorsed by Jiang Zemin in his frank welcome to market forces in the latest Communist Party Congress. The ambitious “window” plan became such a great success that the rigid border of Shenzhen, which was initially set to keep out the ominous influences of capitalism on mainland China, is today a defense against the hordes of people ready to flock here from all over the country, in order, it would seem, to respond to the heterodox communist Deng’s proclamation, “To get rich is glorious.”

**PIL di Shenzhen 1980-2001 (milioni di euro)**



Source: *Shenzhen Statistics Yearbook 2002*.

It is easy to get rich in Shenzhen. It records the highest per capita GDP in China, in a region that is not larger than 350 square kilometers of flat land in the Pearl River Delta and stretches for approximately twenty kilometers alongside Shennan Boulevard, a long east-west axis. A true city center does not exist, just a series of districts with variable density and heights (from the dizzy 384 meters of the Diwang skyscraper – the sixth-highest building in the world – to the low industrial sheds), interspersed with sporadic parks. Shenzhen could be defined as a linear city, even if it remains very different from the traditionally understood western models. Linearity here is not the materialization of a modernist utopia, the sublimation of an abstract idea of planning as in most XIX century con-

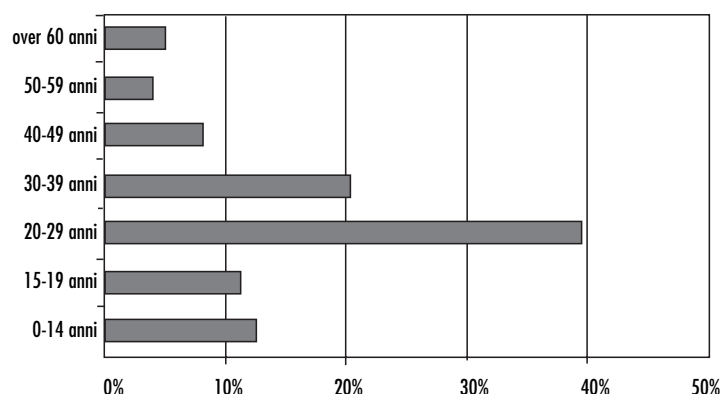
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**A practicing architect, Carlo Ratti directs the SENSEable City Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. An Aspen Junior Fellow, he contributes regularly to *Domus*, *La Stampa* and *Il Sole 24ORE* (Domenica).**

structions. In Shenzhen, “linearity is simply a thread, a vector loosely stitching together an assemblage of disparate market experiments,” writes Mihai Craciun in the recent *Great Leap Forward*,<sup>5</sup> an interesting collection of essays on the urban boom in Shenzhen and in the Pearl River Delta, produced by Harvard students under the direction of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas. The book, richly illustrated and full of data, finally brings data and phenomena previously limited to scholarly, Chinese-speaking circles to a broad public.

Market forces are the main actors in the drama of Shenzhen’s urban development. The public sector seems to have abandoned the idea of spearheading and governing changes and is simply facilitating them. Faced with a reality that embarrassingly escapes from every forecast, masterplans have become “non-legal” or “for government use only.” Their objectives are continuously adjusted to market fluctuations and their scope often downgraded to the simple acceptance of a given condition, as in the case of the transformation of North Huaqiang Road: an entire district initially designed to host industrial activities and later spontaneously converted into one of the liveliest commercial zones of the city. In Koolhaas’s words, “the absence, on the one hand, of plausible, universal doctrines and the presence, on the other, of an unprecedented intensity of production, have created a unique, wrenching condition: the urban seems to be least understood at the moment of its apotheosis.”<sup>6</sup>

**Popolazione di Shenzhen per fascia d’età**



Source: *Shenzhen Statistics Yearbook 2002*.

