

# Participatory Regeneration Practice of Faan Nguk Kei under the Background of Urban-Rural Dual Structure in China

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**Abstract:** Liurong Temple and Guangxiao Temple, located in the same block, are the two most important temples in Guangzhou City. With the rapid urbanization process, the historic preservation of its surrounding neighborhoods is facing enormous challenges. Today, this district presents a highly complex picture both in terms of urban morphology and programme. Based on the site investigation and morphological analysis, this paper describes the following morphological features of the block: fragmentation and collage of the street network, border barriers brought about by closed territories such as monasteries, diversified architectural types, and interrupted public space system. According to historical research and comparison of urban fabric in different periods, the author find out that the overlapping of following great changes in different historical stages constitutes today's urban form: the evolution of Guangzhou city wall, the construction and disappearance of the six-vein canals brought about changes in traffic modes, the occupation of monasteries by the army, factory expansion in the period of planned economy, development of real estate in commodity economy era.

The author attempts to reveal the establishment, disintegration, and reorganization of boundaries on urban form at different scales, which is more influenced by social force and the migration and settlement of different populations. This research will inspire the formulation and improvement of policies in the preservation and regeneration of Guangxiao and Liurong Temple district.

## 1. Introduction: What is “Fan Nguk Kei”?

With the working method of exhibitions, “Fan Nguk Kei (翻屋企)” (Cantonese, means “back home”) is a non-profit organization that practices in the field of urban regeneration and architectural heritage conservation (figure 1). Its practice is rooted in the Pearl River Delta region of China with the efforts of university teachers, architects, student, officials, journalists, etc. It was born in such a complicated background: in present China, due to the extensive urban development in the past 30 years, the function and structure of the old city town is breaking down in both spatial and social aspects, the issue of urban regeneration is indeed one of the hottest topics in the current Chinese architecture community. Encouraging and guiding users and the public to participate in the design process and professional discussions have become a phenomenon. The problem is that the separation of property ownership and actual users have led to the decline of

the public space system and the spatial chaos aggravated by the collapse of the social structure. Due to institutional reasons, “top-down” urban planning management model has been implemented for a long time, the public rarely has the opportunity to express their views. Besides, due to the public’s low trust in urban management and the lagging understanding of the concept of urban regeneration, regeneration projects designed only from a spatial perspective are often not fully implemented. Not only the regeneration of the public space system but also the reshaping of the community identity need to be performed in the old town. Consequently, it is urgent and challenging for the public to express their ideas and have the opportunity to participate in the urban regeneration project.

The exhibition called Back Home held at the 2015 Shenzhen-Hong Kong Bi-city Biennale (one of the most important architectural exhibitions in China) showed the public the core concept of Faan Nguk Kei: Return to the old return and attract diverse social groups to participate in discussing urban regeneration. The curatorial team selected six old homes (homes) in the old town of Guangzhou as samples. Traditional physics models (figure 2-1), point cloud data pictures of 3D laser scanning (figure 2-2) and 1:1 large scale photos (figure 2-3) were displayed to awake the audiences’ memories of the family houses that had disappeared in the old town. Audiences could edit their home memories into texts or images, upload them by Wechat apps, and the Faan Nguk Kei team collected and displayed them online. During the two-month exhibition period, more than 100 texts and images were received by the Faan Nguk Kei, which serialized on the WeChat Media Platform later (figure 2-4).

## 2. Build the Context: Faan Nguk Kei’s Manifesto

There are three essential characteristics of the Faan Nguk Kei: Context ,Participatory and Co-design. In the author’s opinion, these characteristics have been embodied in the Faan Nguk Kei’s exhibitions. The first step is to construct a common context to ensure that professionals and the public discussion in a same cognitive system. How to build the mechanism of free communication is crucially faced by China’s urban regeneration movement. Then, the co-design is introduced. The public starts from the experience participation of “play the game” and gradually participate in the real design process. Faan Nguk Kei also considers the Internet and social



Figure 1. Posters of Faan Nguk Kei’s exhibitions.



