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## Inclusive Urban Transformation Embracing the Values of Urban Villages in the PRD Region

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# Chapter 14

## Inclusive Urban Transformation: Embracing the Values of Urban Villages in the PRD Region



Lei Qu 

**Abstract** The presence of urban villages inside the city is a common phenomenon in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region. This chapter investigates the reference cases of Guangzhou and Shenzhen, to provide insights into the issues of inclusiveness in the rapid urbanisation process in this region, in the context of industrial upgrading and migration. This is done by exploring potentials and values of urban villages through mapping analysis, which serves as the basis for inspirational design proposals on alternative redevelopment models for urban villages, in contrast to the ongoing tabula rasa approaches. This chapter introduces a Delft approach of using ‘mapping’ as a tool to build a visual narrative on spatial relations and governance models in urban villages in the PRD region. The results indicate the values of urban villages as arrival cities to migrants, in terms of cultivating micro-economy and strengthening social resilience. To enhance such values, incremental developments that contribute to a more integrated spatial structure, providing space for small businesses and social interactions in urban villages, are considered strategic. In this sense, a more adaptive planning framework that makes room for co-creational urban regeneration processes is needed, in which these incremental developments can be facilitated.

**Keywords** Urban village · Urban transformation · Inclusiveness · Migration

### 14.1 Introduction

Currently, cities in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region are mostly undergoing an industrial upgrading process, stimulated by various new industrial policies implemented by regional authorities (Liu 2020) to enhance socio-economic and environmental sustainability, which has led to a certain level of exodus of capital in affected sectors and increased industrial restructuring (Chen and de’Medici 2010). For example, since 2005, the Shenzhen municipality has tightened restrictions on land

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usage, increased minimum wages and raised environmental standard for industrial development. The city has since then been re-profiling itself from a ‘world factory’ to a ‘world city’. New types of industries, e.g. in services and creative industries, started to increase while capital in those polluting, labour-intensive manufactory industries has seen a certain degree of withdrawal (Wall 2016). Along with this trend, it is foreseeable that new social groups will emerge, new social relations are to be formed and new demands on liveability and urbanity will be generated in cities of the PRD region. Next to such socio-economic transformation, spatial development in this region is focussing more and more on the built-up areas. Urban regeneration is playing a crucial role in reshaping spatial structure at the city-regional scale and urban form at the neighbourhood level. This reflects the paradigm shift in urban planning and development, from extensive urban expansion to adaptive urban redevelopment (Zou 2015). In this sense, the future of the cities lies in existing urban fabrics.

Urban villages, as one type of old urban fabric in the PRD region (as defined by ‘Sanjiu’ redevelopment in Guangdong Province, i.e. redevelopment of ‘three old types’ of land: old villages, old urban areas and old factories) (Wu 2018), have gradually been put on the agenda of urban regeneration practice in the last two decades, especially those located in central urban areas. For example, renewal of urban villages in Shenzhen in the 2010s started from those in the older sections of the city (O’Donnell 2021). For those who are unfamiliar with this phenomenon, urban villages are informal settlements built by villagers on homestead land, managed by village collectives. These informal settlements emerged during the rapid urbanisation process in which rural villages became part of the city due to urban expansion. The formation of urban villages is a process of densification with mixed urban functions, while at the same time, these villages remain rural in terms of governance and serve mainly rural–urban migrants. Due to the high demand on land for large-scale redevelopment in central areas, *tabula rasa* approaches were often implemented in the renewal of urban villages in PRD cities. As a consequence, issues related to gentrification and shortages of affordable housing in central urban areas emerged, which have generated debate in society. This is also the starting point of this chapter: to explore the potentials and values of urban villages, seeking more inclusive redevelopment models.

Thus, this chapter contributes to the understanding of socio-economic values of urban villages in PRD cities. It indicates the role of urban villages as arrival cities for migrants, in terms of cultivating micro-economies and enhancing social resilience as well as urban vitality. The intention of this chapter is to raise questions about the current urban regeneration practice in big cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen in the PRD region. It also touches upon broader questions related to sustainable urbanisation in Chinese city regions and the role of urban planning and design in it: Who could play a vital role in the co-creational process for a more inclusive, liveable and vital city? And how could urban planning and design guide the spatial transformation within such processes? The ambition is not to give answers, but to generate a meaningful discussion, using the redevelopment of urban villages as examples (Fig. 14.1).