**The race to break records.** The city has collected many records: besides that for the fastest growth in the world, it also qualifies for the maximum construction speed of a skyscraper (an average 2.5 days per floor), the highest building of the region (the aforementioned 384-meter tall Diwang) and eventually what is going to be the largest shopping mall in Asia, the C-Mall of Hua Ago North Road, challenging a glorious North American supremacy. But the most striking record, albeit unofficial, is that of the stunning heterogeneity of its buildings. Shenzhen resembles an architecture theme park: a window, to use Deng's word, on the infinite technological and formal possibilities of the art of building. The strangest geometries, ornaments of all types, curtain walls, all coexist, and all evoke a building fair catalogue. In fact, it is not too far from their very own theme park: "Window of the World." Extremely popular in the region, it has scale reproductions of monuments and buildings from all over the globe: an over 100-meter Eiffel tower in front of a reconstruction of Pisa's Piazza dei Miracoli; Brasilia next to the pyramids of Giza...

After all, the juxtaposition of prepackaged heterogeneous elements, chosen, as it were, "from the catalogue," is perhaps the only possible way to cope with the design insatiability of the instant city. It is no surprise that some proper architectural cookbooks – such as the *Pictorial Guide to Speedy Architectural Design* – have enjoyed great success amongst Chinese engineers and architects. The latter are themselves record-breaking practitioners: if one believes the nearly epic profile traced by Nancy Lin in her essay "Architecture Shenzhen",<sup>7</sup> they are able to churn out the designs for a skyscraper in a single week and are approximately 2500 times more efficient than their American colleagues. The university does not produce them in sufficient numbers: some forecasts estimate that the first unemployed architect will be born in China in approximately one hundred years. Now what European colleague does not feel that he was born in the wrong country?

**The risk of losing all sense of identity.** The hyper-burgeoning that characterizes the instant city is also one of its main negative factors. What has happened to that slow process of accumulation that shaped urban areas in the past? It was a

method based on the collective addition, discussion, acceptance, refusal or modification of every new intervention, leading to a slow and long-lasting urban growth. On the contrary, in Shenzhen it is not rare for buildings to be demolished before they are even finished just because perceived changes in market conditions impose an imperative to reconstruct it differently. The city is continuously changing its skin, the urban landscape mutating in a fluid way. The result is a loss of identity and authenticity. Koolhaas wrote: "Beyond a certain construction pace, this sort of authenticity is unavoidably sacrificed, even if everything is made of stone and authentic materials – and exactly therein lies the irony."<sup>8</sup>

Nothing could be stranger in the breathtaking development of Shenzhen than the European concepts of identity and context. In two decades, the city has succeeded in erasing nearly all traces of pre-existent architecture. It is a pity, many say.

Wu Liangyong, old master of Chinese architecture and professor at Beijing's Tsinghua University, points out the inadequacy of the new skyscrapers based on western models: the traditional buildings provided exceptional climatic comfort; in the new glass towers during the hot season it is impossible to survive without air-conditioning. He supports the idea of an architectural "neo-regionalism" which might combine the basic principles of traditional architecture with modernity: "New regional architecture is only born from traditional architecture with external drives such as new techniques and new materials."<sup>9</sup>

But the skyscraper in Shenzhen is not merely a building type; it is an inalienable icon of progress. Promotional posters of the city show a skyline that seems to rival Manhattan's. In fact, in Shenzhen the modern condition is not a local elaboration, but a formula imported from the west.

Rem Koolhaas, moreover, emphasizes the liberating condition of not having any conditioning from the past. "At most we are like dead parents deploring the mess our children have made of our inheritance."<sup>10</sup> But this "mess" is probably destined to become larger and larger. Nobody doubts that Shenzhen represents the future of China, a country that in the next ten years is planning to build more cities than Europe has ever done in all its history.

**But does Shenzhen have a future?** Nobody wants to risk a forecast for a city that has exceeded every predicted scenario so far. One should mention, however, the efforts of its present administrators which aim to modernize the industry, to create an innovative and advanced district for research and new technologies, to encourage skilled-labor immigration and to improve the quality of life. The last is rather low because of the degradation of the environment: the main roads are clogged with traffic, the air is unbreathable and the rivers and canals resemble open sewers. As therapy, the city underground is under construction, as always in record time.