Figure 2. Exhibits and scenes of the Back Home exhibition.

network as tools for managing and disseminating ideas in conjunction with traditional physical space exhibitions.

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In Postdesign theory, understanding and empathizing with the people who experience artifacts, interfaces, systems, and spaces can best be accomplished by communicating with them in the places where they live, work and play while they live, work and play. If accessing experience is required, it is essential for the designer to analysis what People do, say and make. The exhibition Back Home actually fabricated a fantasy context about "home" for every viewer. It had

nothing to do with where they are living now but exists in their memories of growth or family stories, reproduced in the text or images they edit and upload. In the process of selecting words and pictures, audiences re-experienced what they do, say and make in the old house, and gradually began to understand the value of renewing and protecting the old town (the container for their old family houses).

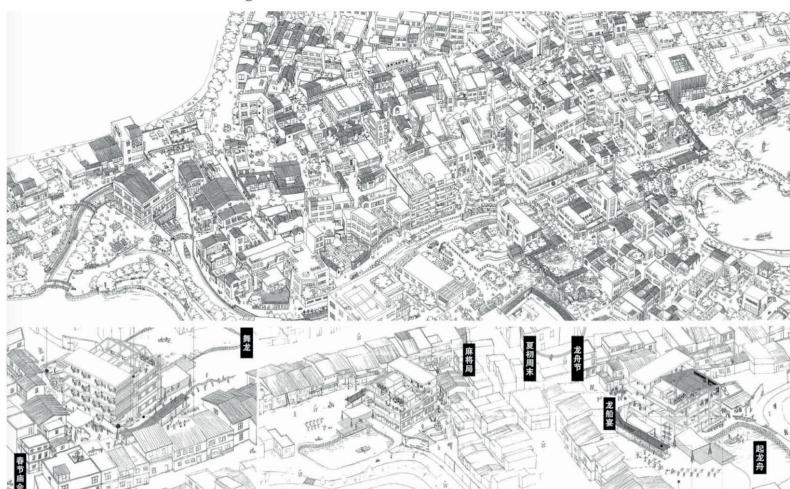
As most of the Biennale's audiences are architecture professionals or art lovers, Faan Nguk Kei carried out a re-exhibition in the old town of Guangzhou, in the same way, to deliver the idea of old town regeneration to more people in the community. An old house with a history of more than 100 years in Dongshan District of Guangzhou had been selected as the exhibition venue. (figure 2-5) Through the reproduction of scenes and the presence of the spatial ontology, a context was built, in which audiences could recollect and imagine the lifestyle in the old houses. After the exhibition, more texts and images were collected. Gradually, Faan Nguk Kei began to establish a primary context for discussing the urban regeneration with its followers.



3-1: exhibits are mixed with goods



3-2: Exhibits and installations



3-3 : The econometrical drawing of Pantang village



3-4: The interactive installation of Pantang village

Figure 3. *The exhibition in a shopping mall.*

### 3. Consumer Culture and Collective Generativity: Is it an exhibit or a goods?

It's not new to display art in shopping malls. In his Harvard Shopping Guide, Rem Koolhaas argued that public functions and activities should be possible to reclaim territory from the shopping field, which would be a win-win strategy. The advantage of the mall is that it has far more people than the art exhibition, and more diverse groups of people gathered in it. In 2016, the Grandview Mall, the most popular shopping mall in Guangzhou, hosted a Faan Nguk Kei's exhibition, which was a combination of consumer culture and Collective Generativity. In essence, the behavior accommodated by both retail stores and exhibition venues can be classified as exhibitions. In Grandview mall's display, exhibits/ installations for experience are mixed with goods from boutique stores (figure 3-1, figure 3-2). Thus boundaries between goods and exhibits are blurred.