**Fig. 14.1** Hubei village in the central urban area, Luohu district, of Shenzhen. *Photos Lei Qu*

## 14.2 Theories and Practices Related to the Phenomenon of Urban Villages

### 14.2.1 *The Formation and Transformation of Urban Villages*

Villages in China are governed by village collectives, which is different to the urban system. In the PRD region, it is a common phenomenon that along with the rapid rural industrialisation and urban expansion processes, farmland in peripheral areas of cities has, to a large extent, been gradually transformed into urban use. During this process, villages that owned the farmland got compensated land for construction, to replace the lost form of income. From the late 1980s, these villages started to build factories and apartment buildings on compensated land, which were rented out to manufactories and new migrants, respectively. The village collectives oversaw the planning—dividing the homestead land—for these new developments; the individual families were the ones who raised funding and built apartment buildings on their own plots. Depending on the management style and capacity of the village, the physical environment as the result can be very different in terms of the level of informality. Nevertheless, the typical urban villages can be described as patchworks of semi-planned informal settlements.

As noted by Saunders (2011), many metropolises around the world have experienced the emergence of arrival cities, including Shenzhen. These are informal settlements, often at the outskirts of cities, in which rural–urban migrants try to integrate themselves socially and economically into the city. These arrival cities are mostly overlooked, and some even destroyed as their value and potential, for example cultivating the future middle class, is ignored.

Urban villages in the PRD region have indeed played the role of arrival cities, accommodating numerous rural–urban migrants by providing low-cost living for

them. However, due to the informal setting and problems in infrastructure and building quality, they are usually defined as problematic neighbourhoods that do not meet the universal standard of a ‘healthy city’, which leads to the ‘tabula rasa’ urban redevelopment approach. This approach has been commonly used in cities in the PRD region in central urban areas, where more large-scale urban renewal projects based on urban villages have been implemented than in peripheral districts. These projects are mostly related to the development of high-end housing or other urban functions, driven by the high pressure of industrial upgrading, population growth and land scarcity. Such pressure for redevelopment is usually less severe in peripheral districts, where alternative approaches of improving liveability in urban villages are being tested by local governments, social organisations, practitioners and people themselves in urban regeneration processes, focussing more on social construction (Vlassenrood 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to address the different local context when evaluating the urban regeneration practices in the PRD region. In places with a high pressure of large-scale redevelopment, recognising the value and potential of urban villages is essential to maintain affordable living for rural–urban migrants inside the city; in areas where no immediate redevelopment is to happen, adaptive solutions can be tested for improving the living and working conditions inside these arrival cities.

### ***14.2.2 Inclusiveness and Liveability***

The current discussion of liveability in Chinese cities focusses more on the universal standard of physical environment than the context-related perception and satisfaction of people, especially when it is related to old urban fabrics like urban villages. In these informal settlements, factors such as the commensurate level of income (Evans 2002), living expenditure, housing and services need to be considered in the discussion on liveability. For example, due to the inflamed real estate housing development and increasing focus on urban regeneration in Chinese cities, newly built commodity housing areas that are homogeneous, mono-functional and owner occupied have largely replaced the old neighbourhoods that accommodate the middle-low and low-income groups. These old neighbourhoods are usually not appreciated by the real estate market; however, they function as affordable housing and contribute to a real proximity between living and working for vulnerable groups (Qu et al. 2017).

Production and jobs are endogenous forces to the process of urban growth rather than exogenous drivers (Storper and Scott 2009). Meanwhile, along with the industrial upgrading process in the PRD region, social groups that work in emerging industries are increasing and they embrace new lifestyles. This development trend poses challenges to PRD cities in meeting the diversified demands of living. According to Florida (2004), places that are open and tolerant can attract different kinds of people and generate new ideas. This explains why big metropolises in the PRD region, especially Shenzhen with the slogan ‘You are a Shenzhener once you came’, are attracting migrants, including young graduates and skilled and unskilled workers to live there.

Thus, inclusiveness is essential to cities in the PRD region, from the perspective of liveability in the context of industrial upgrading and migration.

### ***14.2.3 Social Resilience Versus Entrepreneurship***

As indicated by the discussion above, this chapter proposes a people-centred approach in response to the rapid urbanisation and industrial upgrading processes in the PRD region, one to help the rural–urban migrants coping with the socio-economic and spatial transformations. From this perspective, social resilience—the relations among and adaptive capacities of social actors—needs to be emphasised.

