POST GENERIC CITY – LEARNING FROM SHENZHEN THE GONGMING EXPERIMENT

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ABSTRACT: This paper refers to and critiques the urban theory of Generic Cities applied to contemporary urban developments in Southern China's Pearl River Delta. Chinese control planning following models from Central Government have meant that high speed development is producing generic cities all over the country. Shenzhen as the first tabula rasa urban prototype is undergoing urban reforms to break the cycle of repetition and indifference, keeping the city competitive. Shenzhen has been launching strategic planning competitions that call for innovation new models. Guangming New Radiant City and Gongming New Central District are experimental projects to rethink generic control planning. Post-generic strategies and tactics draw upon research into rapid transformation of other global generic cities, and also test a Dynamic City Model with catalytic Hot Zones. Urban performance evaluation criteria and an 'urban bar code' is deployed as a planning and communication tool. *Learning from Shenzhen* may be a new system of creating cities of dynamic differences, and could eventually be exported globally as a post-generic paradigm.
KEYWORDS: Contemporary Chinese Urbanism, Generic, Shenzhen, Strategic Planning

PREMISE

This paper attempts to re-examine the concept of the generic city under globalization through the theoretical lens of Rem Koolhaas, and revisit China's Pearl River Delta (PRD) where he led a 1996 Harvard Study 'Great Leap Forward' (Koolhaas & Harvard, 1996). A more critical perspective on the PRD's urbanization could shed light on the future of contemporary cities in the region. Could changing local cultures of urban planning, design and architecture have an effect on how cities are produced? Or are such generic processes automated beyond intervention and hope of any specificity? What room is there for aspirations of citizens and policy makers to determine their own future beyond controlled masterplans handed down from Central authorities. Could the original China urban lab Shenzhen's recent urban transformations still influence contemporary Chinese urbanism, and produce new prototypes that we can then learn from? Ongoing experimental urban research projects in Shenzhen point towards possible alternative futures that do not deny the generic city, but proposes symbiotic post-generic strategies for the city to re-invent and sustain itself.

Fig 1. Shenzhen (Generic City)

GENERIC CITY

Globalization and information networks have been a force in the production and shaping of the contemporary city over the past 20 years (Castells, 1996). Convergence of the global contemporary city, have produced generic 'cities of sameness' that results from relentless urban expansion subsuming the historical city, homogenizing effects of the global economy becoming as a productive force in urbanism. But this global 'sameness' is not about producing the identical, it is opposed to Corbusier's global ideal of standardized reproduction. The generic here celebrates the chaos of contemporary urbanity, accepting it as given and effective in organizing urban resources. Sameness represents the lack of perceivable difference in and between cities around the world, where cultural connectivity and material overabundance have created states of indifferentiation. What is at stake here is architectural production contributing to urban identity.

Generic City is Rem Koolhaas' theory of the contemporary city formulated in 1995 based on critical observations of many global cities he had experienced and what characterized them. It is "uncontrollable, autopoeietic and infinitely repeatable… held together not by an overdemanding public realm, but by the residual" (Koolhaas, 1995). He recognizes that such a universal urbanism could be understood as systematic assemblage of culturally activated space, he questions how perceived differences are constructed and received in cities. On the question of identity in the generic city, decentralization will be the urban process that will free the city from historically defined spatial interrelations. The periphery requires centrality, if there is no centre then there is no periphery, and everywhere is the same. Continuity becomes an imperative for cities. Continuity provides a perceivable datum for all groups to be able to identify with the city, with variations and mutations that allow different groups to participate. Jean Attali, the French philosopher, has postulated that a universal urbanism represents the terminal end of the idea of a polis – he asks whether difference is embodied in physical elements of the city, or in the abstract rules that control their systematic assemblage, or created through our perception? In Generic City, Koolhaas dismisses traditional leftist concerns for collective good and nostalgia. The generic city is amoral and pragmatic, free to start again whenever it desires. A precursor to Generic City was 'Typical Plan' (Koolhaas,1993) from his book S M L XL where typical plans are indeterminate, indiscriminate and everything is possible. Later in essay 'Junkspace' (Koolhaas, 2002) he proclaims: "the lack of uniqueness as a virtue, absence is a vacuum always needing to be filled, reworked, redefined. In generic cities buildings become floating signifiers, divorced from programmatic content and historical past…they are pragmatic and able to change to fit new needs…like a Hollywood studio lot, generic city can produce a new identity every Monday morning". It has dissolved the connection between spatial setting, social and cultural activity. Contemporary cities are complex rapidly mutating entities that defy established categories of identity, not static but dynamic and stretchable.

