

Silkwinds

FEBRUARY 2018



A JOY TO FLY WITH SILK AIR



Slow fashion is taking over the fast-paced streets of Hanoi

A culinary journey through Cebu's diverse and storied past

Taking the next step

Futuristic art spaces and grand architecture transform Shenzhen from manufacturing hub to global design powerhouse





DRIVEN

BY

DESIGN

Shenzhen is poised to
take centre stage as the
world's creative capital

Words by Jamie Fullerton
Photos by Matjaž Tančič

“People here have no burden of history. That’s the core of the Shenzhen spirit: having nothing to be afraid of because everything is exciting”

Doreen Heng Liu, founder of architecture firm NODE





“M

ade in China”. Chances are, you currently have something in your pocket that has this phrase stamped on it. If so, it was probably made in Shenzhen, the city in China’s southwestern Guangdong province that borders Hong Kong and has an estimated population of 12 million.

For most of the last 20 years, it’s been a famous manufacturing metropolis – “the world’s workshop” – with millions of migrant workers flocking from elsewhere in China to work in its factories.

It’s where Taiwanese manufacturing giant Foxconn makes Apple products, and where Chinese communications powerhouse Huawei creates its phones. The city, a fishing village with a population of 30,000 just 40 years ago, now makes an astonishing 90% of the world’s consumer electronics goods. It has been a rapid and remarkable evolution.

THIS PAGE
THE BOLD
EXTERIOR OF THE
NEWLY OPENED
DESIGN SOCIETY

TOP
HUGE STEPS
DOMINATE THE
DESIGN SOCIETY'S
INTERIOR

BOTTOM
MINDING THE
DIGITAL IS A
FUTURISTIC
EXPLORATION OF
DIGITAL DESIGN

Now, an exciting new stage of the city's development is underway: the fine-tuning of a UNESCO-approved creative design brain to pair with its hefty production muscles. With design events increasingly frequent in the city, Shenzhen is placing itself at the forefront of China's transformation from the world's sweatshop to a global innovator.

CREATED IN CHINA

Evidence of this push comes from the city's social diary. Shenzhen Design Week debuted in 2017 and returns in April this year, while Shenzhen Original Design Fashion Week will celebrate its fifth anniversary in 2018. Meanwhile, the Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture exhibition – running until 17 March this year – explores themes of urbanism and is a



colour-burst of art and design splashed across Nantuo Old Town, a normally rustic residential area.

This year also marks the 10th since UNESCO welcomed Shenzhen into its global Creative Cities Network, noting at the time that “the concept of modern Chinese design was gradually created in Shenzhen and has increasingly become a part of the city and its residents.”

UNESCO's stamp of approval has also sparked international interest in the city's creative credentials. Most notable is the recent opening of the magnificent Design Society, a collaboration between the state-owned China Merchants Shekou Holdings and none other than Britain's Victoria & Albert (V&A) Museum. This enormous cathedral to creativity – opened in the city's Shekou area last December – is China's first independent design museum.

One of the lead exhibitions, “Values of Design”, which runs until August 2019, pieces together the story of modern design through everyday objects, drawing from the V&A's staggering permanent collection and covering over a millennium of human history. The first iPhone stands propped up next to a video of Steve Jobs giving one of his trademark product launch speeches. A red Olivetti Valentine Typewriter from 1969 marks the point where typewriters first became objects of aesthetic desire, rather than purely functional tools.

