

Governance

Innovations in Semi-Formal Tools and Multi-actor Cooperation for Urban Design Governance: The Practice of City Chief Designer System in China

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Abstract: Urban design governance is the process of state-sanctioned intervention in the means and processes of designing the built environment in order to shape both processes and outcomes in a defined public interest, advocating for the establishment of a system of actions and decisions composed of diverse entities. The current development trajectory of Chinese cities has shifted from a period of rapid growth to a phase of high-quality development focusing on stock space, and urban design as a mode of planning and control has received more and more attention. A new form of urban design governance has emerged in key areas of development in some mega-cities—the City Chief Designer system. The City Chief Designer system serves as a semi-formal governance tool, bridging the gap between the hard-power governance of government authority and the soft-power governance of non-governmental organizations. This study divides the development of City Chief Designer system into three stages: the implicit development period, the establishment of the mechanism period, and the optimization and adjustment period. It summarizes the practical role of the system in driving the effectiveness of urban design operations, and investigates the interactive relationships among diverse participants. The study dissects the role of the system as a semi-formal design governance tool, analyzes power shifts and institutional reforms, and discusses the problems of the system, aiming to provide insights for optimizing the governance system of future urban design.

Key Words: Historical institutionalism; Urban design governance; Semi-Formal Tools; Multi-actor cooperation; City Chief Designer system

1 Introduction

By 2023, China's urbanization rate had reached 66.16%. The continued rapid urban development has also brought about a series of new problems and challenges, including inefficient resource utilization, environmental pollution, and loss of regional culture. Currently, China's urban construction is transitioning to high-quality development. Urban design, as a professional means of providing higher-quality urban living environments and public services (Wang and Liang, 2024), has received significant attention in recent years for its ability to meet the demands of high-quality development in the new era. The "Guidelines for Urban Design in Territorial Spatial Planning" issued in 2021 pointed out that "urban design is an important component of the territorial spatial planning system, a vital support for high-quality development of territorial spatial planning, and runs through the entire process of territorial

spatial planning, construction, and management."

At the same time, improving the urban governance system, enhancing urban governance capabilities, and increasing urban quality and competitiveness are trends in urban development. Urban design governance, as an important aspect of improving urban governance capabilities, has gradually attracted attention. Coordinating planning, construction, and management is an important manifestation of the modernization of the urban governance system and governance capabilities. In recent years, various regions in China have carried out a large number of urban design practices, but they face many challenges during the implementation phase, including the ineffective resolution of discrepancies between the implementation of urban design at the meso- and micro-levels and the existing institutional framework.

The position of City Chief Urban Designer represents an important innovative exploration for China in promoting high-quality urban development and transitioning urban design governance. A systematic study from this perspective can provide an intuitive understanding of the semi-formal tools and the composition and relationships of multiple stakeholders in China's urban design governance.

2 Governance turn of urban design in China

2.1 Traditional urban design

The concepts and methods of modern urban design were introduced to China at the end of the last century. Traditional urban development primarily relied on regulatory planning as the main control method, and urban design mainly followed architectural traditions, with morphological design directly affecting urban spatial forms.

2.2 Urban design regulation

Due to the involvement of a series of public interest motivations in urban design, state intervention has become increasingly widespread, and the depth and manner of state intervention have also been continuously changing. The normative guidance approach, which is too extensive and lacks targeted regulatory planning as a control method, has brought about problems such as resource waste, infringement of public interests, and environmental pollution. Urban design is considered to be able to optimize these issues, and its importance as a public policy has begun to emphasize the implementation of design control based on public spaces (Wang and Liang, 2024). During this period, a series of urban design transmission mechanisms such as technical guidelines and additional regulations emerged. The principles of urban design were incorporated into local urban planning technical management regulations or directly into regulatory planning. As technical management regulations and regulatory planning are the statutory basis for local scheme review and management, the incorporated urban design principles also have a certain legal effect, guiding and controlling specific development and construction activities to a certain extent. However, this model faces implementation issues

such as technical formalization and blurred lines between rigidity and flexibility in urban design control, and its effectiveness is not as expected.

