

# Cultural Planning University Towns: An Emerging Pattern language in China

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## **Abstract**

*This paper is structured around three planning projects the author made for university towns in China. These projects sought to integrate the university into holistically planned urban settlements that could generate or attract other creative and cultural industries. In each case, the university cooperates with the city or region in the cultivation of new urban patterns of development that run counter to conventional orthodoxy. Specifically the project stakeholders saw value in becoming partly de-institutionalised in return for becoming an active participant in a wider cultural context. This co-evolution of the university and the town creates cross fertilisation opportunities as a mutually beneficial venture in the creation of diverse cultural environments. The emerging spatial order is one can more easily embody conditions of inclusion, variation, diversity, and cultural sustainability. These projects are discussed in the context of Franco Bianchini's concepts of cultural planning and the use of its regional cultural resources in the formation and planning of the creative city.*

Keywords: Cultural Planning, China, University town, Co-evolution.

## **Planning: a transitional field**

Planning in China is at a critical juncture, the transition from a Socialist model of centralised planning towards a market driven model is not new but the consequences of the past 30 years of transition reveal specific issues. Irrefutably, planning has had a role in what is easily the largest and most sustained modernisation and urbanisation program ever. However planning's role, whilst extensive is unclear and in many ways less potent or a less effective tool than might be expected. As Wuttke (2013) explains, before 1989 there did not exist a legal framework for urban planning, and when it was introduced with the requirement that long term planning should extend to 20 years, this "proved incompatible with the dynamics of fast economic and population growth" (p.1). Often these lands were allocated to special interests, or with little concern for actual demand or at odds with Government or city regulatory plans. One consequence of this according to Wuttke (2013), has been that "Government and administration have been largely unable to control or manage the cities' rapid growth. Uncoordinated investment and development projects and informal – even illegal – construction are common in urban China" (p.1). Given such a context it is not unusual to find statutory planning being retroactively implemented as was the case with Shenzhen in the 1990s or planning initiatives rejected only 3-4 years after they were partly implemented.

The vacuum formed by the lack of an integrated planning process indicates the general absence of strategic planning, long term regulatory planning, statutory planning, independent authorities, public approval processes of planning drafts; or for that matter any public participation in the planning process. However recent re-alignments of cities such as Shenzhen towards the tertiary sector have shown the city's willingness to correspondingly re-align their planning process. This has encompassed – to some degree – an approach that is more transparent, participatory and one that will permit some regulatory control over their statutory planning process in future developments. As a measure to stabilise development, this approach can be advantageous as a means to attract types of development that need a more stable and long term context. It encourages different patterns of development and the types of development that were under the previous planning systems easily bypassed. Smaller or more

nuanced developments such as the OCT loft area (figure 1.) in Shenzhen show some positive signs of this change in the development pattern.



*Figure 1 Shenzhen OCT Loft Area image credit: Urbanus*

### **Operational limitations and entrenched patterns**

During the 1980s, cities and their state actors; including many former State Owned Enterprises (SOE); were vested with power to privatise and develop their land under Central Government policies. Many of SOE's evolved in-house and officially sanctioned Local Design Institutes (LDI) that conducted the majority of planning, design, engineering, construction and property management (speculation) and development. Vested with a large remit and backed up by significant resources and financial backing, the SOE's together with the LDI's have ended up with a monopoly on planning and construction and remain the primary drivers of the quasi-private planning sector today. Whilst this peculiar Chinese system is efficient at fast tracking design and implementation of generic planning projects, it is not a system that is adaptable or particularly open to change. Furthermore this monopolisation has happened to the extent that other modes of development and their planning measures struggle to gain a foothold in this sector.

As is well noted (Friedmann 2005), the primary driver for China's urbanisation has been the endogenous shift towards a foreign investment and export led economy. This is paralleled by the need for urban agglomerations and their populations to drive factory production together with massive infrastructure projects to mobilise goods and people. This urbanisation process entrenched specific patterns of development employing fast track derivative solutions aided by a government land acquisition system that drives land speculation (often by government agencies, SOE's and cities themselves). This process emphasised fast track tabula rasa development and mono-functionally planned areas. We can now recognise its outcomes as a sprawl of generic urban developments that are prevalent everywhere in China. The foundations of this phenomena seem to be built on a perceived unlimited demand, a kind of field of dreams in which the 'build it and they will come' mentality prevails. This approach partly fills the vacuum of development that occurred prior to the liberalisation of the sector in the 1980s. Commonly in this process, the developer's master land use plan comes to be adopted as the primary planning framework for an area, resulting in a not well integrated patchwork. This is evident in Shenzhen (figure 2.) for example (see Koolhaas 2003) and many other cities.