Generally speaking, social resilience refers to the capacity of individuals and institutions to respond to crisis—the capacity to absorb changes, coping with known or un-known threats and disturbances (Glavovic et al. 2002). Social resilience within a society evolves from acceptance of changes passively, to prepare for them proactively. For rural–urban migrants, the sudden shift from rural to urban identities and environments along with the urbanisation process could be seen as an example of disturbance in their lives. The industrial upgrading process is part of the rapid socio-economic changes, which imposes extra challenges to the migrant workers who might lose job opportunities due to such transitions. From the perspective of cities, the influx of rural–urban migrants is also a huge challenge on public facilities and housing provision. The emergence of urban villages in the PRD region is the local response to demands of rural–urban migrants on low-rent housing, a challenge absorbed by the self-built houses of villagers. Next to the massive construction of apartment buildings inside urban villages, people (villagers and migrants themselves) kept adapting these informal settlements for livelihoods, which is a way to prepare for future uncertainties (Béné et al. 2012). As often seen in urban villages in the PRD region, shops and small businesses emerge along streets and alleys, where open markets are also organised by village collectives using leftover spaces, showing the adaptive capacities of people in the use of space, seeking every chance to thrive.

Such adaptive capacity varies among stakeholders, depending on their access to property rights, which determines their powers of influence in governance, as well as the level of participation in the process of urban redevelopment—the transformative capacity. Stakeholders with (or without) property rights are engaged (or not) in the decision-making process, which leads to, very often, big changes to their living environment (Voss 2008). For example, the village collective as the association of property owners can decide on radical redevelopment strategies in collaboration with real estate developers, for the sake of greater profit and a more promising future on financial terms. Such decisions, however, exclude the voices of the majority of migrants living in the urban village, who still struggle with adapting themselves into the urban life, and rely on their social capital attached largely to the place they live in. Hence, in a nutshell, urban villages inside the city contributed to social inclusiveness, functioning as arrival cities for migrants; however, they were built by villagers and managed by village collectives, functioning as a business entity for property owners

at the same time. Knowing such a fact can help us to understand the social value and entrepreneurship within such informal settlements.

#### ***14.2.4 Mapping as a Way of Thinking***

The above-mentioned theories and practices can provide a framework for interpreting the phenomenon of urban villages in the PRD region. However, to thoroughly unravel the complex issues at hand and explore the potential and possibility for more inclusive redevelopment of these informal settlements through urban planning and design, we need an effective tool to visualise the spatial features of urban villages that are associated with the socio-economic transition and governance model. ‘Mapping’ is usually seen as such a tool to analyse the current situation in cities and regions, linking spatial structure, functionality and urban form with social, economic and environmental performances. In this chapter, it is also seen as a visual narrative on inclusive urban redevelopment that is derived from illustrations of the current status and future scenarios of two urban villages in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, as representative cases of the PRD region. Examples of mapping analysis included in this chapter are from selected graduation projects conducted by TU Delft urbanism master’s students of the Complex Cities studio from 2013 to 2017. These analyses can help us to understand the interactions between macro-level spatial development trends and micro-level socio-economic dynamics inside urban villages, which could be used to inform decision-making and opt for alternative ways of urban regeneration. This MSc graduation studio serves as a powerful platform for conducting such research, as students are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed for mapping spatial relations and governance models, linking research, planning and design. The studio follows the Delft approach that uses mapping and drawing as a way of thinking (Nijhuis et al. 2017).

### **14.3 Two Cases of Urban Regeneration in Guangzhou and Shenzhen**

This section introduces two cases of urban regeneration in areas with urban villages in Guangzhou and Shenzhen. The case of the Lijiao village in Guangzhou represents the large-scale redevelopment of urban villages in central urban areas, and the foreseeable social consequences of the tabula rasa approach; the case of the Dalang district in Shenzhen showcases the potential for alternative incremental urban redevelopment in peripheral districts.

### 14.3.1 *The Lijiao Village in Guangzhou–Urban Redevelopment in Central Urban Areas*

The Lijiao Village is located at the end of the southern extension of the central axis of Guangzhou, currently one of the largest urban village redevelopment projects in the city (Fig. 14.2). The village has a history of almost 800 years. It is one of the key areas that represents the historical and cultural resources of the city. According to the head of the village, there are more than 70,000 migrants living in the village, much more than the number of villagers (around 10,000). In recent decades, the Lijiao village has experienced an evolution from a clan-based society to a production-oriented economic entity, later on to a semi-acquaintance community and eventually a neighbourhood with a majority of migrants. These changes are reflected in the transformation of its physical environment, such as the remaining ancestor halls of the clans, collectively owned land for industrial development, informal markets selling local food along the river and housing densification with new typologies of apartment buildings accommodating migrants upstairs and shops on the ground floor (Fig. 14.3).

