

## Window to the City

Mimi Tong

My time in Shenzhen, just north of Hong Kong on the Mainland border marked a return sojourn to China as my second Chinese residency. I chose to go to Shenzhen because I hadn't been before and for its proximity to Hong Kong; a city I have visited many times. The plan was to start from Hong Kong, to trace its geographical relationship to Shenzhen. It was also a way I could start from the city I know and pave a smooth introduction to a city that's new to me.

With recent and first hand experience of a few major cities in China, I wanted to cast a wide definition of the built environment to be found. Starting in Hong Kong, I had not fully explored the green terrain that the city is embedded in. Staying with family in Tsuen Wan (near the New Territories district where the China borders lie), I soon discover a vast countryside of mountains, reservoirs, wetlands and beaches.

At times when I was walking on bush trails or speeding by on the bus, high-rise buildings framed the countryside as a backdrop. As a visitor, the city's incongruous relationship with its mountainous islands was not alarming. It was a visual reminder of the compact yet diverse nature and texture of the environment. The Bird Aviary in Hong Kong Park is a memorable example of this observation. Inside the large and elegant arch enclosure; one can inversely view the residential towers peering over the Park built within the enclosure.

Crossing the border to Shenzhen, I enter a new and unfamiliar cityscape that is less than 30 years old. There are not many visible remnants of the former farming and fishing village. Rapid and continuous urbanisation has transformed the physical and social landscape. Millions of economic migrants from rural areas and neighbouring cities have made and shaped the manufacturing and construction industries to build China's 4th largest economy.

Shenzhen's profile as a successful case study in urban renewal made the process of finding green spaces all the more interesting. From the residency studio, I was walking distance to many scenic and touristy sites that can be perceived as both natural and man-made. The Window of the World and Splendid China theme parks are miniature representations of culture expressed through architecture and formal landscaping. In Windows of the World, famous examples of national monuments and landforms from around the globe can be found here. Have your photo taken under the Eiffel Tower and ride the monorail over the Pyramids, all in one convenient location.

In life scale, there was greenery everywhere to be found in the city. Manicured hedges and trees line every dual carriageway, footpath and roundabout. Potted plants were in shopping malls and museums in vast numbers, as friendly bollards demarcating viewing space. I encountered Shenzhen's green civic pride in daily transits from the heart of the city, to the suburbs and outer fringes.

In Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: The History of Walking*, she claimed that 'the desk is no place to think on the large scale' in order to write about walking. But at the desk is precisely where I return to at the end of the day after my outings walking the city. In the same way the Windows of the World theme park is a cultural construct through celebrating scaled replicas, I too have miniaturised parts of Hong Kong and Shenzhen in the space of my photographs. At my desk I study, edit and crop the digital files to be translated as photographic prints. At my desk, I look out of the Studio windows to my own landscaped courtyard that faces the street. It is at my desk that I can see and make the connection between the photos I have taken of the civic spaces outside in relation to personal space of the Studio.

The prints illustrate the landscape with knowing limitations. The prints are small yet tactile. They pose as windows with selected views of the city.

This essay was first published in *Window to the City* exhibition catalogue, GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney Feb 2010.