Koolhaas' Generic City has not been critiqued or further developed since the 1990s due in part to its actual rampant proliferation and globalization in emerging countries like China. Since the 2008 financial market crisis and real estate collapse, unrestrained out-of-control urban development has begun to be critiqued in many countries affected by the fluctuations of global capital markets. In China itself, the world's fastest growing economy and largest urbanizing population, a critical rethink of the generic city has started with academic projects on contemporary Chinese cities at Chinese University of Hong Kong (Liauw & Liu, CUHK 2008, 2009) around the Pearl River Delta, with projects such as Songgan Post-Industrial Urbanism (2008) and Shunde River Urban Regeneration (2009). The spawning of generic cities in this region of China requires an urgent need to re-examine their operating premises of them, whilst at the same time providing opportunities to critically speculate about what and how post-generic futures are possible.

Fig 2. PRD Post-Industrial City (CUHK Studio)

PEARL RIVER DELTA AND SHENZHEN 1998 – 2008

Harvard GSD study ' *Great Leap Forward'* conducted by Koolhaas in 1996 pioneered international attention to China's rapid urbanization and production of cities – bringing us a kind of Big Bang urbanism of the Pearl River Delta (Koolhaas&Harvard, 2002). The Harvard PRD study exposed the generic architectural qualities yet competitive character of Chinese cities growing from zero to becoming towns and cities several million, through accidental and self-organizing growth strategies of C.O.E.D. (Cities of Exacerbated Difference). What was already ordinary everyday urbanism in China's booming southern provinces (spearheaded by Shenzhen since paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's second Southern tour in 1992) was suddenly subjected to this international scrutiny. In reality the PRD has gone through several cycles of economic and social development since the 1980s. Much has happened since the 1996 Harvard study. Many PRD cities continue to grow in a generic manner, but there has also been more differentiation and upgrading of cities since the late 1990s due to increased social prosperity, environmental changes, economic and political reform (Chinese National Commission for Reform, 2008). In the past 10 years, the unprecedented 1998 housing privatization reforms, early 2000's infrastructure expansion and migrant worker social mobility in the PRD have drastically transformed the urban landscape of PRD. Moving from an emerging urban conurbation, towards a fully urbanized territory of interconnected cities, major cities in the PRD have continued to attract global and Chinese investment to build for expanding populations currently close to 50 million. Since Paramount Leader Deng's 2 tours in 1979 and 1992, Shenzhen has been used by the central government as an experimental prototype for both economic and urban reforms. As a 'Special Economic Zone' it was set up to experiment and succeed or fail, without full city status. The SEZ's border boundaries have been expanded northwards 2 times since 1979 as more land was developed (Urban China, 2007). Because of this open experimental attitude, Shenzhen was able to develop faster with new approaches compared to other Chinese cities. Still hard to define in terms of planning models, partly because it does not follow any particular paradigms, with development often outpaces and leads planning timetables. Shenzhen's prototyping of itself is at the forefront of new urbanism in China, spreading development success to other parts of China.
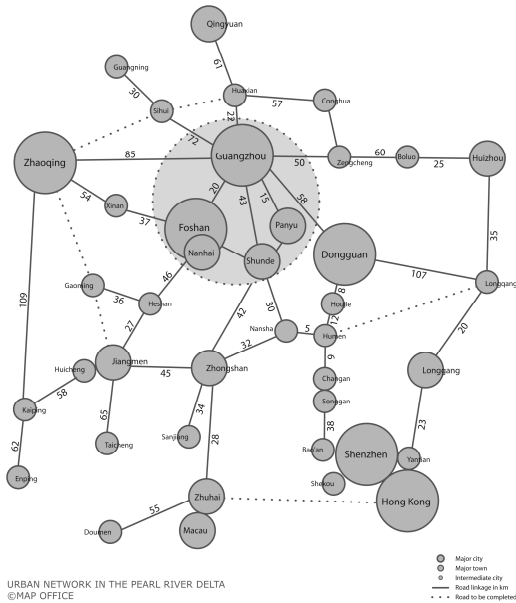
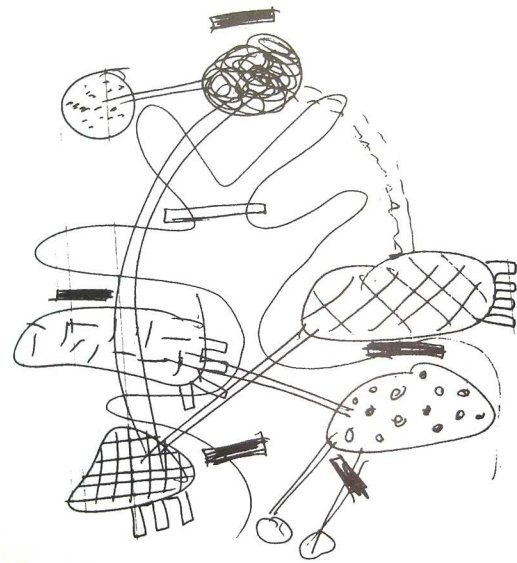**Fig 3**. PRD Network City   **Fig 4**. C.O.E.D (Koolhaas / Harvard)