Along with the decreasing of secondary industries in the overall economic structure of Guangzhou, low-end manufactory industries inside urban villages, such as those collectively owned land for industrial development in the Lijiao village, will be gradually replaced soon. Instead, the emerging industries, like e-commerce, will

**Fig. 14.2** The location of the Lijiao village in Guangzhou. *Image* Qiao Yang, TU Delft





**Fig. 14.3** The spatial configuration representing the transformation of the Lijiao village in the past decades. *Image* Qiao Yang, TU Delft

offer new opportunities for young entrepreneurs who see urban villages as suitable places for investment. For example, in Guangzhou, ‘Taobao villages’ have emerged in urban (and rural) villages along the edge of the central city, with clustered small businesses based on the e-commerce platform called ‘Taobao’ (Zhang et al. 2016). The flexibility embedded in informality in the use of space in urban villages offers people possibilities to be entrepreneurial. Such processes of accumulating wealth and social capital is also a process of climbing the social ladder.

Since 2007, the village collective intended to collaborate with developers in the redevelopment of the Lijiao village. After five years of negotiation, the village reached an agreement with the developer Zhuguang Group on the redevelopment model, which will be ‘demolition and reconstruction’ for most parts of the village, except for the preserved cultural heritage sites such as the ancestor halls. One of the conditions was that the developer would construct apartment buildings for relocating villagers as compensation for the property owners of the current apartment

buildings in the village. However, the negotiations about compensation standards became a protracted battle among all stakeholders, including the government, developer, village collective and villagers. In August 2015, Zhuguang Group raised the compensation standard, which attracted interest from many villagers. In May 2018, more than 80% of the villagers agreed with the compensation proposal, which means the long process of negotiation had come to an end and the redevelopment will go forward. This also means that soon the large number of migrants and businesses in the village will be gone.

The mapping analysis not only provides evidence for the foreseeable social consequence of such a tabula rasa approach, but also serves as a basis for exploring alternative development models that are more incremental and can accommodate certain types of the new economy (mainly small businesses, e.g. the above-mentioned e-commerce) while maintaining this urban village as an inclusive living and working environment for the migrants. Such alternative models seek a balance between social resilience and entrepreneurship and require a more adaptive planning framework that encourages the property owners to transform their self-built houses. A win-win situation can possibly be achieved through design experiments within a co-creational process, in which the government, the villagers, the small businesses and the migrants jointly adapt the built environment. The proposal sheds light on such a planning and design process for exploring the potential of urban villages in strategic locations in Guangzhou as inclusive neighbourhoods. It is based on conclusions from the mapping analysis for the Lijiao village—the potential of adapting the village into an open neighbourhood for all, using the inherited historical spatial structure as a framework for self-organisation. (Fig. 14.4).

### ***14.3.2 The Dalang District in Shenzhen—Alternative Development Model in Peripheral Areas***

There are around 300 urban villages in Shenzhen, and the majority of them are located in peripheral districts. This is related to the urban planning and development trajectory of Shenzhen. In the 1980s, Shenzhen started its rapid urban development almost from scratch, from a series of fishing villages and small towns with a total population of 300,000. Urban planning was focussing on the central urban districts, where the construction of a special economic zone and a city became the priority of the municipal government. To the contrary, the peripheral districts experienced spontaneous, rural industrialisation processes as the result of the absence of urban planning. Furthermore, the contrast between the informal urban landscape in the periphery and the well-planned global-city image of the central areas represent different stages of urban redevelopment in Shenzhen.

Dalang is an industrial city district located close to the northern edge of a central urban district (Nanshan district) of Shenzhen (Fig. 14.5). Over 95% of the population there are young migrant workers. The urban fabric in Dalang represents the mutual





Fig. 14.5 The location of the Dalang district in Shenzhen. Image Qiao Yang, TU Delft