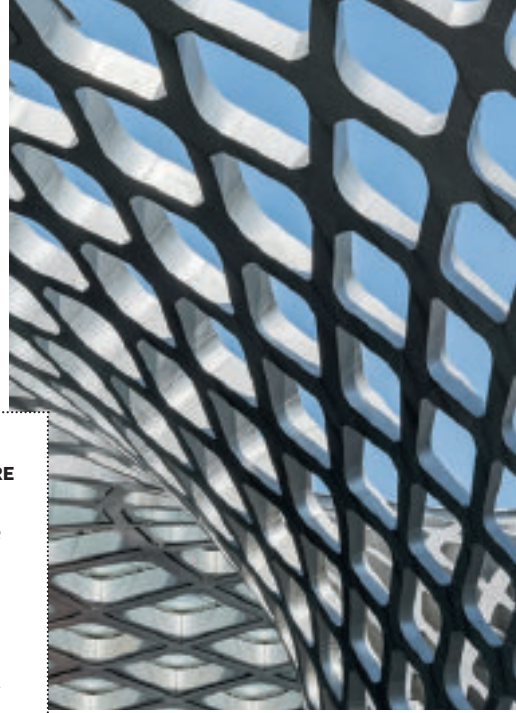
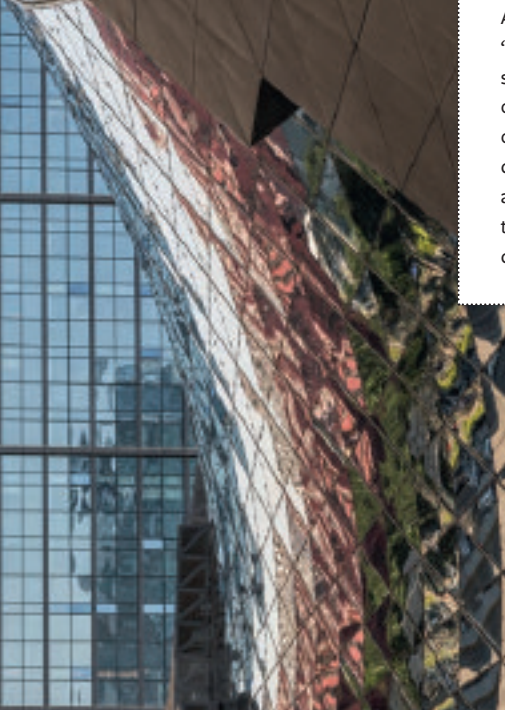
Nods to China come from items such as a Shenzhen school uniform and a Jindezhen porcelain dish dated to the 16th or 17th century. They feel a little shoehorned in – the school uniform is a rather bland tracksuit-style affair and not exactly a bastion of stunning design – but they're understandable and welcome inclusions.

Also on show is “Minding the Digital”, an exhibition that allows your inner, mildly-hyperactive child to run rampant. A forward-looking exploration of digital design, it's an insanely fun showcase of “human meets computer” inviting interaction through over 60 Chinese and international works.

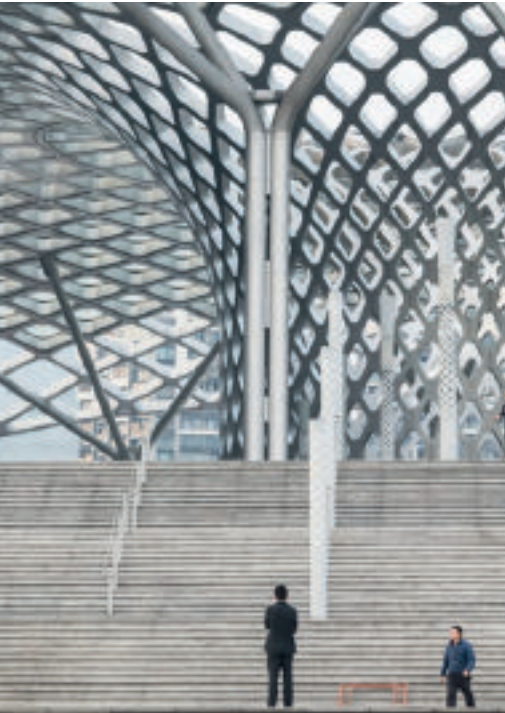




SHENZHEN CIVIC CENTRE
Affectionately known as the “moustache building” due to its swooping shape, the centre, which opened in 2004, contains government offices as well as a museum. The design is actually meant to represent a mythical bird known as Dapeng, also the name of a district in the east of the city. *Fuzhong Third Road*



SHENZHEN BAY SPORTS CENTRE
Created in 2011, this enormous complex in the west of the city is the centrepiece of Shenzhen Bay, an area that has undergone dramatic development in the past 20 years. It houses a 20,000 capacity stadium and a 13,000 capacity arena within a distinctive mesh exterior. *Shenzhen Bay Park*





OCT DESIGN MUSEUM

Completed in 2011 and resembling a midpoint between a huge drop of water, a hyper-smoothed beach stone and an alien spacecraft, the OCT Design Museum hosts science exhibitions and fashion shows.