A powerful forward-looking and risk-taking Planning Bureau in Shenzhen has been organizing regular design competitions in the fields of urban design, architecture, landscape and urban regeneration in the past 10 years. Planning is still handled mainly by large local planning institutes directed by top officials in Guangzhou and Beijing. Most government masterplans handed down are static, standardized, centric in nature and dominated by infrastructure rather than space. With the globalization of Shenzhen, new local and international talent began to appear in design competitions since the late 1990s. Architecture and urban design quality is now seen by the Shenzhen government as complimentary to rigid control masterplans which become quickly outdated, due to rapid development and pursuit of the 'New' as a paradigm. In 2008, Shenzhen was awarded the title UNESCO 'City of Design', the only city in China and amongst 6 cities in the world. In past 5 years, public projects by progressive Chinese and international architects are appearing with the production of new commercial and residential projects. Major new projects commissioned through design competitions include buildings designed by Arata Isozaki, Coop Himmelblau, Rem Koolhaas, Hans Hollein, Steven Holl, Chang Yungho, Massimiliano Fuksas, Norman Foster, Kisho Kurokawa, and Mecanoo. Shenzhen's Planning Bureau has also encouraged the participation of emerging young architects, fostering the development of new talent whether local Chinese or from overseas.

Fig 5.   Shenzhen Masterplan (2008 -2020)

Shenzhen is moving towards an unknown and post-generic future. It is experimenting not only with its market driven planned economy, but now also upgrading the quality of its architecture and urban design. So if Shenzhen is trying to move away from its generic past, towards prototyping new urban models, how does this fit in with global urban trends and what cases provide evidence of others' success?