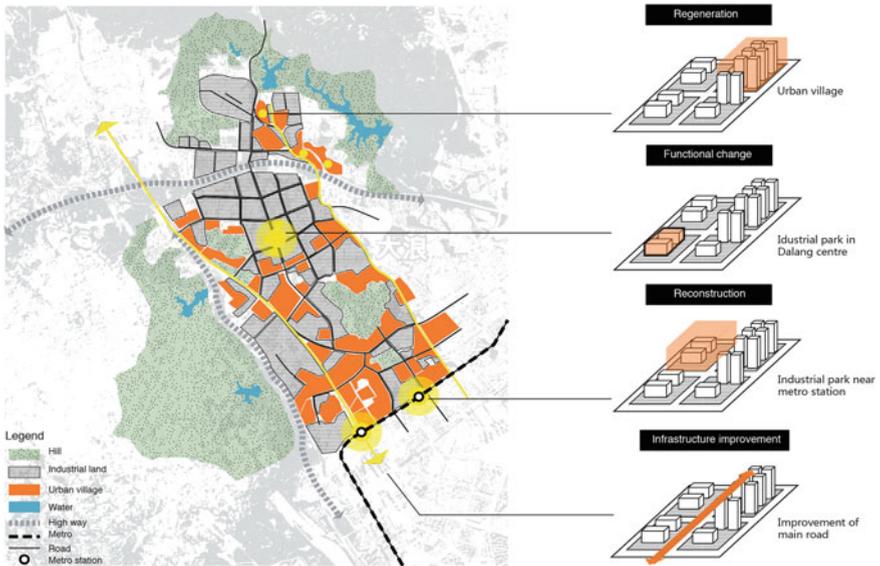


Fig. 14.6 The urban fabric and four main types of urban regeneration practices in Dalang. Image Yishiqin Li, TU Delft

Dalang. The findings clearly show that the distribution of retail stores is strongly correlated with street connectivity (Fig. 14.7). The retail stores are mostly situated on the ground and first floors of residential buildings, which show a tendency of clustering in pedestrian friendly streets with wide sidewalks.

From the perspective of inclusiveness, an alternative redevelopment strategy for urban villages in Dalang other than the tabula rasa approach implemented in central urban areas would be to maintain and unlock the potential of these urban villages in accommodating such small businesses. This is actually in line with the ongoing developments encouraged by the local district government. There are small projects in Dalang districts co-created by villages (providing space), local district government (providing funding), practitioners (providing design proposals) and social organisations (facilitating public participation), improving public spaces and facilities for the migrant workers. A participatory planning approach oriented towards social construction and community development is emerging in this peripheral district of Shenzhen.

Considering the special context of this peripheral district, TU Delft students concluded their research with planning and design principles for urban regeneration



**Fig. 14.7** Overlaying the mapping of retail stores and street integration analysis at  $R = 800$ . *Image* Yishiqin Li, TU Delft



**Fig. 14.8** A design proposal for activating waterfront public spaces through new connections in North Dalang. *Image* Yishiqin Li, TU Delft

in urban villages in Dalang. These include, for example, increasing street integration, prioritising slow traffic as well as the comfort of walking and cycling environment and diversifying public space to facilitate street vendors and other informal activities. The mapping analysis helped to indicate potential areas for intervention. Figure 14.8 shows an example of a design proposal that illustrates how the improvement of (currently abandoned) waterfront area next to an urban village in North Dalang and the new connections through a footbridge can contribute to the integration of street networks and activate public spaces. Based on this, new commercial functions and flexible spaces for vendors are expected to emerge, which will contribute to the inclusiveness and vitality of this area.

## 14.4 Discussion

As shown by both case studies, informality is the main feature of micro-economy in urban villages, including, for example, the informal housing market and small businesses. From the perspective of property owners—the villagers—rental income generated by their self-built houses is the most important part of the village economy. However, the small businesses located in urban villages not only contribute to the village economy through rent, but also offer job opportunities to migrants, as well as urban vitality to the neighbourhood. Such informal economy is accommodated within a self-organised spatial structure inside the urban villages. From the spatial perspective, the integration of such spatial structure—mainly public space networks that are connected by streets, alleys and waterways in urban villages—provides the most potential to generate adaptable and affordable spaces for small businesses to thrive. This is meaningful for developing alternative urban regeneration approaches for urban villages that are more incremental and inclusive in the context of industrial upgrading and migration. In this sense, facilitating small-scale strategic interventions and making room for self-organisation are relevant principles to planning and design

for urban regeneration in urban villages. To do so, a powerful tool is needed to analyse the current socio-spatial conditions, envisage better scenarios and identify strategic interventions, so that stakeholders could be better informed on win–win situations. This chapter introduced ‘mapping’ as such a tool. Through exemplary student work, it demonstrated how mapping can help to unravel the complex issues and facilitate decision-making in the planning and design process.