The largest site at the moment, the new city center – a city in its own right within the city, with over seven million cubic meters of new constructions spread over an area of 400 hectares – is designed around a large park that stretches from the mountains in the north to the sea in the south, in between two curtains of skyscrapers.<sup>11</sup>

Aware of the importance of the quality of architecture in other world-class cities, Shenzhen, in its characteristic spirit of competitiveness, summoned leading international architects for the design of the city center. It owes its skyline to, amongst others, the American Skidmore Owings & Merrill, the German von Gerkan Marg und Partner and the Japanese Arata Isozaki and Kisho Kurokawa. The detailed masterplan that for the first time might succeed in guaranteeing urban coherence has been developed by the German planner Obermeyer. According to their design, a large conference room in the shape of a UFO is suspended approximately 100 meters above the district. This is the urban symbol with which Shenzhen's administrators would like to crown this putative capital of the XXI century.

Will they succeed in their intentions? The initial evidence looks promising. The quality of the environment is progressively improving: parks and green spaces, already recognized by the international "Nations in Bloom" prize in 2000 have reached impeccable standards,<sup>12</sup> while the city, once considered the productive backyard of Hong Kong, is asserting itself as a center of hi-tech excellence. Kevin Walsh, vice president of the Platform Technologies Division of Oracle Corporation, declared last October, while inaugurating its first Chinese research center: "I have to say Shenzhen is one of the best places

in the world to do business.”<sup>13</sup> A similar view is shared by Bill Gates: “Just have a look at what Shenzhen was twenty years ago; we can expect its success in the next twenty years.”<sup>14</sup> Chen Yanping, professor of urban planning at the local university, is more ambivalent. “So far, Shenzhen has enjoyed special status and a tax treatment that guaranteed a privileged condition in the country. Soon things will change. With China joining the World Trade Organization, the very concept of Special Economic Zone will disappear and every city in the country will become our competitor. What will happen to us?” she asks. The question makes Professor Chen anxious. It is also one which speaks directly to the administrators of western metropolises, at least those that aim for maintaining their places in the changing geography of globalization.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics and data in this article come from various sources, including the following websites:

*www.shenzhen.gov.cn* (in Chinese);

*www.szszd.com.cn/szdaily* (in English);

*www.china.org.cn* (in Chinese, English and other languages);

*www.cia.gov* (in English);

*www.worldbank.org* (in English and other languages).

<sup>2</sup> From a speech by Zhuo Qinrui, Shenzhen’s deputy mayor, on the occasion of the inaugural awarding of the “Nations in Bloom” prize, Shenzhen, November 2001.

<sup>3</sup> The term “instant city” was first used by the British group Archigram at the end of the 1960s, but today it takes on a whole new meaning.

<sup>4</sup> Ruan Ming, *Deng Xiaoping: Chronicle of an Empire*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1994, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> Mihai Craciun, “Ideology Shenzhen”, in: A.A.V.V., *Great Leap Forward - Harvard Design School Project on the City*, Köln, Taschen, 2001, p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> Rem Koolhaas, “City of exacerbated difference”, in: A.A.V.V., *Great Leap Forward*, *cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Lin, “Architecture Shenzhen”, in: A.A.V.V., *Great Leap Forward*, *cit.*, pp. 158-161.

<sup>8</sup> Interview of Rem Koolhaas in: Kai Vöckler, Dirk Luckow (ed.), *Peking, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Cities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, Frankfurt, Campus Verlag, 2000, pp. 438-443.

<sup>9</sup> See interview of Wu Liangyong in: Kai Vöckler, Dirk Luckow (ed.), *cit.*, pp. 99-113.

<sup>10</sup> Rem Koolhaas, Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL*, Rotterdam, 010, 1995, pp. 1010-1089.

<sup>11</sup> See Lining Geng, *Shenzhen City Center Plan*, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001, Cambridge, MA.

<sup>12</sup> website [www.nationsinbloom.com](http://www.nationsinbloom.com).

<sup>13</sup> From *Shenzhen Daily*, October 18, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> On the occasion of Bill Gates' visit to Shenzhen, March 1999, as reported by Lining Geng, *cit.*