Haiyuan Second Road

It gets even more interesting: in the installation “Sharevari”, by Japanese sound artist Yuri Suzuki, visitors stand encircled by sensor-shrouded crystal orbs, triggering musical notes by gesturing towards the gleaming spheres.

And that’s just what’s within the walls of Design Society. The building complex that houses it – the Sea World Culture and Arts Center, which aims to be the city’s leading cultural public space – is a design achievement in itself, comprising attractive outdoor spaces and several cantilevered components gleaming white over Shenzhen Bay and the South China Sea.

“I’ve been waiting for this place to open for three years,” says 30-year-old Charlex Lin, a Shenzhen-based fashion designer and one of many local creatives who have attended industry events at Design Society.

Luisa Mengoni, head of the V&A gallery in Shenzhen, organises these sessions with architects, fashion and graphic designers and artists, to find out how the venue can help inspire and showcase Shenzhen talent in the future.

Mengoni says it is the present and future of Shenzhen design, rather than its past, that was a large factor in the V&A choosing to open where it did. She lauds the city’s “astonishing manufacturing base”, “drive towards innovation and creativity” and its “young and entrepreneurial spirit”.

DESIGNING AN IDENTITY

Even before the arrival of Design Society, many buildings were already pointing towards the city’s creative future. Across the metropolis, minimalist

boltholes are juxtaposed against colossal architectural feats such as the Shenzhen Bay Sports Centre.

The enormous sports complex in the west of the city is the centrepiece of the bay, an area that has undergone dramatic development in the past 20 years. Shimmering skyscrapers housing tech firms such as communications giant Tencent overlook the 20,000-seat stadium, while locals zip around its mesh-style exterior on shared bikes or manoeuvre drones, capturing the architecture from above.

Further east, on Fuzhong Third Road, the Shenzhen Civic Centre, which opened in 2004, is affectionately known as the “moustache building” due to its distinctive swooping shape. Shenzhen’s new Futian Cultural District, meanwhile, houses the dramatically twisting, reflective panel-adorned Museum of Contemporary Art and Planning Exhibition (MOCAPE).

The equally impressive OCT Design Museum resembles a cross between a shimmering pebble and an alien spacecraft. It is found near the flagship store of Shenzhen’s DJI drone firm, another prominent example of the city’s blossoming design creativity.

All of these buildings are worth visiting, even if just to admire their exteriors. But it is OCT Loft Creative Culture Park, a leafy neighbourhood crowded with design museums and trendy shops and cafés, that is the spiritual home of design in Shenzhen – as well as the literal home of many design studios. “We are attracted to the vibe of the area,” says Ji Xiaolin, a 30-year-old architect with the Swooding Architects firm, whose office is situated in OCT.

The vibe at OCT, which opened in 2005, is indeed buzzing: sharp design meets art enclave meets hipster hangout. The acronym stands for Overseas China Town, referring to the number of creatives who left China, often to study, then returned to work in the area. It shares arty-cool DNA with Beijing’s 798 Art Zone and Shanghai’s M50 art area, with many of the renovated warehouses seemingly influenced by the lofts of 1970s New York.