2.3 Urban design governance

The current role of the Chinese government is shifting from directly intervening in economic and social affairs to providing public services, formulating rules, and maintaining fairness as regulators. It emphasizes government efficiency and responsibility, promotes public-private cooperation, enhances transparency and public participation, and is undergoing a transformation from management to governance. National recognized interventions are implemented in the methods and processes of built environment design to ensure that the design process and results better serve the public interest, and it is recognized that the process of design governance should be continuous and permeate through all stages of a project from inception to completion.

In response to the difficulties in coordinating interests, vague evaluation standards, inadequate technical responses, and difficulty in grasping intervention intensity in the urban design operation process, the renowned British urban design scholar Matthew Carmona proposed the concept of "design governance" in 2016. Design governance is the application and extension of governance concepts in the field of urban design, providing references for the development of transitional period urban design in China (Feng, 2021). Urban design governance is the process of state-sanctioned intervention in the means and processes of designing the built environment in order to shape both processes and outcomes in a defined public interest (Carmona, 2016). This concept advocates for establishing an action and decision-making system composed of diverse actors such as experts, investors, and citizens around the government, and optimizing the urban design operation process through formal and informal governance tools (Zhu and Tang, 2019). Essentially, it explores the basic principles of state intervention in urban design.

2.4 Semi-formal urban design tools

In the field of public policy research, government tools refer to various instruments, methods, and actions adopted by decision-makers to guide environmental and organizational actors in achieving specific policy outcomes. Since the 1990s, the rise of neoliberalism has led to a proliferation of available government tools, with tools or means to address public policy issues rapidly spreading. Some scholars have used typological approaches to study and classify existing government tools (Hood, 1983; McDonnell and Elmore, 1987; Schneider and Ingram, 1990; Salamon, 2000; Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2007). Schuster proposed five categories that could represent the "implementation of government urban design policies," namely operations, regulations, incentives, establishment, and information (Schuster, 1997). Based on this, Carmona categorizes design governance tools into formal and informal. Traditional formal design governance is primarily led by government departments, utilizing formal government tools such as laws, regulations, technical standards, and public policies to intervene in urban

material environments through planning and design, thereby ensuring that the design process and results align with the public interest. It is a "hard" governance approach relying on government power. Informal design governance tools represent methods used by third-party organizations, other than the government and the public, to indirectly participate in the urban design process. These methods lie between "traditional" design management and "private" corporate management, lacking legal safeguards and constraints. They constitute a "soft" governance approach intervening in the design and implementation process of the built environment. (Table 1)

Since urban design implementation in China is integrated into the planning management process, it possesses most attributes of formal design governance. However, due to the government's not necessarily possessing the strong professional capabilities required for urban design, and the relatively low level of development of non-governmental institutions in China, there exists a "semi-formal" design governance state (Wang, 2022). The government commissions professional technical organizations or teams to complement formal design governance, authorizing non-governmental department teams or organizations as leading actors in the multi-stakeholder governance network, and employing a mix of formal and informal design governance tools for design intervention. Semi-formal design governance practices currently emerging include the Chief Urban Designer system, community planner system, etc.

Table 1 Characteristics of formal, semi-formal, and informal design governance tools

	Governance entities	Governance tools	Governance approaches
Formal design governance	Government planning management departments take the lead.	Primarily utilizes formal tools such as laws, regulations, technical standards, departmental regulations, and administrative permits.	Relies on the power-based "hard" governance approach.
Semi-formal design governance	Non-governmental public institutions, but government-funded.	Combines formal and informal design governance tools.	A "flexible" governance approach between "hard" and "soft".
Informal design governance	Non-governmental organizations or citizen groups.	Primarily relies on informal governance resources and tools such as research and advocacy.	A "soft" governance approach relying on informal resources.

3 The Connotation and evolution of the City Chief Designer System

3.1 The connotation of the City Chief Designer System

The City Chief Designer system originated from the need to address the temporal and spatial separation issues in urban design formulation and implementation. Similar practices include the collaborative system of architects in the United States, coordinated architects in

France, expert advisory teams in Germany, and chief supervising designers in Japan. The City Chief Designer system entails local governments hiring experts and their planning and design teams to serve as regional city chief designers. These designers, commissioned by the government, leverage their professional technical expertise to provide services such as technical coordination, professional consultation, and technical review during the urban design and implementation processes in designated areas. This ensures that public interests are not infringed upon and that designs are effectively implemented. Essentially, this system serves as a flexible supplement under the rigid top-down control regime of government management departments. It aims to promote effective coordination between management and technology through institutional improvements, thereby better safeguarding core elements such as public interests, exhibiting characteristics of semi-formal design governance tools.