The theme of this exhibition is the past and future of Pantang Village, the village in the old town of Guangzhou. Ironically, because of the vigorous development of commercial trade around Pantang Village, natives moved out and rented their old houses to traders. The original public space system and social structure of the village rapidly declined. According to the oral history collected in the first exhibition, the volunteers of Faan Nguk Kei drew a huge econometrical drawing. The picture itself has no boundaries, and a viewer can continue to draw it on the spot under the guidance of volunteers based on his/her own memories and imaginations.



4-1: Old photos and Q&A hung on the Clothesline



4-2 : Villagers were discussing and sticky notes of historical information



Figure 4. The exhibition in Puntong village.

4-3: "model + sticky notes"

(figure 3-3). Another exhibit is an interactive installation based on the status situation of Pantang Village, where visitors could play like toys, create their own Pantang Village, take photos and upload them to the Wechat Media Platform of Faan Nguk Kei (figure 3-4). The imagines of Pantang village were hung together with tapestries for sale, while the interactive installation looks no different from children's building blocks. When interacting closely with the exhibit, the viewer would realize that it was an exhibit, not goods. As a project to popularize the concept of urban regeneration to the public, Faan Nguk Kei was not excluded from the current consumer culture that was spreading in Chinese society. Instead, this phenomenon was taken as the background to give the following questions for the audiences to rethink deeply: When the reproduction of the old town space is blurred into goods for sale, is its spatial ontology itself had been materialized into goods accordingly? Is the value of living space in the old town reflected only in the price tag of land and property, but not in the intimacy and memory of space/events/people?

Whether or not audiences can understand the implications of the exhibition propositions, thanks to the simple and popular way of participation, more common public began to ponder over the problem of old town regeneration. Collective Generativity, which is emphasized in post-design theories, requires that the tools are projective in nature, allowing users to project their own needs and desires onto their imagined experiences. Artifacts, interfaces, systems, and space may or may not play a supporting role in these imaginings. In this exhibition, although participants are not actually drawing a design scheme or making a design model, the psychological distance and cognitive differences between professionals and participants narrowed after experiencing similar working methods to designers'. More importantly, in a place like a mall that is closer to daily life, "goods" are psychologically more accessible and intimate. Participants could be more relaxed in fiddling with interactive installations like building blocks, as easily as checking goods in the retail store. At the same time, achievements of their Collective Generativity under unconscious conditions had become a reference or source of inspiration for designers.

#### 4. Go to the site: Clothesline, Q&A, and Sticky Notes

In the past three exhibitions, whether it is the scene or memory of the old house, or the image of Pantang village, image and virtual reality are used to depict the future visions of historical sites. The exhibition disseminates a concept of conservation and regeneration, which regards "historic urban landscapes/scenes" as an essential element of urban heritage conservation, rather than the isolated regeneration project itself. In the process of urban regeneration, professionals are faced with the task of collecting historical information and residents' opinions. Traditional methods of investigation and collection often face failure because of the distrust and cognitive gap previously described. Faan Nguk Kei further extended the method of "experience (operation) – feedback – record" in the exhibition mentioned above, and apply it to Pantang Village regeneration project. Since the end of 2017, Faan Nguk Kei has regularly held exhibitions in Pantang village. In the first stage, the main content of the exhibition was about the history information of Pantang village and the display of old photos. In a way that was most close to life, exhibits were hung temporarily and cheaply on the ubiquitous clothesline of the streets. The exhibits contained Q&A about Pantang's history (figure 4-1). The purpose was not to examine residents' understanding of history, but to stimulate residents' mutual discussion about the history of the community. Due to the cognitive gaps between residents and investigators,

the interviewees inadvertently ignored some key information. Actually, it was because of these disputes over different answers that Faan Nguk Kei's investigators learned a lot of historical information and oral history, which is not available through interviews and questionnaires. Because of the cognitive gaps between residents and investigators, audiences often inadvertently ignore some vital information in traditional interviews and surveys. Q&A of Pantang history, as a game-like "make tools", enable residents to express their feelings and true thoughts in the process of arguing and playing with each other. Residents can write their answers and historical information on the sticky notes and paste them on the display panels (figure 4-2). Audiences and subsequent audiences enlightened each other through sticky notes to exchange information beyond the time dimension.