*Figure 2 Shenzhen patchwork credit: Google Earth*

## The creative city in China: emerging pattern or pipe dream?

At first glance, it seems clear that China has not yet provided the fast burgeoning urban areas with sufficient creative areas to become competitive in the creative, service, finance or knowledge based economies within a regional, Asian or global context. As such there appears to be many obstacles that hinder the emergence of the creative city in the Chinese context. These obstacles might include the relative inexperience of cities and regions, policy constraints, inadequate education, training or technology reach and lack of capacity in a particular sector. Applying Richard Florida's (2002) 'creativity index' outlining the necessities of talent, technology and tolerance, most urban areas in China would presently rank very low, indicating many aspects are lacking or insufficiently developed, particularly for urban areas outside of the main cities.

A few tendencies mitigate this. On a policy level, recent Central Government policies have changed focus and are now aimed at building high quality universities, generating high level research and attracting highly educated Chinese academics back to China. This is aimed at developing the tertiary sector and recognises that the knowledge society needs a highly skilled and educated base together with a stronger emphasis on a research culture. One effect of these policies is to provide incentives to develop high tech zones and regions that can equip China with its own Silicon Valley's, innovation zones and creative clusters. Two examples are the recent Zhongguancun Technological Base near Beijing or the Zhangjiang High-Tech Park near Shanghai. In implantation such areas tend to be oversized business parks at present and the planning offers little that differentiates these areas from any other conventionally planned areas.

Creative city type developments are on the increase and reveal some new directions that may be closer in operation to the creative milieu. These developments include the 798 art district in Beijing, Xintiandi in Shanghai, Suzhou Creek in Shanghai or Sanlitun in Beijing (figure 3.). While most of these developments are at present either consumer led or tourist driven rather than culturally productive, they begin to articulate differentiated urban environments or 'creative milieus' in ways that are distinct from the orthodox Chinese planning model. As Sasaki (2010) writes:

"... for creative industries, whose 'lifblood are the creativity, skill, and talent of individuals,' to form a cluster, it is imperative to have a 'milieu' in place where creativity can be nurtured and can flourish. In creative city theory, it is the 'creative milieu' and 'social structure of creativity' and, above all the social, cultural, and geographical context that are truly vital for the effective integration of industrial, urban, and cultural policy". (p.54)

Despite their limitations, in the above examples can be found instances of spatial proximities, functional and programmatic flexibility. Some are planned to have mutually beneficial overlapping areas of culture, lifestyle, creative industries, recreation and entertainment. Thereby allowing for the development of what we might term the spatially networked society, or a type of creative mesh that could define a 'creative milieu'.



**Figure 3** 798 Arts District Vision Plan, credit: Sasaki Associates Ltd. / Xintiandi, photo credit: Shui On Land / Sanlitun Beijing, photo credit: Radio86

A further factor is the rapidly emerging middle and educated classes, who with increasing mobility and choice are pushing expectation and demand. This coincides with the liberalisation and massive growth of the tertiary education sector. Together the above factors reveal an emerging alignment of macro policy and specific individual or stakeholder desires in some regions to generate possibilities

for a more knowledge based or creative economy. In planning terms this identifies the need for a more holistic or integrated planning process that can generate very different development patterns.