3.2 The evolution of the City Chief Designer System

This study takes historical institutionalism as its analytical perspective and divides the development of the Chief Urban Designer system in China into three stages: the implicit development period, the establishment of the mechanism period, and the optimization and adjustment period.

3.2.1 The implicit development period (Before 2018)

The development goals of cities, and even the phased development goals of cities, are continuously being adjusted, and the implementation paths face a series of choices, which is an important test for the subsequent services of urban design. For some key development areas of cities, the involvement of local planning and design teams is often long-term and may involve many different projects. The goals and orientations of planning and design also evolve continuously. For example, in the Shenzhen Bay Super Headquarters Base in Shenzhen, the Shenzhen branch of the China Urban Planning and Design Institute has been involved in a series of projects including protection and development planning, conceptual planning, and urban design over nearly twenty years. It witnessed the evolution of its positioning from a single "coastal urban residential area" (2001) to a compound "coastal cultural and business centre" (2004), and then to a "super headquarters base" (2007) (Figure 1). Although there is no specific employment contract for this long-term tracking of planning and design, the planning and design team effectively plays the role of city chief designers in overall planning and coordination for the region. The service usually accompanies dynamic planning and design work, including from planning intent to design blueprint, and then to the process of implementation construction (Wang, et al, 2022).

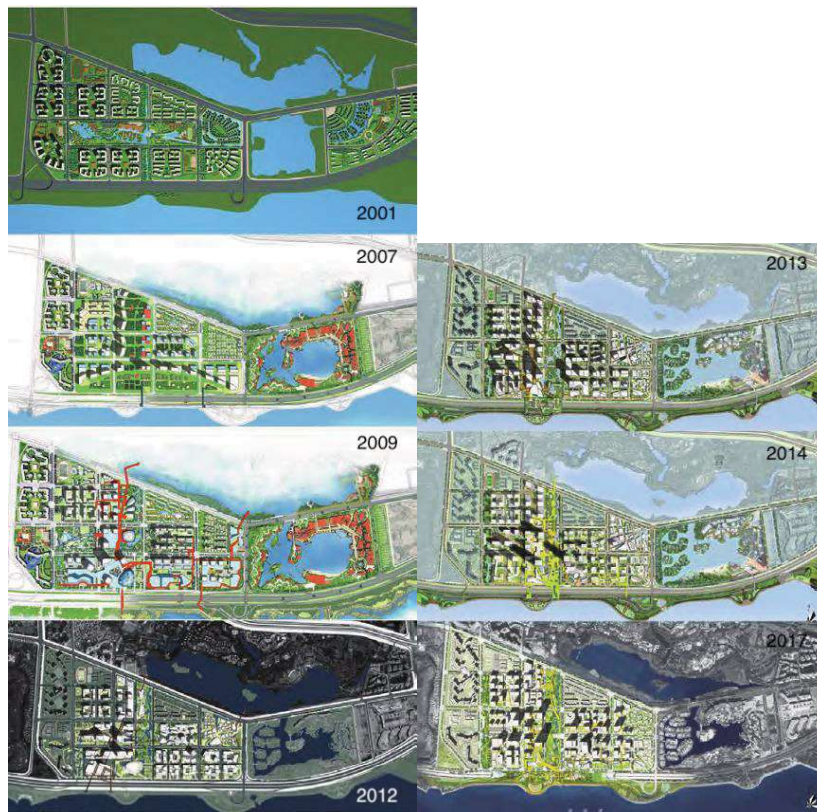


Figure 1 Changes in the Shenzhen Bay Super Headquarters Base Scheme Over Twenty Years