The OCT venue OCAT Shenzhen showcases the haunting painted bamboo stalk art of Wang Donglin, in a huge hangar-like room he’s turned into an urban forest. The OCT Art and Design Gallery, meanwhile, uses the hexagon as a running theme, and has become



MOCAPÉ

The dramatically twisting, reflective panel-adorned Museum of Contemporary Art and Planning Exhibition (MOCAPÉ) was designed to be a centrepiece of Shenzhen’s new Futian Cultural District. The project, completed in 2016, was helmed by the Vienna-based architecture company Coop Himmelb(l)au. *Futian Cultural District*



TOP
OCT LOFT
CREATIVE CULTURE
PARK IS THE
SPIRITUAL HOME
OF DESIGN IN
SHENZHEN

LEFT
ARTINN IS A
HOTEL-CUM-ART
GALLERY
TRANSFORMED
FROM A FORMERLY
DERELICT SPACE

something of a landmark of the area. Next door, there is a gallery devoted to the painter He Xiangning, who was also a feminist politician and worked as minister for women’s affairs in the neighbouring city of Guangzhou before her death in 1972.

Ji knew this was the place to forge his career. “The design environment in Shenzhen is quite different from other cities,” he says. In Beijing and Shanghai, *guanxi* (social clout) outranks talent when it comes to winning design contracts. But in Shenzhen even young architects receive support from the local government and developers. “Shenzhen is a fair city,” Ji adds.

This sense of openness – somewhat unique for business in China – can be traced back to 1980, when Shenzhen was declared China’s first Special Economic Zone (SEZ), giving it tax benefits and making it particularly attractive to foreign investors. The move was an attempt to haul Shenzhen’s productivity closer to that of neighbouring Hong Kong.

Since then, this spirit of meritocracy has further manifested in the architecture sector, through design competitions held by organisations such as the Shenzhen Centre for Design (SCD), founded by the city’s Urban Planning Land and Resource Commission.



**DESIGN BY
THE NUMBERS**

Shenzhen has:

20%

Annual growth in the cultural and creative industries

40,000

New creative enterprises established since 2004

6,000

design firms

8
trillion yuan
yearly output

100,000

people employed in the design sector

Statistics from UNESCO

Competitions such as these, along with the UNESCO-supported Shenzhen Design Award for Young Talent, are commonplace. Perhaps that’s another reason why Shenzhen is having a youth-led design moment. The city’s residents average age is 27, and Ji agrees that the city’s abundance of young, vibrant minds contribute to its creative atmosphere.

This mentality is evident everywhere you go. On the eastern edge of Shenzhen, in the beachside Dapeng district, Huang Zelin, founder of Aether Architects, holds court on the roof of ARTINN, a hotel-cum-art gallery he transformed from a derelict space by covering it in cubed white latticed frames.

Huang is another Shenzhen resident who believes the city being so young is a major reason for this creative zeitgeist. He adds that his generation feels a sense of responsibility to help carve an identity for a city largely bereft of historical buildings.

“Shenzhen doesn’t have a strong cultural identity,” he says. “Our government tries to shape an identity for Shenzhen as a young migrant city by spending money

TOP
AN ELDERLY RESIDENT TAKES A BREAK IN THE NANTUO OLD TOWN DISTRICT CURRENTLY HOME TO THE BI-CITY BIENNALE OF URBANISM



SilkAir flies daily between Singapore and Shenzhen

on high-quality public exhibitions. Opening places such as the MOCAPE helps show off our capabilities as a design city.”

One woman playing a big part in this new design identity is Doreen Heng Liu, founder of NODE, a widely respected architecture firm based in OCT Loft. Many Shenzhen buildings that are designed by NODE – such as the futuristic, lakeside Wedding Hall, which opened last year in Xiangmihu Park as a venue for wedding ceremonies – are tastefully actualised, and far from the mega-structures of Shanghai and Beijing.

“Shenzhen has a very interesting spirit,” Liu says. “People here have no burden of history; they are often young and are here to start afresh. That’s the core of the Shenzhen spirit: having nothing to be afraid of because everything is exciting.”

Indeed, places such as Design Society are tangible examples that Shenzhen is carving an identity more vibrant than its “conveyor belt and screwdriver” image. It feels as fresh as the sea air from Shenzhen Bay, blowing up and across the building’s main steps. ■