### **Quantity versus quality: tertiary education and the knowledge sector**

There are a number of significant characteristics of the Chinese Tertiary Education sector. In general state run universities tend to be didactic, prescriptive and generic; most are not well known for innovation or research or collaborative outreach to private enterprise and score low on the global rankings. It is however a sector that is very dynamic. The implications of the single child policy in China notwithstanding (demand will fall as the one-child policy generation complete their education: the number of 18-19 year old population peaked in 2007) the tertiary education sector continues to grow in parallel with China's urbanisation process. This growth, as Shen (2013, August) explains, "applies not only to the public sector, as private education is becoming a considerable force in undergraduate and vocational-technical education". Based on the Ministry of Education of China reports the total number of higher education institutions doubled from one thousand to more than 2400 between 1999 and 2010, accordingly undergraduate student numbers have increased more than fourfold to over 6 million at present in the same time period. Similarly graduate education increased fivefold to over half a million (Ministry of Education, 2010) reflecting a strengthening in emphasis towards research driven fields. As Brandenburg and Zhu (2007) state, this has often been referred to by the term 'massification' as a way to describe the general tendency to increase quantity to match tertiary education demand.

Until now university planning in China broadly followed a North American model. This model can be characterised, with a few exceptions as the discrete campus model, one which until recently tended to establish its difference spatially from its adjoining urban context, deriving from hierarchically planned red brick campus typologies or functional and generic institutional typologies. The green field campus models employed are exclusive of their urban context rather than inclusive. In campus terms, it is comparatively recently that the re-integration of the campus into its urban context has been partly bridged by technology transfer zones, research and business park additions as universities shift from a secure public funding mode towards revenue generating modes. This is exemplified by Shenzhen University's Nanshan campus. There have been some notable exceptions to the campus model in China, one of these is the now widely known Chinese Academy of Arts in Hangzhou (figure 4.) by the Architect Wang Shu, that in addition to a formally interesting campus also aims to foster a specific culture of creativity within the village like campus and in the everyday interactions of its users.



*Figure 4 Chinese Academy of Arts, Hangzhou, photo credit: Peter Hasdell*

In contrast to 'massification', the implications of the drive towards educational quality are many. Coupled with the demand for higher education, one which has clearly outstripped national supply as middle class incomes have risen, has been the rapid growth of Chinese students going abroad to further their studies. This has changed the student demographic and has increased the expectations of those staying 'at home' opening up new sectors in higher education and in particular in the private university sector as Shen (2013, August) shows. Middle class expectations increasingly mean that it is not regarded as adequate for those with mobility and money to go to a second rate state run university. As Brandenburg and Zhu (2007) explain, the increasing demands from students and their families, particularly fee paying students are leading the tertiary education sector to become more market driven and more internationally focussed (p.17). For university administrators who are cognisant of this change, this has meant that both software; including academic programs, research, global

opportunities, networking, and relevant curriculums need to be matched by equivalent hardware; the provision of university campuses that offer competitive facilities, spaces and conducive environments to study in, both within the campus and in its wider context. In other words, there is a need for universities and their campuses to have facilities that are similar in pattern and operation to the creative milieu.

### **Cultural planning: a viable alternative**

In the early 1990s Dr Franco Bianchini together with Charles Landry articulated a theory of 'cultural planning' as an 'anthropological' approach to planning. The use of creativity inherent in culture to create new industries, social cohesion and economic prospects as outlined by Bianchini and Landry, is an important precursor to the term 'creative city' and the subsequent concepts of knowledge based industry, creative industry and social inclusion. Richard Florida's 'creative index' and 'creative milieu' ideas extend this concept and these concepts are beginning to be applied within planning and policy to significant effect in Europe and North America. This has been promoted on both on a macro scale, for instance UNESCO's (2004) Creative Cities Network, and also on a number of very local scales through specific planning initiatives mostly in Europe. Derived in part from the emerging attempts to use culture as a regeneration tool in European cities in former industrial centres during the early 1990s, Sasaki (2010) informs us that the "creative cities idea emerged as a new urban model with the European Union's 'European City of Culture' or 'European Capital of Culture' projects. In these cases, the creativity inherent in art and culture were utilized to create new industries and employment opportunities"(p.53) In this context Europe's emerging European Union and the progressive reunification of East and West Europe, culture was acknowledged as a major imperative in a rapidly changing or transitional context. This issue was recognised and implemented by the EU as cultural policies aimed at fostering social and cultural cohesion whilst promoting regional difference. Coupled with this, the industrial decline of Europe since the 1970s had a legacy effect, leaving significant voids in urban areas across many cities as many of these urban regions struggled to transition to tertiary sector economies and development.

