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Two Kinds of Knowledge

Architect and planner Huasheng Sun talks about urban planning in South China's fastest-growing city.

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Since it was declared a Special Economic Zone by the Chinese government in 1980, the city of Shenzhen has grown from a town of thirty thousand to a megalopolis of an estimated 12 million citizens. Professor Huasheng Sun, a 74-year-old professor of architecture and urban planning at Shenzhen University, has been both an influential participant and a witness to the transformation of Shenzhen from a rural village to the world's fastest-growing shipping port and one of China's most productive cities. Sun's contributions to Shenzhen's cityscape include the planning for the mixed-use urban community "Overseas Chinese Town", the redesign of the multimodal LoWu Station (a gateway to Hong Kong), and the creation of the strangely appealing "Splendid China" theme park, a scaled down replica of every major architectural and cultural landmark in the country.

Sun began his career as an architecture student just as Mao Zedong rose to power as the leader of the People's Republic of China. For the next thirty years, Sun and other members of China's educated class walked a fine line between the Party's practical appreciation and its ideological scorn for their education and professional skills. For Sun, this meant moving from one government-assigned job to the next, then settling in Beijing as a professor of planning and architecture only to be exiled a few years later to the Chinese countryside where he was made to work as an agricultural laborer. Sun's is not an unusual story; during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960's and 70's, educated professionals like Sun were de facto enemies of the state, vulnerable to ostracism and punishment for espousing Western ways and following the "capitalist road".

In the 1980's with the opening of China and its adoption of a quasi-market economy, these professionals found themselves with the unlikely task of preparing China's cities, factories, and infrastructure for a political and economic revolution – this time, a capitalist one. Professionals like Sun were in high demand since the generation behind them received very little formal education, thanks to the dismemberment of China's educational system during the Cultural Revolution. So, like others of his generation, Sun has forged ahead with China's new economic agenda, despite decades spent designing the spaces and places of a communist society.

On a McDonald's balcony overlooking the Norman Foster-designed Hung Hom station in Hong Kong, Sun spoke about growing up with Western influences, managing the phenomenal growth of Shenzhen since 1980, and looking ahead at China's urban future.

How did you first end up working in Shenzhen?

I came here after the first comprehensive plan of Shenzhen was done in 1980. There was just a fishing village here at the time, and the first plan was basically an inventory of Shenzhen's natural condition – the mountains, waterfront, climate, et cetera. So I was working at the university in Beijing when the government asked me to come here, and I said 'Yes, okay, I understand the purpose and the meaning of the Special Economic Zone, and I would like to try and to see what I can do. And I'll do my best.' That was when I first came here.

What was your first project?

My first task was to help Mr. Meng Ta Cheang from Singapore with the “detailed plan” for Overseas Chinese Town, which was to be the first development in the new Shenzhen. A “detailed plan” is like zoning, but it’s very different here than the United States. In the US, zoning usually only incorporates land use, development, and planning. Here, a zoning plan includes urban design guidelines and civil engineering concerns, like energy and water supply and waste disposal.

Were you nervous about working on something so experimental –a mixed-use project in the new, undeveloped Special Economic Zone?

No, not nervous exactly, because before that I had worked on the same kind of project, a mixed-use area in Suzhou, China. I had some experience with this kind of project, even though maybe at that time, the idea was a little bit unusual for Chinese planners. A community can be done in this way? It was very strange for us. But in China, every planner has to understand the principles of socialism, welfare, and governmental responsibility, but also the market economy—the real ways, the real dealings, the real transactions, the real thing—everything in the market economy, planners have to manage this too. So Chinese planners need two kinds of knowledge.

How did your education and training prepare you for this kind of work? It must have seemed very new after working for so many years in an anti-capitalist society.

Well, the first thing I should tell you is that my parents graduated from American universities—my father from Purdue in chemistry, and my mother from Michigan in physics. But my family, the older generation, are pure Chinese. So I grew up with a combination, both the Chinese culture and Western culture, especially US culture. Also I was educated in the Continental culture through my French schooling at a French Catholic school in Tianjin. And through this European education, I absorbed a lot of pure culture—Expressionism, classical music, painting, Shakespeare, and so on. So I was educated with some Western thinking, some Chinese thinking.

