The Rural-Urban Ecology concept originated in a journey that we took to a project site for a rural school construction in a village near the border of Guangdong and Guanxi province. In an eight-hour drive originating in Hong Kong, the journey passed through seven official urban zones and countless in-betweens and otherwise indeterminate territories before arriving at the rural site in Qinmo village. The journey exhibited various conditions of development, many of which exploited grey areas in current government policies and were indicative of the degree of market savvy and entrepreneurship among people who were all simply farmers 30 years ago. There were also clusters of abandoned buildings and projects—bi-products of the extreme influence of the market economy—which were simply halted the moment the market shifted. In the first stage of Shenzhen’s transformation from rice fields into a 12 million-inhabitant city, the edge between rural and urban was brutally distinct. Now, as the PRD develops from a region which in 1989 had only four urban areas with over ½ million inhabitants into an area today with more than 20 such cities, the entire regional dynamic has become much more complex. What becomes evident is that urban processes are intertwined with rural processes to the extent that the rural is a key agent in the creation of urban fabric. These mechanisms produce specific forms of differentiated urban fabric, creating incoherent adjacencies between banana trees and high-rise developments, remnants of fishponds and factories. The following is a selection of images along this Rural-Urban scan with key issues that factor into the continuing transformation of the PRD.
The years preceding October 2008, when it was generally acknowledged that the world was entering a global recession, could be considered the apotheosis of the extremes of market capitalism. In many developing countries the rapid transformation of rural territory directly into industrialized urban substance was accompanied by mass migrations of workers to these new urban centers. Now those millions of workers are going home. It is estimated that in China alone over a six-month period, 20 million workers have left cities and returned to their rural homes. This represents a crisis not only for cities but for the established relationship and co-dependency between rural and urban territory.

The traditional relationship between the countryside and the city, the farm and the factory has become exploited and increasingly complex within the processes of globalization. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Pearl River Delta in China. Here globalization’s incessant search for cheaper land and labor, combined with the specific local conditions of Chinese socialism, with its inherent inequality between Urban and Rural citizens has produced a phenomena of urban migration and urban production that is unparalleled.

Under the original set up of Mao Zedong’s collective farming system, the relationship between the countryside and the city was clear and distinct. In exchange for their land rights, farmers contributed a portion of their food production as tax. Food and raw materials were then distributed by the government to the non-agricultural population. As a result, the notion of balance between the roles of rural dwellers and urban dwellers was established in the system of Hukou or household registration, and it has continued to this day. This system defines every citizen as either an urban dweller or a rural dweller with distinct rights and responsibilities. This strict legal separation of its entire population exemplifies China’s deep-rooted belief in not only the division but the co-dependency of its urban and rural parts. However the nature of this relationship continues to evolve.

One of the chief architects of China’s economic rise, Deng Xiaoping, recognized not only the failure of the commune system but the potential for China to act as fertile territory for the expression of late capitalism in built form. The continued commodification of goods, worldwide consumption and expanded field of production centers made possible through globalization, prioritized affordable and available land, co-operative governmental controls and an abundance of cheap labor. By simultaneously opening up key areas to foreign investment and loosening the tie between farmers and their land,
Deng produced the basic conditions for unprecedented urbanization directly linked to the globalization of markets. In 1978, Shenzhen was named one of five Special Economic Zones, strategically located directly across the border from Hong Kong, which was already established as a global financial center. A year later, Deng began the emancipation of the farmers by transforming the collective farm system to shift productivity from the collective to the individual. The farmers could choose what to grow and had the right to sell any excess for individual profit. Then in 1983, the huge temporary migration from rural areas to sites of production was legalized by a policy that allowed rural citizens to work in designated urban areas without changing their citizen status.

Currently the rural continues to play an unequivocal role in the growth of cities and economies of the Pearl River Delta.