Lia Ghilardi, a sometimes collaborator with Bianchini, contextualises cultural planning in reference to the humanistic planning focus of Jane Jacobs in the 1960s. Conventional planning as Jacobs argued was more focused on a structuralist approach, as Ghilardi (2001) writes: "Jacobs saw the city as an ecosystem composed of physical-economic-ethical processes interacting with each other in a natural flow. ... developing the idea of the city as a living system" (p.11). With reference to Patrick Geddes, Ghilardi (2001) explains that this constitutes an idea of an urban settlement or a city as a "living ecosystem, made up of diverse resources which need to be surveyed"(p.12). In fact Bianchini, Ghilardi and Landry all seem to understand cultural planning as the necessary software and dynamic life force or living ecosystem part that is essential to the hardware of the creative context. Considered as a part of a living system or ecosystem, cultural planning therefore uses a very broad definition of culture that integrates with all aspects of local culture and everyday life (Bianchini & Ghilardi, 1997). This is the basis for understanding the specific culture as a 'cultural resource' that has intrinsic value and which can add value to the planning processes, driving or instigating new patterns in the planning process. As Bianchini (2004) explains, these cultural resources can and should be regarded as a positive value that can contribute to the "integrated development of a place, whether a neighbourhood, a city or a region" (p.11) Further, he adds "Cultural planning cuts across the divides between the public, private and voluntary sectors, different institutional concerns, types of knowledge and professional disciplines" (p.11), suggesting that its value has meaning outside of the cultural sector, but also that cultural planning is a common rubric that can form the basis of commonly agreed values in planning. This is elaborated further by Ghilardi (2001) who writes: "By linking culture and other aspects of economic and social life, cultural planning can be instrumental in creating development opportunities for the whole of the local community" (p.5). It is important to emphasize that this approach is one which can potentially be a source of innovation in planning, as Bianchini (2004) writes cultural planning can generate creativity and innovation in cultural production through "interculturalism, co-operation between artists and scientists, and crossovers between different cultural forms" (p.8). By extension this process of hybridization or cross fertilisation can lead to new patterns of urban development that

actively participate in the living ecology that Ghilardi writes of, generating opportunities from previously disparate sectors, functions, sectors and typologies.

The cultural planning process therefore has a number of implications. Firstly it tends to require alignment of macro policy together with specific individual or stakeholder desires as a co-evolution process, meaning that the resultant plan or development is not one which is imposed as a top-down solution but is one where typically the stakeholders have an expanded role in the development process. Secondly that it tends to require a non-hierarchical approach so that cultural resources can be understood, fostered, cross fertilised and utilised to their fullest potential. Thirdly a high degree of openness and horizontal collaboration and identification of areas of mutual benefit in the planning process needs to occur to allow for public participation, diversity and tolerance to occur.

### **Three campus plans**

During the past 5 years I have made a series of planning studies for university towns in China that reveal some changing conditions of tertiary education in China and outline opportunities for an approach based on cultural planning principles. The three projects, whilst limited in that they are still working within the constraints inherent in the existing Chinese land-use and planning processes, nonetheless highlight the need for new patterns of development that can satisfy their knowledge or cultural based economy. Two of the three projects sought to integrate the university into new types of holistically planned urban settlements that could generate or attract other creative and cultural industries. In each case the university becomes a significant stakeholder acting in conjunction with the city or region in the cultivation of new development patterns. Further this process was based in part on the identification of its regional (site specific) cultural resources and stakeholders.

#### **1. Chinese Academy of Sciences Graduate Campus in Huairou.**

This project from 2009 was to develop a concept plan for the Chinese Academy of Sciences Graduate Campus. The campus is located in the town of Huairou, site of China's first rocket launch, 2km from the Great Wall and 50km to the north of Beijing. The Chinese Academy of Sciences, the most prestigious science institute in China draws its graduate students from state universities from all the 34 provinces.

The campus provides post-graduate study to all government science researchers before they commence work at China's many science research institutes that are spread across the 34 provinces. The campus therefore was required to represent the differences and identities of these provinces, as a kind of cultural map or image. Prior to this project the campus had undergone several conceptual stages which had conventionally planned red brick style campus plan (figure 5.) which were rejected by the client as too representative of the image of a university.