"Emotional toolkit" and "cognitive toolkit" are two basic forms of the Make Toolkits in Post-design theory. "Q&A + sticky notes" can actually be classified as "emotional toolkit" through which people show or tell stories and dreams. The exhibition also developed a "cognitive toolkit", that is, "model + sticky note". The model shows Pantang village's current situation and renovation plan, and the residents' opinions and needs on the design, as well as their understanding and understanding of Pantang public space through the form of sticky notes directly to the relative position of the model (figure 4-3). Residents would directly pasted their opinions and needs, as well as understanding of Pantang village's public space, to the corresponding position of the model with sticky notes. Residents could even modify the design directly by manipulating and adjusting the model. The "model + sticky notes" completed by all residents had also become the result of Collective Generativity which had been translated into practicable professional achievements by designers. Through the participation in the design process in the exhibition, the residents re-established a sense of identity with the community.

## 5. Conclusion: Four Characteristics of the Exhibition as a Tool

From the reviews of three exhibitions, the process of changes can be roughly divided into three stages: 1) In the first two "manifesto" exhibitions, emphasizing the spread of goals and ideas of FaanNguk Kei; 2) For the mall's exhibition, emphasizing the combination of collective generativity and consumer culture; 3) The exhibition at Pantang village provides "toolkits" so that residents can really participate in the design. The exhibition opens a window for the public to understand professional issues while re-establishing community identity through historical excavation and the involvement of contemporary public events. Through the analysis of the exhibitions held by Faan Nguk Kei, we can conclude that the exhibition as a Make Tools in the post-design era has the following characteristics.

The exhibition as a "machine" that can collect what people do/ say/make. Just as in the exhibition held by FaanNguk Kei, exhibits/venue often serve to create a context for the viewer and provide "toolkits" to help them express themselves. The aesthetic features of the exhibition space itself are not important, like the exhibition on the clothesline in Pantang Village. The exhibition in the Postdesign era is just like what Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders and Sonic Rim stated: The Make Tools are a "design language" for users, not just for designers; a design language built upon an aesthetics of experience rather than an aesthetics of form.

Collective Generativity process under Participatory Culture. The achievements produced under the "Make Tools" are not the most crucial, but the process of Collective Generativity. Direct information and emotional exchanges between people are worthy of being recorded and analyzed, from which to establish sympathy of common culture and history.

Exhibits transcend the reappearance of “the other,” focusing on the feelings of participants’ experience themselves. When the exhibition panels were filled with sticker notes and huge Pan-tang’s utopian drawings were completed, each viewer was engaged in a dialogue with the former participants’ behavior: what they do/say/make.

The way to display the exhibition must be a balance between a sense of intimacy and futuristic. Whether it’s a clothesline rack and a sticky note or it’s a product blurred into goods in a mall, the exhibition always creates a sense of intimacy with the viewer. When the participants imagine and depict the future in a psychologically friendly way, the designer begins to empathize with the user truly.

Interestingly, the four exhibitions did not have a pre-planned “roadmap” or an outline of action. Instead, as the original Manifesto of Faan Nguk Kei said, it is “as I am doing”. Postdesign is not a linear process but a continual intersection of changing perspectives. The works of Faan Nguk Kei in the field of urban regeneration, in a sense, have made an experimental exploration into the possibilities of the exhibition as a “Make Tools” in the post design era, which is worthy of further study and practice. The “bottom-up” work of the Faan Nguk Kei has changed the urban form of the built environment and provided another possibility for urban regeneration.

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