

ON THE SHENZHEN-HONG KONG BIENNALE BI-CITY BIENNALE OF URBANISM/ARCHITECTURE

UABB SZ, curated by Ole Bouman with Academic Directors/Curators Li Xiangning and Jeffrey Johnson
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The Value Factory

In most architecture biennales, the vacillation in scale of exhibited content is wide, and often times, confusing. As the only biennale dedicated to exploring themes of urbanism, the UABB's focus is on the urban scale, larger territories, longer-term and more immediately invisible consequences. Here, the exhibition of research and proposed interventions often deal with returning human scale into the urbanscape, as a way to bring liveability back into a context of rapid development.

This year's fifth edition of the Shenzhen-Hong Kong biennale sought to merge the event across the two territories. This decision seemed only too fitting for this year's theme-- Urban Border—which exposed complicated dynamics between these Chinese territories. In the foreground of this biennale is a series of uneasy questions surrounding the future of the dissolving border between Hong Kong (former British territory handed back to the People's Republic of China in 1997) and Shenzhen (a former fishing village, rapidly developed in the last decades and established as a Special Economic Zone). The site of the biennale, the base context, is in fact one of the most charged and fascinating parts of it. The event is used not only as a way to exhibit various architectural interventions, but as way to open discourse on topics of anxiety: cultural identity crises, fears, and speculated futures. What is the future of the Pearl River Delta? How long until, and how will Hong Kong, Shenzhen and the PRD megalopolis coalesce? What are the consequences at the urban scale, and how can the intimate human scale be resurrected?

On a more localized level, even the specific venues of the biennale exposed fascinating dynamics that pose possibilities of urban border development. The two selected venues for the Shenzhen side of the biennale-- the Border Warehouse at the Shekou Ferry Terminal and the Value Factory (formerly the Guangdong Float Glass Factory)—were derelict spaces renovated and converted for the biennale itself. The renovations, which also successfully maintained the super industrial quality of the spaces, became a performative aspect of the biennale and also witnessed new development practices of a rising China, in which the roles of sponsor and developer shift and merge.

Interview with Jeffrey Johnson

Academic Director/Co-curator of the UABB SZ

CWZW:

This year's biennale venues included two main venues that were both rapidly renovated in less than a year, for the purposes of the biennial, with no clear future intention for the spaces in mind. How did the renovation logistics of the spaces bring a whole new dimension to the exhibition? Were you involved in the renovation design process?

JJ:

Both teams were involved in the renovation of the venues from the very beginning. For the Glass Factory, Ole Bouman invited a dozen young international architects to the site for a workshop in May to offer recommendations on what could be done to it. What to do with a huge defunct factory was quite a challenge. For Ole, the factory renovation would become the experience.

For us and the Border Warehouse, we worked with the Shenzhen architects Zhubo on both the renovation and the exhibition design. Because the warehouse was largely empty and obsolete, how we conceived of it for the exhibition was very important. Our concept from the beginning was to create the exhibition like a sort of archive for research and speculations on Urban Borders. The Warehouse provided a perfect venue for this. Its location along the waterfront and immediately next to the ferry terminal was very advantageous. It is, in fact, an urban border condition. To connect to the ferry terminal pedestrian traffic and to create a visual link with the waterfront, the warehouse façade was cut open at the base to create an open and porous façade, which displayed the contents inside. During opening hours the building facade is relatively open to the weather and acts as a large open storefront or market.

CWZW:

Discolè: What was the aimed connection between the exhibition at the Factory and the Warehouse? Was it a choice to contain the exhibition within two discrete venues? Does your future vision of the biennial include more interventions that can inhabit parts of the city?

JJ:

The venues were given to us by the UABB. We were not involved in the selection process. Extending the Biennale out into the city at additional satellite sites was something we originally considered. However, in the end, we were limited and constrained by the resources available. Also, permission for sites beyond the control of the UABB is difficult and complicated. There are also logistical challenges such as security, maintenance, operations, etc.

Both teams proposed entirely different approaches to the Biennale and the theme Urban Borders. The end result is two quite different, yet complimentary approaches that work very well together. For us what was always important was that our project approached the Biennale with the intention of creating a “documentary” on the theme of Urban Borders. This meant that the participants, the content and how to display it were very critical. We spent a considerable effort in identifying people we felt were already intellectually and artistically invested in the theme. We invited many of the leading thinkers on this topic to contribute to our exhibition. For Ole Bouman, it was about creating a venue as a platform for generating content. He invited 12 international content partners to assist in generating this through workshops, discussions, etc.

CWZW:

I might have my facts wrong, so correct me if so -- but word on the grapevine is that the sponsor for the Shenzhen- side of the biennial shifted into being a developer of the Float Factory. The unclear, mutable relationships between municipal domain and private development seem to be a tricky yet interesting dynamic that somehow *works* in China. What has been your experience with this?

JJ:

This is correct. The Biennale is sponsored by China Merchants, a developer located in the Shekou area (area of the UABB). For their sponsorship they are granted rights to the property following the Biennale. I do not know all of the details about the agreement but this is a model that has been used in the past SZ Biennales, for example, previously in the OCT district. You might have seen in the Border Warehouse there was a designated sponsor section. In this area, there is a model of a master plan by OMA of the zone around the venues. Obviously the hope is that this arrangement provides a win-win result for both the city and the developer. The UABB acts as a creative and cultural catalyst for the regeneration of the post-industrial area.