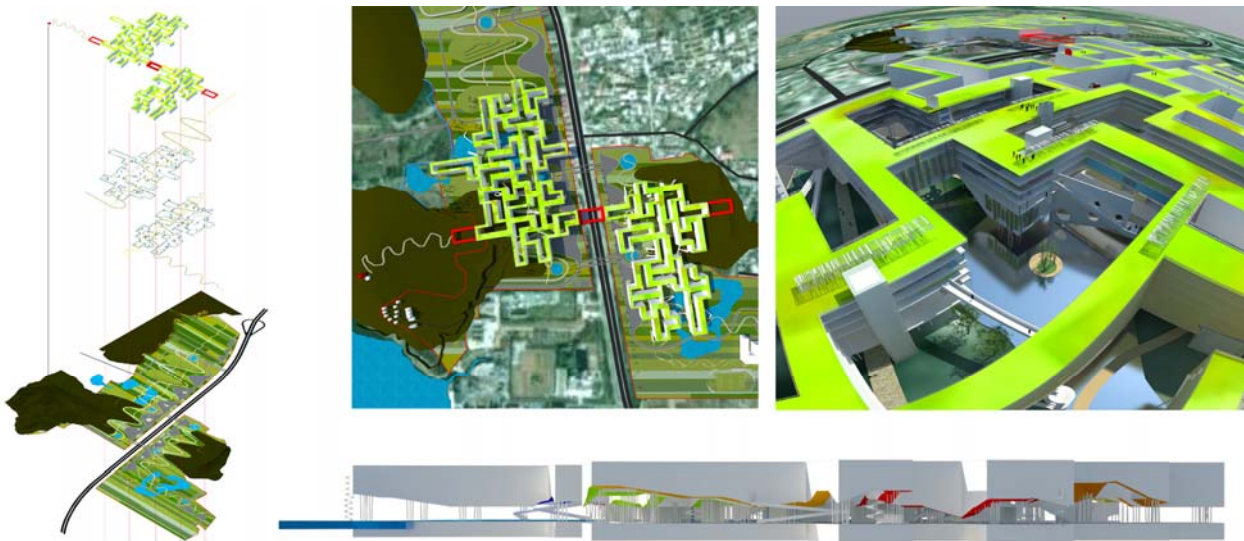


*Figure 5 Chinese Academy of Science: various: Red Brick campus proposals*

The brief was therefore for a non-traditional campus that could create a unique cultural experience that could bind together the disparate faculties and people in those faculties. Additionally, through discussion with the client we proposed and had accepted the additional design requirements that the campus should include visual arts programs and facilities and some liberal arts programs and facilities to assist in the cross fertilisation of the highly structured graduate programs and to help foster cultural connections.

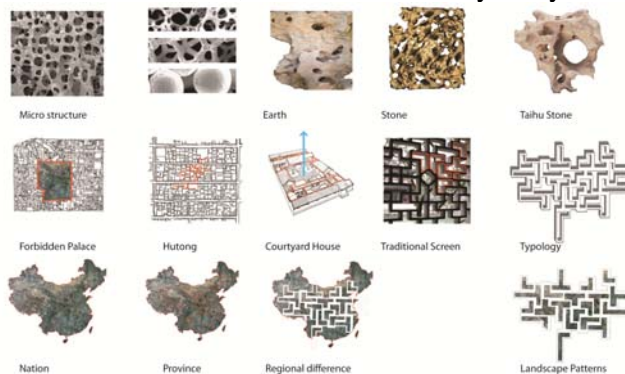
The spatial concept (figure 6.) proposed to elevate the main campus buildings allowing for a continuous landscape passing under an elevated interconnected building. The notion of the landscape

as common ground was conceived as a way to link all the newly arrived graduates and to generate 34 interlinked courtyards each with a different theme relating to one of the provinces. Formal axis and hierarchical university building arrangement are replaced with an unconventional network of spaces, courtyards and cultural condenser's at the node points of the network.



**Figure 6** Chinese Academy of Science proposal, credit: D+A h.q.

Conceptually the aim was to link the planned structure to traditional Chinese ideas of courtyard houses and city patterns lattice screens and landscape as part of the shared or collective cultural knowledge of its users (figure 7.). In the Chinese courtyard house for example the inner courtyards have a symbolic relation to the heavens, a fact understood by many educated Chinese.