As indicated by both case studies, such incremental and inclusive approaches require a co-creational process that engages the stakeholders involved, including villagers, migrants, social organisations and the local government. In practice, experiments on similar participatory urban regeneration projects are emerging in peripheral areas in Shenzhen (as shown in the Dalang case) that are very different to the tabula rasa redevelopment happening in central locations of the PRD cities (such as the Lijiao village in Guangzhou). How could urban planning and design guide the spatial transformation process when co-creation and self-organisation become the way of working? The current physical conditions in urban villages are not ideal and have up- and down-sides: on the one hand, they lack public spaces and amenities; on the other, there are a variety of public activities (e.g. those centred around food stands, retail stores, nightlife, etc.). Improving safety, hygiene and providing possibilities to socialise in public spaces can offer migrants opportunities to build social networks and further improve social resilience (indicated by the design proposal for the Lijiao village). Besides, being part of the owners of small businesses inside urban villages is also an option for migrants’ career development (conclusions from the research on Dalang). These socio-economic benefits are nested in the role of urban villages as arrival cities for migrants, providing affordable housing and as stepping-stones to climb the social ladder. From the planning perspective, a more adaptive and flexible framework is needed which makes room for incremental developments that enhance spatial quality, urban vitality and social resilience. This requires a new mentality and entrepreneurial capacity of the planning sector. Within this framework, design proposals can play a new role that provides inspiration for and facilitates the co-creation process in small-scale urban regeneration projects.

Although this chapter introduced ‘mapping’ as a tool for analysing the socio-spatial conditions of urban villages in the PRD region and facilitating decision-making in co-creational processes of urban regeneration, one has to know the limitations of such methods. One of the major challenges in using this method is the lack of reliable data in urban villages, as the development of these informal settlements have never been officially registered. Most of the mapping analyses shown in this chapter were manually done by students with data obtained through intense field work. When applying this method in practice, extensive investigation is needed to gather data, which needs the support from villagers when it comes to complex issues such as property ownership.

## 14.5 Conclusions

Urbanisation in China is an ongoing process that leads to formation and transformation of city regions with large numbers of migrants. What are effective planning and design strategies that could stimulate the transition of PRD cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen towards a more inclusive, liveable and socially resilient future scenario? Answers to this question may vary between cities, which are at different stages of industrial and urban development. A good understanding of correlations among socio-economic conditions, urban form and governance can help unlock the potential of cities.

Generally speaking, Chinese cities are experiencing a paradigm shift in urban development modes, focussing more and more on regeneration of existing built-up areas than the construction of new towns or districts. Urban regeneration brings opportunities to improve liveability and urban vitality, creating better places for people and facilitating social development. This, however, can only happen when the planning process is inclusive to all social groups, especially migrants who do not have the equal access to public resources as local citizens, nor voices in the decision-making process.

Urban villages in the PRD region represent a unique phenomenon of informal settlements that facilitate social resilience and entrepreneurship at the same time. They emerged and contributed greatly to accommodating the large number of rural–urban migrants along with the rapid urbanisation process, providing space for these people to adapt themselves to a new urban life. The micro-economy inside urban villages also offered job opportunities to migrants and vitality to the city. Furthermore, the flexibility embedded in informality enables urban villages to adapt to new economies in response to the ongoing industrial upgrading process. These above-mentioned values all help to strengthen the role of urban villages as arrival cities to rural–urban migrants, which is crucial to social resilience and needs to be recognised in urban redevelopment processes. This requires a new mentality and entrepreneurial capacities of the public sector in guiding the co-creation processes in urban regeneration practices. It is an alternative approach focussing more on social construction and cultivating small businesses, different to the large-scale *tabula rasa* redevelopment projects often seen in central areas of the big cities in the PRD region.

This chapter focuses on urban villages in the PRD region, using two cases from Guangzhou and Shenzhen. It introduces a powerful tool—‘mapping’—for analysing the current socio-spatial conditions of urban villages, which can serve as the basis for envisioning more inclusive future scenarios and identifying strategic interventions. This is not a new tool for urban planning in general, but indeed new and promising to studies on urban villages, as the development of such informal settlements in the PRD region have never been officially registered, which also poses challenges for conducting such research due to the lack of data. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, a more adaptive planning framework is needed to make room for co-creational and self-organised processes, in which incremental development that enhances the values of urban villages as arrival cities for migrants are encouraged. Hopefully, with such an

alternative planning and development model, the tool and research method introduced by this chapter can be used more effectively through the support of all stakeholders involved.

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