GLOBAL CITIES OF POST GENERIC TRANSFORMATION

Global generic cities globalization shows a convergence of sameness and similarity in city making driven by global capitalism. There exists a multitude of global cities not differentiated by their fabric and urban cultures, that have decided to avoid potential expiry and boost competitiveness by strategic planning. This differentiation of cities in a bid to remain competitive has brought global attention to some smaller cities, previously unknown until their architectural and planning successes took effect over short periods of around 10 years. Research has been conducted by Liauw at CUHK to classify 10 post-generic global cities, so that tools of urban transformation can be systematically extracted and deployed, remixed with variations in other generic cities. Problems, actions and results were classified and indexed for a matrix of transformation tools that could be adapted to different urban development scenarios. This approach of selective and adaptive transformation is now being tested on a generic city in Shenzhen SEZ.
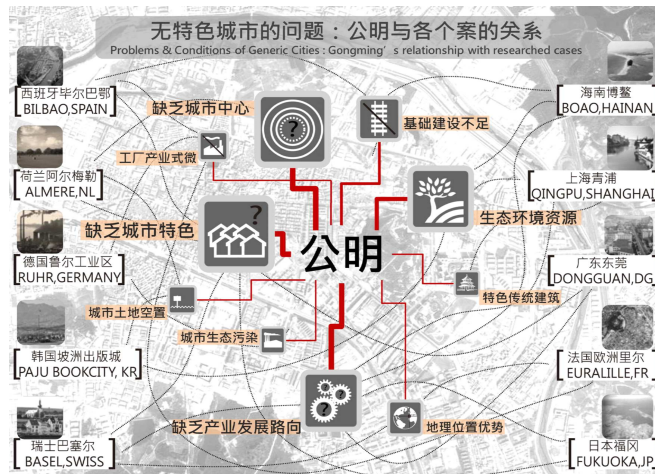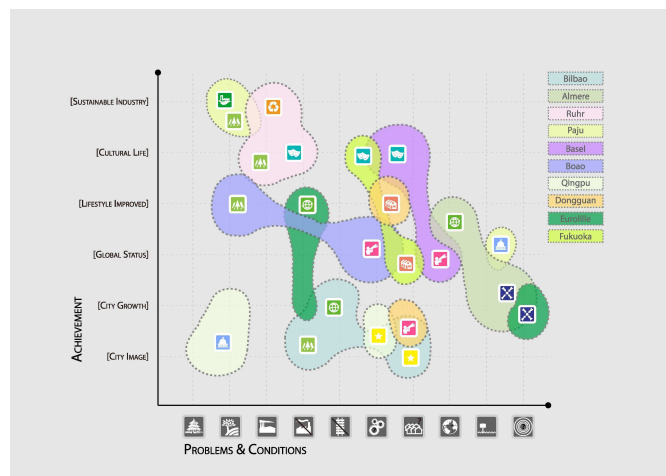

Fig 6. Gongming Problems Case Studies

Fig 7.   Global cases problem-action matrix

The following are the 10 cities researched with a matrix of urban transformations and effects:
- Bilbao Spain (networked starchitecture and urban regeneration)
- Ruhr Germany (adaptive reuse from industrial to cultural)
- Almere Netherlands (planned centrality emphasizing difference by connections)
- Basel Switzerland (cultivation of local arts and global culture integration)
- Euralille France (transit orientated new town centre and connectivity)
- Paju Korea (led by one dominant new industry as growth generator)
- Fukuoka Japan (planned culture and public housing)
- Dongguan China (development by media promotion and leisure lifestyle)
- Boao China (local natural resources and global events)
- Qinggpu China (modern architecture and strong political setting)

THE GONGMING URBAN EXPERIMENT

In 2006 Shenzhen's government launched an ambitious international urban design competition for an experimental city on its outskirts called Guangming (光明 translates to Radiant in Chinese) in a bid to redesign a 'New Radiant' city. The aim of this competition combines the latest urban ideas in high technology industry development and sustainable design, eventually won by Austrian practice Rainer Pirker. Guangming's radical planning away from standard control masterplans. This government initiated approach marks a departure in Shenzhen's thinking about its own future.
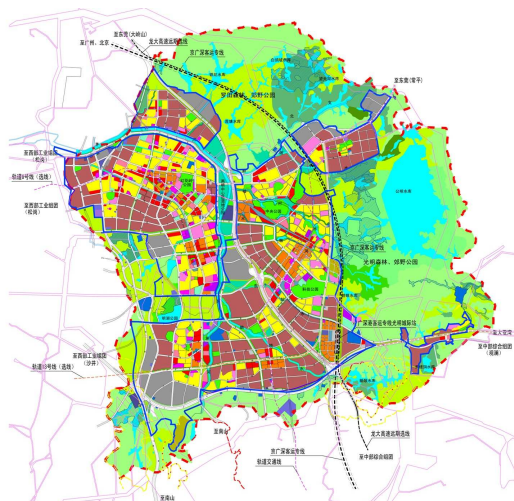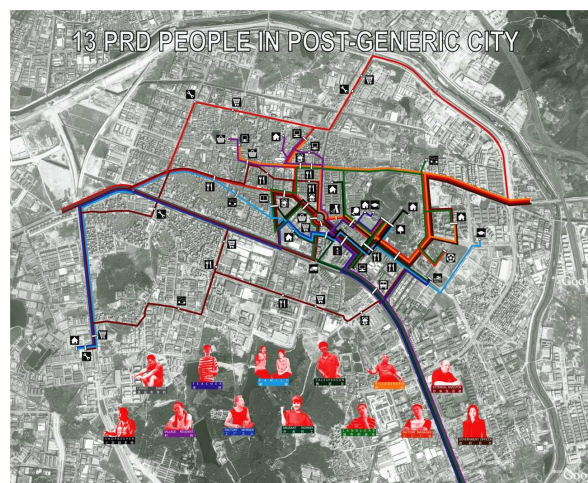