**Figure 7** Chinese Academy of Science conceptual diagrams, credit: D+A h.q.

Whilst the planning concept for this project remains monolithic and apart from its landscape the proposal is not well connected to its local context (partly due to programmatic constraints which meant that graduate campus had to be inward focused), its value lies in the awareness and openness of the client to consider culture as an integral and essential part of the program and thereby of the planning process, within a highly structured institute such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences. This represents a radical shift away from functional campus planning that had typified university development prior to this.

## 2. Campus Culture Town for Heshen in Chengdu.

The brief for the Campus Culture Town for Heshen called for an integrated land-use plan and development strategy and masterplan that combined the rural town development strategy and a private university campus in a sustainable concept for 50,000 inhabitants. Heshen, a rural town covering about 6km<sup>2</sup>, is situated on an irrigation plain between the 2000 year old UNESCO World Heritage listed Dujiangyan Irrigation system and Chengdu City. Prior to our project, the client Heshen Municipality

had commissioned various plans and had begun to implement one of these plans, adopting the landuse plan and masterplanning concept (figure 8.) as designed by Atkins, an international planning company.



**Figure 8** Heshen Atkins Plan, credit: Atkins, photo credit: Li Qin

Consequently the municipality, on determining that specific planning measures did not match their expectations, such as the 42 metre four lane wide avenues and the non-integrated zoning, halted this process and commissioned us to develop a new concept and integrated landuse plan for the town. Our approach differed from Atkins in a number of ways. To start with we chose an overarching project concept we called ‘Campus Culture Town’ putting culture at the centre (figure 9.) of the planning development. This was endorsed by client and university consultants as they could see that they could mutually benefit and gain from this idea.



**Figure 9** Conceptual framework: sustainable culture integration, credit: D+A h.q.

Specific planning outcomes included:

1. On a regional level we inventoried the local agrarian culture (figure 10.), looked at agricultural products and expertise and then researched possible ways that these resources could have future economic, cultural and research relationships with the university colleges and the town: examples of this include the research fields of Chinese herbal medicine or organic food production, or cultural sectors involving agro-tourism and flower festivals.



**Figure 10** Regional framework: cultural resources, credit: D+A h.q.

2. We adopted a polycentric planning concept manifested as a series of hubs (figure 11.) that dispersed the planned seven university college hubs in a ring around the town. This de-institutionalises the university and opens the possibility for each of the seven colleges to be able to activate public spaces and cultural event spaces in different hubs around the town. This was conceived as a way to allow the local residents and students to mutually benefit socially, culturally and economically and to allow for sharing of facilities to gain economic benefit. Each hub has a different focus and different college and can generate a diverse range of environments; for example the Performing Arts college may be connected to street performance and the presentation of Sichuan culture in theatres and bars, whilst the Visual Arts college may generate an art market and a different focus for its public spaces.