Massive migration had created a temporary population of 147 million rural workers in the PRD before the recent downturn and current counter-migration. Ironically this temporary population inhabited the cities of Guangzhou and Shenzhen in clusters of densely packed and loosely regulated enclaves called ‘Urban Villages.’ These areas, imbedded into the urban fabric are the resultant tradeoffs between the government and villagers when claiming large tracts of farming plots for urban development. The rights of rural dwellers to build a dwelling and the demand for cheap migrant worker housing transformed local farmers into property developers. The city of Shenzhen has grown so vast in 30 years that many of these areas have become entrenched into the very center of the urban fabric. However due to the legal separation between rural and urban territory, these Urban Villages have become an intractable problem for city planning, or seen another way as islands of resistance containing a form of informal urbanism that is simply not possible in the formal-grid urbanism that predominates Shenzhen’s city fabric.

The fact that rural land is owned collectively—something not possible for urban dwellers—gives the farmers of China an inherent capitalistic edge. Originally the collective ownership of property led to the rural welfare distribution system. Since the 1990s the PRD cities of Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Foshan have begun reforming this system as a method to speed the conversion of farmland into urban land. These actions transformed the existing ‘collective ownership system’ into what was strategically termed the ‘rural shareholding co-operative system.’ In the administrative region of Dongguan, as a result of implementing these reforms from 2004-2006, nearly 3,000 shareholding entities have been created, taking over the rural collective assets.

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The Central Government proposed to increase its spending on agriculture and rural development to 716.1 billion yuan this year, an increase of 120.6 billion yuan from 2008, in order to reduce the gap between rural and urban residents. Rural inland areas are particularly impoverished: in 2006, only 48 percent of rural households had tap water, and 87 percent did not have flush water.

The government banner reads: “Sex selection is a natural process. Artificial selection will jeopardize social safety.”

There are approximately 30 million migrant workers in Guangdong Province. The recent recession has left approximately 4.8 million unemployed of which 3.5 million have returned to their hometowns.

There are a number of rural co-operatives that have been established. The co-operatives are essentially business entities with shareholders, thus allowing the farmers to conduct business freely with outside investors and developers. One might say that nearly overnight 3,000 new corporations were formed with substantial assets in the form of prime land. Though essentially urban, the official rural status of most of Dongguan has allowed it to develop in a uniquely capitalistic manner far in advance of the other cities in the PRD.

The continuing conversion of rural territory into urban substance through various means is blurring the lines, which define not only their physical boundaries but their economies. The areas which are outside the cities, the large expansive peripheries once occupied solely by rice paddies, are rapidly and simultaneously transforming into a generic territory, neither strictly urban nor rural, dotted with factories, isolated residential towers amidst the farmland. This land is still under the legal designation of ‘rural’ territory and continues to develop in a haphazard manner through coalitions of rural committees, developers, individual farmers and village governments. The growth of this peripheral zone is much faster, more ruthless and seemingly devoid of planning control even compared to the infamous growth of Chinese urban areas. This proto-rural territory is a contested space, organized along territorial lines of traditional farming plots, being speculated simultaneously as new residential communities and high-end industrial parks. As opposed to the past development of cities, which were government organized and led, this wave of development is propagated by individual farmers and village co-operatives eager to catch up.

Qinmo is a small rural village, which is mainly populated by the very young and very old as most young people, men and women, have left to work in the factories or service industries of the PRD’s emerging cities. The set of intertwined relations between the city and the village describes an ecology, always in flux, and liable to change. The current economic recession will no doubt impact several layers within this ecology, its exact ramifications as yet unknown.
Towards ‘Sustainable Communities’?
Community, Consultation and the Compulsory Purchase of the site for the 2012 Olympic Games

According to the International Olympic Committee Evaluation Commission report dated June 6, 2005, London’s ‘Bill Team’s Olympic Games concept and legacy’ were key to its success in securing the 2012 Games. In an article for The Guardian on January 12, 2003, Greater London Authority (GLA) Mayor Ken Livingstone argued that the prospect of an Olympic Games presented London, as it did Barcelona in 1992, with a unique opportunity. This hinged on a view that an Olympic Games had the potential to attract huge levels of investment which could be harnessed towards the long-term regeneration of the East End of London’s “economy and physical environment [and] the transformation of the city’s, and even the nation’s social capital”.

