



E L E C T R I C D R E A M S

Shenzhen is on a mission to be the blueprint for the city of tomorrow, not least with its advanced electric transportation infrastructure. We explore this innovative and driven Chinese metropolis in a Range Rover Sport PHEV



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A mass of cloud-brushing glass towers perched on the edge of a vast natural harbour; the economic engine room of its nation, with more wealth per capita than anywhere else; and perhaps most fundamentally of all – a city of immigrants. Sound familiar? This isn’t 20th century New York, but 21st century Shenzhen, a city that more than any other defines the new China.

Shenzhen turned 40 at the end of last year. In 1978, it was the first experiment in former leader Deng Xiaoping’s drive to open up China. This sleepy fishing town of 30,000 was chosen because it sits just across the bay from the financial hub of Hong Kong. What began as a simple factory town making most of the ‘Made in China’ items in your house has morphed into a metropolis of 13 million people, home to tech giants such as Huawei, Tencent and Alibaba.

Everything happens fast in Shenzhen, and that includes the future. ‘I can’t remember the last time I carried a wallet,’ is something many locals told us; everything from parking to restaurants to the most humble street food can be bought using your smartphone. The skyscrapers may still be rising at a breathtaking pace, but this is a city where a high quality of life is now everywhere apparent.

The streets are clean and green, the parks are beautiful, and there are plenty of ways for Shenzheners to enjoy their leisure time. People throng glitzy shopping malls, the offbeat creative district of OCT-LOFT, art galleries, museums, and restaurants serving everything from tip-top Sichuan flavours and Beijing-style beef hotpot to sushi and Parisian coffee.

Perhaps most importantly, Shenzhen has mapped out a goal for itself in sustainable urban living. Part of

the International Low Carbon City initiative, it leads the world in electric vehicle infrastructure. Last year, its entire bus and taxi fleets turned electric and it has one of the world’s most comprehensive networks of EV charging points. As a result, the sound of Shenzhen is a purr rather than a roar. What better place to bring the Range Rover Sport Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicle? Welcome to the future – Shenzhen-style.

There’s an ad everywhere in the city that says, ‘Once you come to Shenzhen, you’re a Shenzhener’.

It reveals the super-open essence of the city. We meet Tat Lam of social enterprise start-up Shanzhai City in the newly developed Houhai district, where many of Shenzhen’s steel and glass towers are literally still growing.

Amidst the girders and hard hats, Tat is explaining the unique identity that’s been forged in a few short decades. “Shenzhen is a start-up version of a city,” says Tat. “If it doesn’t innovate, it doesn’t have any value. It’s always looking for the next thing.”

This energy is the result of a mixing of people from all over China, each searching for something new. Lately, that includes everything from craft beer to designer tea with frothy

cheese toppings. Walk the streets of the converted warehouse district of OCT-LOFT and you’ll find a low-lit gym where leather Chesterfield sofas rub shoulders with the weight benches, and the rough-and-ready OCT Contemporary Art Terminal offers a retrospective of sculpture, 3D printing and film from artist Sui Jianguo.

“Shenzhen is a series of urban villages where innovations develop organically,” says Tat. “In that sense, you could think of it as a crowd city. Rather →

Slick and sophisticated, Shenzhen is not only home to the world’s latest trends, but is now setting its own. Top left: social start-up founder Tat Lam, amongst the city’s fast-rising towers





People like tech inventor Robin Wu (top right) and innovation lab founder Seth Li (left) are the driving force behind Shenzhen's rise as a hub of pioneering thinking

than being filled with big mega-projects, here the crowd decides which small-scale innovations work best. Those that are popular will grow."

In the last 20 years, some of these small ideas have become really big. In a two-square-mile block, you'll find the headquarters of tech giants Alibaba, Tencent and Huawei, and the world's leading drone company, DJI. All this development can mean less cool things – dirt, smog and noise. But here again, Shenzhen has some neat answers built into its DNA. Across the waters of Shenzhen Bay, bulbous mountains rise green

out of the heat haze: Hong Kong. Such proximity has brought with it some useful ideas. "Shenzhen has learned a lot from Hong Kong," says Tat. "Hong Kong made its mountain areas into country parks and Shenzhen followed that model. Now, half of all space in Shenzhen is green, which is almost unique in China."

That greenery is not confined to the mountains, which snake into the heart of the central districts. As we cruise the city, in near-silence thanks to the Range Rover Sport PHEV's electric drivetrain, every road is lined with palms and tangles of tropical creepers. Concrete and glass are juxtaposed with deep, shaded undergrowth. Plants even hang from the sides of skyscrapers. Along these green belts, we pull off the highway into car parks where EV charging points stand among the palms and lawns. And there is water everywhere – cascading, spouting or lying in tranquility.

"All these sustainable developments are simply a choice between doing something better or doing nothing," says Tat. "Most cities have the burden of history, of existing infrastructure. Shenzhen can make itself afresh, and the impetus isn't top-down. It's about daring to take risks – and about implementation. Testing these systems in a small city of 100,000 doesn't reveal the value of the innovation. Here you can scale innovation fast for a city of 13 million. That quickly makes new ways of doing things popular."