CWZW:

Given the nomadic nature of the biennial venue, what do you think will (or could) be the future life of these spaces?

JJ: We obviously hope that the venues would have a lasting legacy in Shekou. When we were first introduced to the sites for the UABB, the intention was to convert Shekou into a district for creative industries. The Border Warehouse was discussed as a possible future location for film industries. With its close proximity to the ferry to Hong Kong it could provide a less expensive alternative for HK film productions. Now, this is a bit unclear. The developer and sponsor of the Biennale, China Merchants, is currently displaying a new OMA-designed master plan for the area. Regardless of whether or not the Border Warehouse remains as an architectural artifact, we hope that the creative energy created at the Biennale will have a lasting effect.

The hope is that the Glass factory could remain after the Biennale as a museum and/or cultural facility. This, however, is in the hands of the developer, China Merchants.

CWZW:

Shenzhen is a crazy place. You can drive for miles, through long expanses flanked by towers and more towers, and not see one human being. How do you reconcile human/intimate scale in such a massive place?

JJ:

Yes, Shenzhen is really a contemporary city modeled on linear transportation systems and not pedestrian-scaled urban concentrations. It is really a city of distinct destinations. Many of these destinations however are more pedestrian and intimate. I think the UABB venues are good examples. They are at the edge of Shenzhen disconnected from any real urban experience. However, as destinations they both provide unique settings for very human and cultural urban experiences.

CWZW:

Many of the projects you selected dealt specifically with the PRD region. How did you the projects that didn't (interventions proposed for urban sites such as Philadelphia, etc.) still play a role in your intended dialogue in the context of Shenzhen? Including the "national" pavilions?

JJ:

The intention was to create a dialogue across and with many urban border cases. Shenzhen is the host for this dialogue. What is interesting for us is that in some cases the contexts are very unique and distinct. Others, however, are very similar or possess certain similarities. For example, with the above-mentioned Hilltopia project by Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss we can compare the degeneration of a Philadelphia neighborhood with those in the Shrinking Cities research by Philipp Oswalt and Studio Archipelago. With Hilltopia, however, the architect provides a speculation for an alternative future for the vacant urban Philadelphia sites.

As another example, we constructed a comparative juxtaposition of projects that deal with the urban-rural condition. Here we exhibit together many projects from both China and abroad. Together they form a comprehensive narrative on many critical issues related to the city and the countryside - physically, socially and economically.

CWZW:

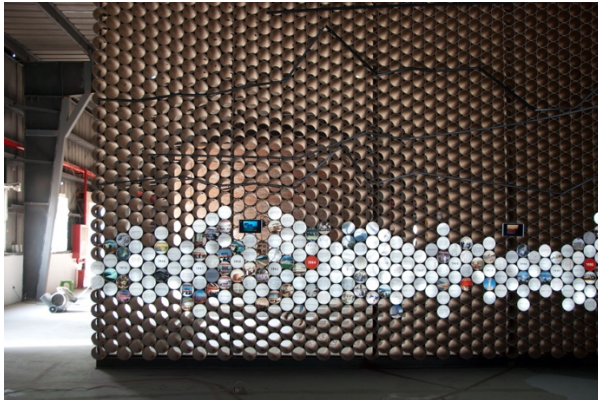
Much of the discourse of workshops and exhibition projects speculates on the future of this dissolving HK-SZ border. What do you think are the most exciting outcomes or consequences of the seemingly inevitable consolidation of the PRD megalopolis?

JJ:

Well, in some ways the future is already revealing itself. The entire PRD is being considered as a single urban region.

The collaborative planning between the cities and zones is already assuming a future where the entire region is smoothly networked through high-tech infrastructural systems.

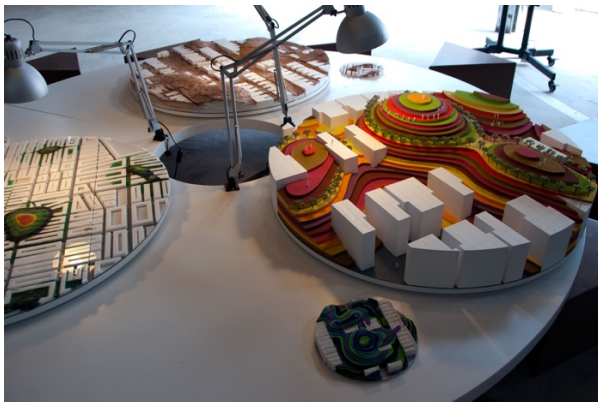
In regard to the physical border between SZ-HK what I find most striking are the extreme opposing conditions. If you view HK from the SZ border what you see is an extreme natural landscape preserved and protected from urban expansion. From the HK side you view SZ as an urban tsunami on the verge of overwhelming the tranquil and idyllic HK landscape. I think this radical polarity needs to be maintained and exploited.



The Border Warehouse



Pop-Up Habitat, Tricycle House, People's Industrial Design Office



Hilltopia, Future of Urban Voids: Philadelphia, Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss



Go West: Africa, Daan Roggeveen, Michiel Hulshof



Toll Stations and Canopies, Salou, Catalonia



The Value Factory





Workshop with Urbanus on the future of Shenzhen's urban villages