Livingstone reiterated this view pledging a package of ‘legacy’ benefits for London in the wake of the Olympics which include “makin[g] the Olympic park a blueprint for sustainable living.”

Livingstone’s commitments fit within a corpus of British New Labour urban policy relating to the creation and promotion of ‘sustainable communities’. This policy is widely viewed as reflective of a paradigm shift in relation to perceived goals of contemporary urban regeneration. It is developed in response to criticism of the regeneration efforts of the 1980s in particular which, in focusing heavily on growth in terms of the private property markets, have been seen to have failed to adequately tackle issues of social and economic disadvantage. However, debates surrounding new ‘sustainable communities’ policy, its ideological underpinnings and instrumental effects through development practices, are currently throwing up a new set of critical issues. These tend to cohere, firstly, around difficulties in terms of defining ‘sustainable communities’; secondly around how its ideology coheres with ways in which communities are actually constituted; and thirdly, around the efficacy of tools currently proposed for their delivery. It is recognised that ‘sustainable communities’ is a slippery term, understandings of both words having evolved historically and vary according to context, including the contexts in which they are brought together. An acknowledged consequence of this linguistic slipperiness is that although policy provides a directive framework for the development of ‘sustainable communities’, what these actually are and how they may be forged relies on the specific, multiple and evolving circumstances in which urban renewal actors both interpret, apply and develop it.

In relation to the third point above, urban policy geared to the creation of sustainable communities often advocates participatory approaches to regeneration. Whilst public consultation has, in these terms, come to be seen as one of the key tools for achieving ‘sustainable communities’, a quite different instrument advocated concurrently and somewhat ironically for realising physical regeneration at the scale of neighborhoods is the Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO). It is by means of the CPO powers invested in development corporations or regeneration agencies by central UK government that significant transformations represented by mega-projects such as the 2012 Olympic Games and Legacy can be developed on inner urban sites. The site for the Olympic Park is situated within the Lower Lea Valley substantially post-industrialised though nevertheless densely occupied part of East London—and borders the emerging region known as the Thames Gateway, viewed as a major recipient for London’s growing urban population over the next 20-50 years.

Authors writing for UK Government think tank Demos have argued that the UK government’s assertion that the Olympics can help generate ‘sustainable communities’ is, from the outset, contentious. Many Olympic Games sites, far from catalysing regeneration, are populated with white elephants which show little capacity for consistent legacy reuse and take host cities years to repay. Vigor et al argue that questions of where, and for whom benefits might be directed remain significantly unaddressed. In response to this, the broad aim of this essay is to consider the effectiveness of the CPO as a tool in initial stages towards the development of ‘sustainable communities’ as a ‘legacy’ to the 2012 London Olympics. I focus particularly on consultation exercises undertaken by the London Development Agency (LDA, an executive arm of the GLA concerned with urban regeneration) in their process of assembling land for the Olympic Park. The first part provides an overview of the site and the negotiated CPO process led by the LDA. In the second part, I focus on practices of community consultation with five former occupants of the Olympic site who were relocated from it in 2007: Eton Manor Allotments, the business H Forman and Son, the residents of Clay’s Lane and the Waterden Road Allotments, the Ministry of Construction, the Education Bureau, and local village and allotment associations known as Clay’s Lane and the Waterden Road Allotments. Analysis draws on interviews with these former occupants in 2008 and on documentary evidence including the evaluation commission report and consultation documents produced by the LDA. These documents provide an opportunity to consider the CPO and consultation policies as they were intended, and to assess the efficacy of consultation practices in securing ‘sustainable communities’ on the Olympic site. Key points I consider in relation to consultation are: the role and function of the Consultation and Community Evaluation Commission (CCEC); the CPO powers invested in the LDA and their use in relation to the Olympic site; and the specific processes and procedures through which the CPO and consultation were managed. This is followed by a brief assessment of how CPO and consultation processes have been managed by the LDA and to what extent consultation practices have come to be seen as one of the key tools for achieving ‘sustainable communities’. Finally, I conclude an essay on consultation and the development of sustainable communities with a discussion of some of the key issues and challenges that have been raised in the course of the research and the implications that these may have for future consultation practice in the Olympic Park.