

STITCHING LIJIAO

Towards the reintegration of urban villages in the landscape of the Pearl River Delta

Reflections

The discussion will ponder on societal relevance, relationship between research and design, outcome, relationship with the graduation studio and limitations.

Academic and societal relevance

The initial aim of this thesis project is to explore urban villages as the spatial consequences of the social phenomenon in China, and in particular in the fast urbanising delta of the Pearl River. The current top-down planning strategy poses a great threat to the loss of diversity and variety in the Pearl River Delta. Therefore, the desired outcome is defining an alternative approach for the development of urban villages and their reconnection to the city's built and natural environment. Hence, in the academic field, a discussion over possible solutions and a long-term perspective on urban villages is needed in order to create awareness and to preserve both cultural and landscape heritage.

Research and design

By reviewing the process from the beginning to the final outcome, it can be described as research-by-design. In different phases, the research exceeds the design method and vice versa, but the two practices are deeply interrelated. Starting from the establishment of the main research question up to the design exploration, there lies a process of optimisation between functional, spatial and representational demands, consistently supported by literature studies. In fact, a deep understanding of the context and the cultural living of people is strongly required for contributing to a pertinent and coherent graduation project on the development of urban villages.

Fundamental to design a consistent development project for Lijiao was historical mapping, which served to trace back the identity to its origins as a Lingnan water village. Each urban village has in fact its own built and landscape character, and it is of great value to support the design choices with clear references to its genesis.

Case studies on the development of urban villages are then crucial to extrapolate principles in order to re-integrate the village-in-the-city considered with its metropolitan area:

1. *connecting* its structure with the surrounding districts;
2. *preserving* its built and landscape morphology re-defining its edges;

3. *adapting* public spaces to climate change, aiming on one hand to safeguard the urban village on a long-term perspective and on the other hand to convert water from an issue to deal with to a quality public element to benefit from.

Therefore, the relationship between research and design has been expressed as just outlined throughout the whole process of this graduation project.

Outcome

"How to preserve and strengthen the identity of the urban village of Lijiao, by re-defining the historic relation between the village and the water landscape?"

The main research question of the graduation project "Stitching Lijiao" aims to re-integrate the urban village with the metropolitan area of Guangzhou while preserving and reviving its former urban and landscape identity.

The three proposed design strategies (connect, adapt and preserve) aim to this initial goal through the aid of a general toolbox. The landscape and its lost water veins are reintroduced, re-establishing the historical identity of Lijiao as a Lingnan water village. Furthermore, the re-defined identity helps to preserve and maintain the morphological structure of the village, and to highlight the heritage buildings and landscape.

The landscape elements, as the re-opened canals, the climate dike waterfront, the pocket parks and bios-wales, function as public spaces.

In fact, they are meant to connect both the village within itself, while, at the same time, expand outside the edges, networking with the surrounding context both physically and socially.

Therefore, the three main lessons learned are:

1. *water as a restructuring element.* Tackling issues as flooding and water-logging can help to restructure urban villages, not just to increase their sponge capacity and release the combined sewage system, but also to increase and create quality public spaces. Both the requalified existing and the designed blue structure can help to better define clear routings and connections.
2. *definition of the village edge as preserving element.* Defining clear, wide and possibly green edges to the urban village can help control the expansion from happening from the outskirts of the village. When possible, the use of medium scale buildings typology can mediate between the surroundings built fabric, which is usually big scaled.
3. *heritage buildings as integral part of public space.* Reviving and linking the heritage buildings of each urban village can help preserve the architectural identity of it, but also habits and customs of the community.

Relationship with the graduation studio

The topic of urban villages is closely related to the Pearl River Delta graduation studio as it is a peculiar urban typology and phenomenon that was first seen in South China. In this graduation project landscape architecture is valued as a powerful tool to re-connect Lijiao to both the local and regional built and environmental system.

Limitations

At the beginning of the research process, it has been complicated to identify the true carriers of identity from remote distance. Before visiting Guangdong Province, the preliminary comprehension of the cultural and societal aspects was the result of a long process of just literature study and desk analysis. Indeed, the field trip has been, for this reason, crucial to acquire a clearer and thorough interpretation over socio-cultural behaviours. Although, due to the language barrier, the collection of interviews has not been possible; this could have enriched to a greater extent both the research and the design outcomes.

Hence, with the limitation of time and travel distance, there are still several issues that the project can explore further. In the case of urban villages the inhabitants are skilled in the "diy" (do it yourself) method. Keeping this competence in mind while introducing a participatory design would have brought a deeper social strategy, which as of now still needs to be investigated deeper. Also it would have educated and empowered both villagers and migrants in the process, creating a better social cohesion.