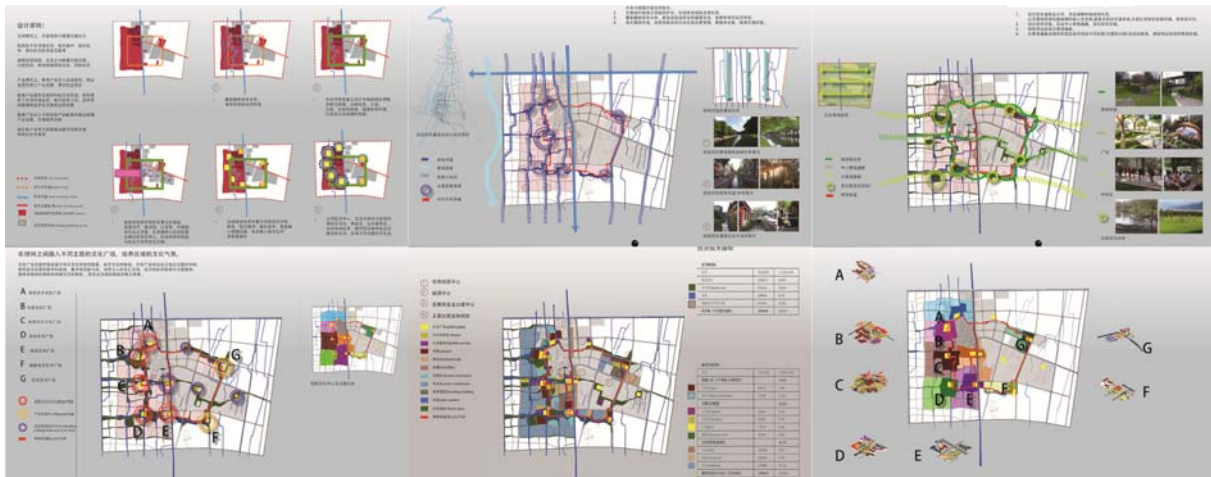


Figure 11 Cultural Hub network, credit: D+A h.q.

3. The seven college hubs were connected by a ring of cycle paths. This aimed at restricting vehicle access into the town whilst promoting a bicycle usage for locals, visitors and students alike.
4. We proposed the re-activation of the canal systems that had become filled in over time; these we considered to be an infrastructure of cultural value in the context of the UNESCO World Heritage listing for the nearby irrigation system.
5. The mixing of different functional zones and areas according to the landuse plan aimed at preventing mono-function zones. In addition the sizes of the development blocks were carefully adjusted to smaller sizes appropriate to the campus town concept to try to minimise future speculative block agglomeration.

This project, whilst positive in some of the accepted outcomes was nevertheless still bound by the planning process constraints, expediency and cost constraints. As such it contains some planning principles applicable to cultural planning but requires further nuance and detailed development. A longer and more protracted itemisation of the cultural resources and detailed identification of stakeholders and users would facilitate this detail development.

### 3. University village in Zhuhai.

The third example is a university village in a rural area near Zhuhai. The client, a private university, aimed to develop an iconic campus design that could add value to the university brand both locally and internationally. The brief was for a creative milieu formed from the combination of the agricultural context, the historic village, the campus itself, a research and technology zone and performing arts culture centre. Further they wished to explore opportunities for collaboration between the campus and other sectors such as tourism and culture and to attract ‘creative types’, residents and visitors to the village who might seek a more sustainable or alternative lifestyle. Although smaller than the Heshen campus, the planning concept should integrate these factors into a holistic vision (figure 12.). What is particular in this case is that the university client is the primary stakeholder in the development process. Furthermore the client’s role understood the potential of the university to extend their cultural remit beyond the campus boundaries.



Figure 12 Cultural planning principles UIC campus, credit: D+A h.q.

In planning terms the project structured urban diversity by minimising spatial separation and linking the different zones with a network of pedestrian and cycle friendly streets and public space the client wanted for cultural and music performances (figure 13.). The spatial pattern for the planning concept derived from careful study of the courtyard village structures in the area, and analysis of their size relationships as well as the ratios of solid to void spaces in the traditional village patterns. Through this we determined a series of variable patterns that we could integrate in our masterplan that would help with spatial integration into a sensitive context whilst allowing for spatial variation and programmatic diversity to activate the street level experience.



**Figure 13** Masterplan UIC campus, credit: D+A h.q.

## Conclusion

It is evident that there are many obstacles to a more culturally focused planning in China. However it is also true that some indicators suggest disenchantment with the Chinese orthodox model of planning and the subsequent patterns of development it engenders. Whilst the planning studies present here are limited in scope and outcome, it is nonetheless encouraging that some opportunities for innovation or evolution can be found and recognised as the seeds of emergent patterns.

A second observation focuses on the stakeholder roles in the development of creative milieu's. In the cases the presented the universities became active stakeholders and cultural producers in the generation of culture and creative milieu's. This is a process of de-institutionalisation in which the university as a discrete entity slightly separate from its context or singular physical campus risks being not as distinct, but clearly the potential benefits outweigh the risks.

Thirdly the projects show a necessary process of co-evolution of the university and the town or region. This is necessary to generate cross fertilisation opportunities and mutually beneficial ventures. And serves in the creation of diverse cultural environments that can be more spatially, programmatically, temporally, economically, socially and culturally inclusive whilst providing opportunity for both local inhabitants and students alike.

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The projects referred to involved D+A h.q. Ltd., an architectural and planning practice based in Hong Kong, of which I am a partner.

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