Tianjin is a port city, yes? It must have been an interesting place to grow up.

Yes, and it was inhabited by a lot of foreigners—many Europeans, and many Jewish people who escaped to China during World War II and brought their schools, their music, their trade, and so on. A lot of these foreigners, including their families and their kids, stayed in Tianjin for a very long time, and the city absorbed their cultures, even their architecture and road networks. For instance, in the British concession, the road network was usually curved, and in the French concession, the road network was a grid. And in the Italian Concession, there were usually radial streets. So the city was a part of my education as well, and I grew up learning from the city, not just architecture but also streets and road networks.

Now you are the teacher of the next generation in Shenzhen. Tell me a little about your teaching style.

I teach in both architecture and urban design, and I’m responsible for the third and fourth year students and postgraduate students. I like to ask them to write down their feelings about a place, what they observe from an urban design point of view while sitting there, quietly—how do you feel about the space, and the movement of people and nature in the space? I usually say that an architect or planner who wants to do urban design, if they neglect people’s movement and their feelings, their work is without any soul. In a word, it must be people-oriented because the soul of urban design is people.

What is it like now working with architects and planners from the West, since China was closed-off from Western ideas and practice for so much of your career?

A Chinese proverb says, if you listen from different sectors, you can make yourself quite clear. This means that if you only listen to opinions like your own, you are living in a consensus world, and you will not be as clear in your mind. This proverb, I think, is correct—especially in urban planning practice. I say this because I have met some American architects, and I can tell you that the American architects are too focused on their own opinion. Every time, they persuade the client to accept their opinion. But they don’t live in mainland Chinese cities—what they understand is only from a very short time in those places, so usually they don’t understand the background. Of course, they can insist on their opinions, but the client thinks, “Oh, the foreigners do not understand what I have in my mind.”

Now that the Shenzhen SEZ has been so successful as a place for foreign investment, what do you see in the future for Shenzhen?

I think in the future, the design aspect will have to be improved more and more along with the city's economic growth and urban development. And I suppose you know that the urbanization rate in Shenzhen is already 100%. That means that everyone registered in Shenzhen is a worker, and there are no farmers. This is the first time that 100% urbanization has happened in China, and I think this will become more common, but not as quickly as people think because the basic conditions are quite different in many other cities. But this is the direction, and the urbanization rate will grow more and more.

And you have to understand that this is a deep change, from a farmer's knowledge and way of being a city citizen, including their lifestyle, their education, their knowledge, their living habits, their interests. So many of the people who live in the cities want to change everything about their lives. This means changes to the built environment and residential life, but also educational opportunities, employment opportunities, commodities. All is changing. It's a very, very complicated task for the city.

What is Shenzhen doing now to prepare for this?

For one thing, Shenzhen government is actively preparing in the near future for Shenzhen to become a creative city. Creative in a few fields, but the central one is industry. Why? Because Shenzhen is a famous electronic component production and processing city, but the brains behind this technology, along with its headquarters and decision control, are in foreign countries. Today Shenzhen is low-income, so this is reflected in its land-use and economy. But in the future, China wants to do more creating, going from "Made in Shenzhen" to "Made by Shenzhen". That means lots of new technology, including electronics, and the Chinese must do a lot of creative work to get to this point. We have to learn from Western World first, but then we want to create more.

And this type of change would improve Shenzhen's environmental conditions as well?

Originally, Shenzhen did not have this kind of heavy industry, unlike Taiwan and Hong Kong. And there is an environmental cost to being a low-income economy, although Shenzhen is starting to address this. For instance, the city government has pollution indices for the factories, and asks them to practice recycling. And if they do it, the government gives them a bonus, or punishes them if they fail. Of course it will take some time, but step by step, we are making a harmonious society. Harmony between people and ecology, consumption and energy. If we maintain this direction, we can make people realize the importance of this and that it does not just benefit others—it benefits them as well.

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