Fig 8. Guangming-Gongming Masterplan

Fig 9. Gongming People Types and Spatial Patterns

An extension of the Guangming experiment is adjoining district town of Gongming (公明) with a population of over 500,000 spread over an area of 30 sq km. This second phase of post-generic planning with strategic urban design is currently the subject of a government research project commissioned to Urbanus architects in collaboration with CUHK's Liauw. Gongming suffers from the same kind of generic masterplanning, where post-industrial fabric is intended to be transformed wholesale into commercial and residential zoning with a standard public town centre inserted containing typical architectural designs. This dominant top-down approach in no way recognizes local differences that may be transformed or evolved. A standardized future is projected top-down from central planners onto the town in an attempt to 'upgrade' it. Our research team sought to challenge this approach to urbanism and reworked the notion of a single centrality being able to transform the city. We began by characterizing the city in terms of its local problems, activities and people types, whilst recognizing the fact that Gongming's physical environment actually 'had few distinguishable characteristics'. 13 people types were interviewed and their personal readings of the city along with their aspirations for their future environment were documented as projective desires for the city

(results presented at the 2009 Rotterdam Architecture Biennale). The physical reality of the city is intertwined with its social ecology in this research presentation, and does not ignore the desires of multiple actors within a multiplicity of spaces and places in the city. These urban desires are not only multiple reflective realities of a city, but also require mechanisms for such aspirations to be communicated and reflected in city planning.

