

# Comparative Analysis of Villa 31 and Nantou Urban Village

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## Introduction

City curates and embodies dichotomy. In the light, it is ordered and organized, almost to a mechanistic ideal: well-planned roads cut through skyscrapers and protocols are established to put human interactions on a highway. When the night falls, poverty, crimes, deprivation, as well as underground pubs and alternative culture start to flourish. Slum itself is a collection of these informalities, disorders, and bottom-up wisdom to survive in a crack. Are all the slums the same? What makes them different from each other and the rest of the city? In this paper, I adopted a descriptive lens to compare two “slums”, Villa 31 in Buenos Aires, Argentina and Nantou urban village in Shenzhen, China to illuminate a paradox in their own narratives: the efforts to articulate their similarities and differences inevitably put them in position to contrast the modernity of the cities as a collective. The life of each “slum” is not only entangled with its context but also hinges on this global narrative they collectively pose to every human being to rethink the vision of life and how to co-exist with their own kind<sup>1</sup>. For the first part of the argument, I will compare Villa 31 and Nantou urban village by examining their current physicalities in relation to their historical process of formation (1931-2018 for Villa 31 and 1951-2018 for Nantou urban village<sup>2</sup>) that deeply entangled with the local context. Followed from the first half, I will put both sites under the light of the global discourse of slum challenges led by UN and discuss how such grouping shapes or reshapes the local narratives toward these two sites.

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<sup>1</sup> #historicalargument: comparing Villa 31 and Nantou urban village using the descriptive lens to articulate the distinctive profile of urban village as a special case not only in relation to local context and Villa 31, but also in the global discourse of “slums”. This satisfies the historical inquiry of contingency and complexity.

<sup>2</sup> The starting time for Villa 31 in 1931 represents the first approval from the government to a group of Polish immigrants to settle at Puerto Nuevo, the port area where Villa 31 stands today. The exact starting time for Nantou urban village is unclear (but Nantou old town was established in 331), so I used 1951, the year when government starts dual urban-rural land system as the marker.

### **The Physicality of Villa 31 and Nantou Urban Village**

The choice of selecting Nantou urban village as the comparison to Villa 31 is deliberate. On the one hand, they are both the “star slum” in their own city and have inspired endless discussions and research work. Both sites share similar physicalities, but at the same time, they have both grown out of a complicated mix of local context contingent in social structure, time and space. Just the fact they are called in different names in the local language and the cognitive dissonance to put a “village” or a “villa (town)” in the “slum” category signifies a rich field of descriptive narratives to dive into<sup>3</sup>.

In my first [primary source analysis](#) on Villa 31, I focused on the physical nature of the site, illustrating how the stigma of Villa 31 gets to be reproduced through physical segregation, as it is sandwiched between the harbor and a railway that cuts it apart from the wealthiest part of the city on the opposite side. The satellite image from Google Map (see Figure 3) produces vivid visual cues to its unique geometric form: a dense, fine-grained cluster of squatters that naturally form a self-enclosed boundary. In this regard, Nantou urban village does seem similar to Villa 31: it is also very much a cluster of dense buildings, constrained by a huge public green space in Shenzhen, two eight-lanes wide roads, and some of the most expensive apartment complex in the city.

Interestingly, despite both located at the heart of the city center, Nantou urban village did not just occupy an abandoned piece of land at the first place as Villa 31. Instead, Nantou urban village is embedded in the Nantou old town heritage, the formal capital for six provinces 1600

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<sup>3</sup> #historyscale: one of the paragraphs that justify why Shenzhen is chosen as the comparison, and this is further proven in the following sections when interesting contrasts are drawn between the two sites under the descriptive lens of their physicality and relationship to modernity. The time scale is specified in the introduction and they are picked because they roughly represent the start and the end of formation time period.

years ago which included the realm of Shenzhen and Hong Kong today ("新安县志 (Ethnography Document For Nantou Old Town)", n.d.). The criss-cross roads cut through the urban village today are the vestige of the original planning that can still be traced in the model replicate in the museum (see Figure 2). Therefore, the boundary of the Nantou urban village today is more of a legacy from the town wall, than a result of the strict physical barriers as in the case of Villa 31. Considered that 90% of what we called Shenzhen today sprung up only 30 years ago as China designated the city to be the forefront of economic reform, Nantou old town, with its 1600 years of history, can be the most significant source of culture for this rising international city that is eager to find its roots. How come that an urban village, a traditionally stigmatized place, get to be situated at such crucial heritage site?



*Figure 1:* Bird-eye view of Nantou Urban Village (URBANUS都市实践, 2018)





Figure 2: Model of Nantou town heritage in Nantou Old Town Museum (Shu 2018)



Figure 3: Satellite Image Screenshot of Villa 31 circled by the red line, taken by the author.

The answer to the question lies in the set of pictures below (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). Buildings in Villa 31 seems like a LEGO construction: blocks of bricks crumble on top of each other and hang on the highway. Layers of different construction materials and colors were natural witnesses to the organic and unplanned growth of Villa 31 when the newcomers struggled to find a roof to stay in the already overcrowded place. On the contrary, buildings at Nantou urban villages are more developed. Though the locals often called them as “handshake buildings” because they are close enough for people to shake hands across the windows, these residences are uniformly constructed, shown by the consistency of color and materials in a single building. Besides, they are much taller than those in Villa 31, implying that people who own the buildings had some degrees of planning and were not severely deprived.