One man who knows better than most the value of scaling up to the Shenzhen model is Robin Wu. This leading tech pioneer is an embodiment of the city's spirit. We meet in his 22nd-floor office looking out over the golfing greens and glass towers of Houhai.

"For the post-1980s-born who come to Shenzhen, it's a one-way ticket," says Robin. "We have to give it our all. Most of the success stories in Shenzhen are people who come from other provinces, like me." Robin was born in the mountains of Jiangxi province. Ten years ago, he was part of a pioneering group of

IT specialists innovating such smartphone features as dual SIM cards. Today, sitting surrounded by his latest prototypes, he believes that the breakneck period in Shenzhen's story is over.

"The new era is moving towards innovation and world-beating competitiveness, rather than simply manufacturing," says Robin. "We're trying to innovate products that are not in the Western markets yet."

He cradles in his hand his latest innovation, a small credit card-sized device that plugs into your smartphone and converts it – via a projector or screen – into a laptop. It's neat and so simple. Robin's company, MeeGoPad, an offshoot

of traditional manufacturing firm Huajian, is an innovation cell that's about taking creative risks. Many of its projects use crowdfunding as a source of capital.

"MeeGoPad is more like a club," Robin explains. "People of different backgrounds come together and share their knowledge to make something new. The direction of our product line isn't fixed; where there's a need, we try to fulfill it." He looks out over the skyscrapers that surround us. "The Shenzhen spirit is not simply about money," he continues. "It's about deeper motivations – how to improve people's lives and make a better community. Within this area there are 300 listed companies, but they don't forget the small guys, because we were all small guys not so long ago." →

Just across town, Shenzhen Open Innovation Lab is a space that's all about connecting the small guys – the makers of the city – with industrial design companies. “We were founded as a FabLab,” explains project coordinator Seth Li. An idea that began in the US, a FabLab provides project management, website design, hardware design – all the basics to help a maker understand how to make a product by themselves. “We provide fabrication machines to help people prototype their ideas. We’re open to everyone, and we host workshops and lectures. A maker can come here to chat and exchange ideas.”

The exchange of ideas is something that's happening at every level in Shenzhen. We step into the pre-cooled cabin of the Range Rover Sport, which we'd parked at a nearby charge point, and head to Shekou, the city's original port area, to visit Design Society.

“Well, Design Society isn't a direct translation,” explains its deputy director, Rong Zhao. “In Chinese we're called Design Interconnected. It reflects our vision of being a bridge – to the world, to the local community, and between makers and the industrial design companies of the city.”

Eight years ago, China Merchants, a major corporation, enlisted Pritzker Prize-winning Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki to design this cultural centrepiece for the Shekou port area. In December 2017, this very public building opened its doors wide.

“Shekou is a special place,” says Rong. “It's where the process of opening up began. It was a test tube of Shenzhen.” China Merchants began by making a port to connect to the outside world. With Design Society, they're once again seeking global connections.

“There's a transformation taking place, from ‘Made in China’ to ‘Created in China’,” says Rong. “Shenzhen was the very first Chinese city to be awarded UNESCO City of Design in 2008. We set out to build on this with the first initiative to bring a European state museum into China.” The result is a collaboration with London's

Victoria and Albert Museum that includes a permanent V&A Gallery at Design Society and the sharing of ideas. “It's an adventure for both sides,” says Rong. “We've introduced them to design associations, tech firms and schools in Shenzhen. They've brought us ideas like their community-focused Rapid Response Collecting project, where members of the public are asked to donate objects that they feel represent their community. As a result, a Shenzhen school uniform is now part of V&A's permanent collection.”

Even the architecture in which Design Society is housed is about engaging Shenzheners. “Everything is open,” explains Rong. “You can move seamlessly from inside to outside. There are staircases connecting a roof park with the surrounding parks. We've given the land back to the public in its entirety.”

And there is a sense of giving back culturally, too. The most recent exhibition – titled *Craft: The Reset* – celebrated traditional Chinese crafts of paper, furniture and ceramic making, but it celebrates them for, and in, the 21st century Chinese city.

“More than ever, modern fast places shouldn't forget about craft,” says Jovana Bogdanovic, one of Hangzhou-based design trio PINWU, whose celebrated paper chair for Hermes is part of the show. “In many ways, craft influences architecture, design, lifestyle and cuisine.”

This mixing of artistry and innovation is now permeating the city. At the nearby Artron Arts Centre, an installation by renowned Chinese pyrotechnic artist Cai Guo-Qiang is displayed against a backdrop of the world's largest wall of books, a 30m-tall, 50m-long library of art history.

Shenzhen is now shaping a new role for itself in the world through its creative response to technology, urban culture and the need for a sustainable future, and whichever direction that takes, what Shenzhen will never do is stand still. Progress is made and the future is shaped by those who move – and if you move at Shenzhen speed, you'll be a pacesetter. □

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Design Society's Rong Zhao (top) sees her organisation as building cultural bridges to the wider world. Right: the record-setting book wall, at Artron Centre