One of our collaborative research criticisms of Gongming's urban development is that it had emerged out of a non-planned chaotic mix of legal and illegal constructions with typical plans, and lack of any recognizable order. In effect Gongming is a classic Chinese generic city 'waiting to reinvent itself by next Monday' (Koolhaas, 1995). In response our research team has tried to ask the question of 'how' to transform this generic city, with strategic actions of 'what' and 'where' to initiate the process of transformation. The city is evolving into a new state of urbanity – *'becoming a city'* could be a new urban paradigm for Gongming, rather than a mass produced 'instant city'. Against this backdrop of a city with 'few characteristics' and the desire to transform itself through strategic planning, our approach to Gongming was not to develop another masterplan, but work with the existing one whilst resisting it at the same time through new influences. Our urban strategy can be seen as an alternative system or methodology that allows the city to structurally transform as a Dynamic City Model, and not in a single pre-determined move. This principle of Dynamic City Model with multiple centres adopts notions of multiplicity and urban continuum as discussed in urban theories of Alison and Peter Smithson (Cluster City, 1957), the Metabolists (circa 1960s). It does not fall into the trap of a becoming a model with a deterministic ending, the very lack of permanence makes this transformation more tactical than strategic when only certain places have been activated. We have proposed to introduce 10 multiple catalytic 'Hot Zones' to operate as attractors and social condensors that create rich urban experience through weaving pathways between recognizable differences generated by the new Hot Zones. This instrumental and tactical approach to Gongming at once incorporates different aspects of the city whether new or old, natural or artificial, local or foreign. Differences between the Hot Zones are accentuated by the existing generic city, which in turn will gradually be affected by them and evolve with an overall more specific character. Future end users and visitors to Gongming will experience these Hot Zones as different characters of mixed-use in the city, and move between them along pathways through existing generic fabric. The new urban identity of the city will not be only visual, but also experiential, where people move through the city encountering ordinary districts and newly designed characteristic zones. The weaving of these different urban experiences becomes more important planning strategy than creating individual architectural spectacles around a centre. Both the generic and specific co-exist in Gongming as a symbiotic system of sameness and difference. Mutually dependant on each other for survival, feeding off each others inadequacies, the same can only be the same because they are not different, and vice versa. The Post-Generic city could therefore be an urban process of evolution and self-similar mutation, until new species emerge from existing types and urban fabric that have been artificially transformed.
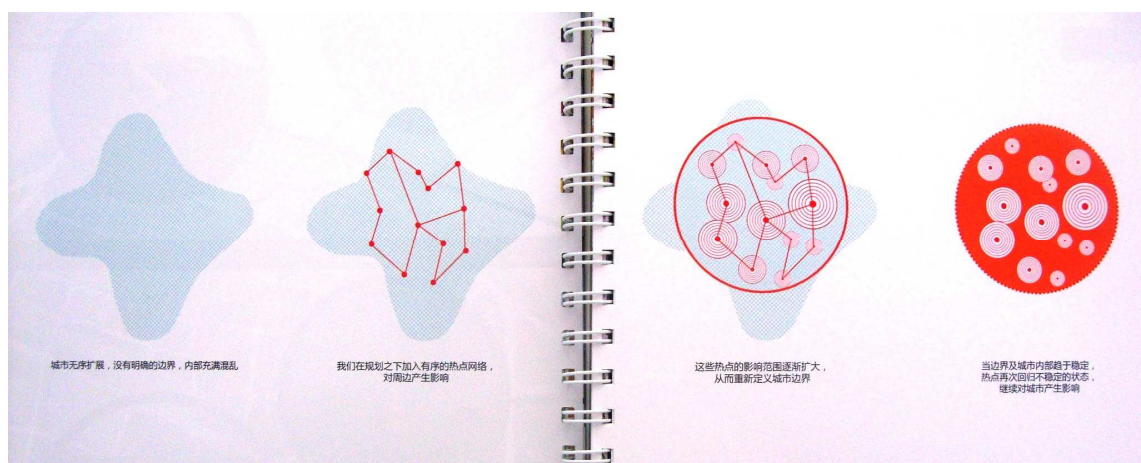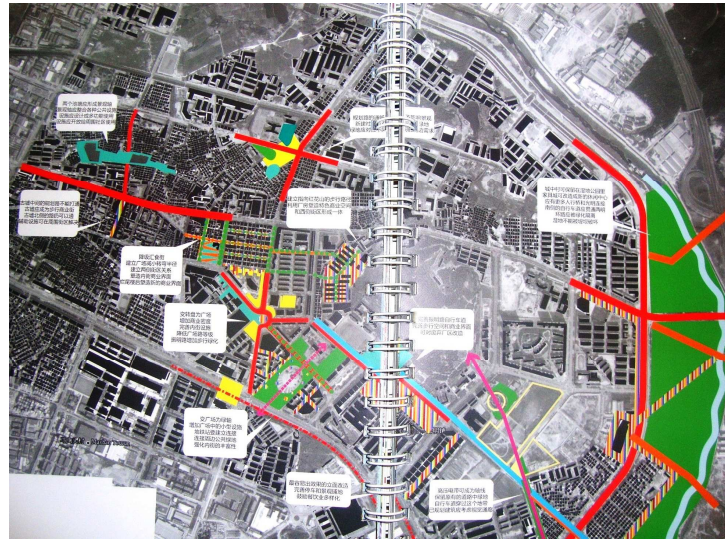

Fig 10. Dynamic City Model (Urbanus & Liauw)