Indeed, urban villages in China are not built by the poorest; they are born out of a special land policy called dual urban-rural land system<sup>45</sup>. In 1951, at the dawn of rapid urbanization and economic reforms, the Chinese government started to separate urban and rural citizenship based on home locations, with the fear that massive population influx to the city would form slums and cause social disorders as exemplified in Latin America (Long, 2014). Therefore, people who were granted rural citizenship cannot access social welfare in the city but were incentivized to stay at villages through the right to own land. On the contrary, local governments own lands in the city and can use them freely for development purposes. Even though Nantou old town did not fade off the stage until 1953 when the administrative center was moved elsewhere (“新安县志 (Ethnography Document For Nantou Old Town)”, n.d.), it has been populated by villagers for a

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<sup>4</sup> #connectionincontext: explain how the formation processes of Villa 31 and Nantou urban village can be derived from visual cues in photos and are deeply rooted in local context, especially in the case of Nantou urban village.

<sup>5</sup> #causationincontext: this essay does not aim to provide a causation argument, but if I have to pick one, then the historical context of how Shenzhen urban village emerges, especially the dual urban-rural land system is the cause to the distinct spatial and building feature of Nantou urban village today.

long time. The most famous one is called Nantou village and its descendants today own most of the buildings in Nantou urban village. When the urbanization frontier sprawled to Nantou village, most of the villagers abandoned farming and competed for building on their tracts of land. Due to the low development cost, these buildings become popular in the rental market, providing cheap housing for the spiking increase of migrants in Shenzhen in the past decades. The entanglement of interests and the presence of historical sites within Nantou village shield it from lucrative real estate redevelopment. When the wave of urbanization passed, Nantou village becomes a village in the heart of the city, an urban village.



*Figure 4 (left):* Photo of Buildings in Villa 31 (Boragina, 2016)

*Figure 5 (right):* Photo of Buildings in Nantou Urban Village (Meng, Lin and Rao 2018)

### **The Past or the Future of Modernity? - A Global Discourse of Slums**

Both Villa 31 and Nantou urban village emerged due to increasing demand for affordable housing in the city, which is a legacy of the rural-urban migration or overseas influx during industrialization and urbanization process. They are not the only cases in the world. Similar to the modern girl heuristic device, researchers, designers, and urban planners worldwide have

conducted detailed descriptions on “slums” in their context and profiled them against other cases in the world. What is different is that among all these players, UN-Habitat does try to establish an archetype: it published a report called *The Challenges of Slums* in 2013, highlighting the common problems and solutions that countries worldwide have taken on and attempting to provide a common language for comparative discourse. UN defines slums as “a group of people living in urban area that is lack of one or more of the following 1) durable housing, 2) sufficient living space, 3) easy access to safe water, 4) adequate sanitation, and 5) security of tenure without the threat of forced eviction” (UN-Habitat 2013). Villa 31 and Nantou urban village, with all the distinctions we have discussed above, can still undoubtedly fit into this one coarse-grained description of slums. The benefit of constructing such framework is obvious: it allows governments to understand what factors and processes are contingent to local context while the others are universal, but still, it also risks stereotyping and trivializing the context these “slums” are embedded in. “Urban village is unique to China,” as the famous urban geographer Fulong Wu written in his blog, “not only due to the Chinese context, but the name we use to characterize these sites point to a very different social dynamics than to the city” (Wu, 2018).

Professor Wu did hint on an inevitable contrast we made whenever we are talking about these “slums”, which is the modern side of the city. Close-tied community, bustling markets, and family-owned workshops in both Villa 31 and Nantou urban village crystalize memories of the small town or rural life in the past that are deteriorating rapidly today (see Figure 6 and Figure 7). In contrast, modernity, populated with the philosophy of professionalism, rationalism, and efficiency (Foucault, 1975) that are manifested in the straight, clean, and organized urban design today, had constructed a very different reality in the city. Where to position these “slums”



relative the narratives of modernity is a challenge posed to all humanity and the answers will lead to different interventions. Should we leave them as they are or redevelop them to align with other parts of the city? Should we memorialize it as our past or a continuation into the future? Without answering these “global” question that pertains all human being, we cannot derive the best approach to deal with these “slums”.<sup>6</sup>



*Figure 6 (left): street view of Nantou urban village (Meng, Lin and Rao 2018)*

*Figure 7 (right): street view of Villa 31 (Cain, 2016)*

Shenzhen and Buenos Aires have both started the experiment to reconstruct this narrative. In March 2018, Shenzhen hosted a three-months-long exhibition called *City Symbiosis*, featuring urban villages in Shenzhen and around the world, proposing to have minor reconstructions to improving living conditions in urban villages, but at the same time, preserve them for historical purposes. “Shenzhen is a city of migrants and we should be proud to include

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<sup>6</sup> #connectionincontext: illustrate how Villa 31 and Nantou urban village is entangled in the global discourse of “slum” and what kinds of benefits and consequences local government can derive from it.

urban villages as a part of our formal history”, said Meng, the head of the exhibition (Meng, Lin and Rao 2018). The city of Buenos Aires takes a slightly different track: the urban planning department is going to redevelop Villa 31 and vitalize the nearby neighborhood while avoiding the subsequent gentrification. There is not a single best approach to either of the cases, but both cities do believe that their case is different from all others.

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