Fig 11. Hot Zones Weaving of Urban Differences

BAR CODE AS URBAN TOOL

How do we know when such an urban strategy is successful and yielding results? We wanted to challenge the conventional Chinese notion of a city's success (typically demonstrated by grand building projects, huge plazas and political performances) by proposing that Gongming (and also Shenzhen) needs to develop its own urban performance criteria, in line with such recognized measurable indicators comparable with the 'livable cities indices' from around the world (The Economist, 2008). Evaluating cities' performance and modulating its urban indexes is important for rapidly developing cities in the PRD that currently lack self-awareness and critical judgment. Our research (Urbanus & Liauw, 2009) has proposed to link urban criteria indexing of Gongming in a performative way to the new Hot Zones and their positive effects (or not) over time to the city. This linkage of the virtual to the real is necessary to define the abstractly controlled measures of a city, through its points of activation and transformation. We further introduced a conceptual 'urban bar code' device to synthesize all new physical urban inputs to the system of the Gongming. This urban bar code performs 2 instrumental roles – it collates all urban design policies from the 10 (or more) Hot Zones activated, then classifies and indexes them to be communicated as an urban device to policy makers and the public. As a communication tool, the urban bar code as a composite of actions and multiplicity of places in the city, becomes a dynamic public branding device to tell people how the city is changing through positive action. It registers urban performance indices and broadcast them in a simple integrated format as a changing multi-coloured logo to citizens. It can be branded and placed in various locations of public activity, interactive with residents. The fact that it changes periodically with the city but is still recognizable as a signifier means that the identity of Gongming will change and grow, driven by the dynamic city model of post-generic development. Gongming's future strategy will be to inject calculated difference into the existing generic fabric, and allow multiple rounds of urban specificity to be cultivated and evolve the city.
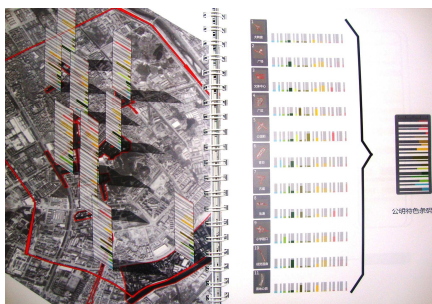

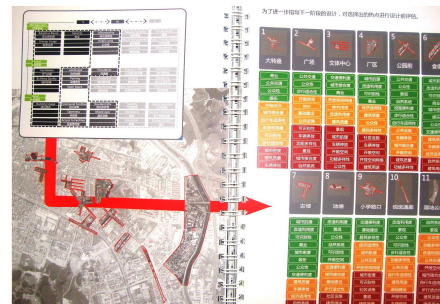**Fig 12**. Urban Bar Code and City Branding

Fig 13. Urban Performance Criteria / Evaluation

In the publication 'City Branding' (Berci Florian, NAi 2002) talks about how Globalization makes cities more similar and therefore brings them into increased competition, so cities must find and accentuate those specific qualities that make them unique. This need to differentiate could address the weightless ahistorical urbanism of the contemporary Chinese city through strategies based on the above projections of constructed differences and measured identities.

M.Christine Boyer in her book 'Cyber Cities' (Boyer, 1996) notes that in today's global village – media propagates a culture of images, not space, building difference primarily on the level of reception, not real experience. Koolhaas earlier writings echoes this by calling for an urbanism that recognizes territories , processes and infrastructure. By avoiding symbolism, images and repetition, the city can be saved (Koolhaas, 1994). Gongming the PRD's post-generic city prototype with a dynamic city model and instrumental tools for urban transformation, is struggling to avoid generic expiry and in turn create specific spatial experiences in the city for a sustainable future.

POST GENERIC CITY : LEARNING FROM SHENZHEN

In conclusion, this paper has critically revived Koolhaas' 1995 discourse on the generic city becoming the dominant form of producing urbanism for the contemporary city, and also attempted to speculate on post-generic futures for urban China. Shenzhen as the first tabula rasa urban Lab in the 1980s is again leading by example. Current urban policies to keep the city competitive and avoid expiry has brought with it innovative planning practices and architecture that challenge existing generic planning. In a bid to break the cycle of repetition and indifference, Shenzhen has launched strategic planning projects that call for innovation new prototypes rather than repetitive models. Alternative post-generic tactics have been developed bottom up for Gongming town district, drawing upon our research into transformation of global generic cities and also testing a dynamic city model with catalytic attractors. New strategic planning by Urbanus & Liauw incorporates urban evaluation criteria and an adaptable urban 'bar code'. Gongming within Shenzhen SEZ may yet provide the DNA for the next wave of post-generic urbanization in the Pearl River Delta. 'Learning from Shenzhen' may no longer be purely an economic reproduction model, but a new system of developing cities of dynamic differences. If successful, this system of contemporary Chinese urbanism could eventually be exported globally as a new post-generic paradigm.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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