3.2.2 The establishment of the mechanism period (From 2018 to present)

In 2018, the Urban Planning and Land Resources Commission of Shenzhen Municipality issued the "Shenzhen Key Area Chief Urban Designer Trial Measures" (hereinafter referred to as the "Trial Measures"), establishing the City Chief Designer system in key areas and proposing relevant requirements for selection, service, and management, aiming to strengthen the planning, design, construction, and management standards of urban key areas through institutional establishment. Subsequently, Zhengzhou, Wuhan, and Foshan have successively promulgated implementation measures for the City Chief Designer system, and Longgang District of Shenzhen has formulated the more detailed "Implementation Rules for the City Chief Designer System in Longgang District" by referring to the "Trial Measures" of Shenzhen Municipality and combining with the actual situation of Longgang District. Meanwhile, the City Chief Designer system has been practiced in various regions, typical examples include the Shenzhen Bay Super Headquarters Base and the International Convention and Exhibition Centre in Shenzhen, the International Financial City and Pazhou West Area in Guangzhou, and

the West Bank Media Harbor, Expo B Zone, and Hongqiao Business Centre in Shanghai. These practices aim to improve the overall development and construction quality of regions by employing City Chief Designer teams mainly composed of planning and design units. However, there are significant differences in specific work content and practices among these practices.

Due to the lack of unified institutional documents issued by higher authorities, there are significant differences in the exploration and institutional provisions of the City Chief Designer system in key areas across different regions, mainly reflected in the service targets, work content, and whether the land has been granted (Table 2).

Table 2 Relevant institutional documents and requirements of the City Chief Designer system in key areas across different regions

City Name	Document Name	Release Date	Main Content	City Chief Designer Responsibilities	Service Period	Whether participation in relevant design bidding and competitions is permitted
Shenzhen	Shenzhen Key Area Chief Urban Designer Trial Measures	2018	Implement the City Chief Designer system in key areas throughout the city, determine selection and management tasks	Provide technical coordination, professional consultation, and technical review services to construction management departments	3 years	Yes, but the scale of buildings undertaken should not exceed 15% of the total planned new construction in the area
Zhengzhou	Zhengzhou Key Area Chief Urban Designer Trial Measures	2021	Employ City Chief Designer in 32 core blocks and other key development areas of the city, determine selection, service, and management requirements	Provide administrative decision-making assistance to planning and construction competent authorities, including technical coordination, professional consultation, and technical review services	3 years	Yes

Wuhan	Wuhan Key Functional Area City Chief Designer System	2021	Implement the City Chief Designer system in 14 key functional areas, the City Chief Designer team will provide long-term urban design guidance and technical support for project proposals	—	—	—
Longgang District of Shenzhen	Implementation Rules for the City Chief Designer System in Longgang District	2021	Applicable to major planning studies, technical standards issuance, and project construction implementation in the district. Determine responsibilities, work content, requirements, and processes, and propose evaluation criteria for the Chief Designer team	Regional-level planning coordination, core control area planning control transmission, and project-level quality improvement	3 years	Yes, registration is required
Foshan	Foshan Key Area Chief Designer Trial Measures	2022	In key areas determined by administrative agencies based on the city's development priorities and the distribution of construction projects, determine selection and management tasks	Provide decision-making consultation to relevant functional departments, including technical coordination, professional consultation, and technical review services	2 years	Yes, but the scale of buildings undertaken should not exceed 15% of the total planned new construction in the area

3.2.3 The optimization and adjustment period (From now on)

China's urban development has transitioned from the traditional period of incremental

growth to an era of stock development, where large-scale new projects are becoming increasingly scarce, and urban renewal is becoming the mainstream of future urban development in China. Although the origin of the City Chief Designer system and its current stage primarily apply to large-scale new construction projects, its important role in effectively implementing planning and design intentions, safeguarding public interests, and improving regional quality remains significant in urban renewal projects. While maintaining its characteristic advantages, how to make adjustments to better adapt to the needs of projects in the era of urban renewal is an important challenge that the City Chief Designer system will face in the future.

Furthermore, contracts for City Chief Designer typically involve large amounts of money (for example, the contract amount for the City Chief Designer of the Shenzhen Bay Super Headquarters Base, with a planned land area of 1.17 square kilometres, is 58 million yuan, whereas the contract amount for the overall planning of Shenzhen Municipality is only 31.57 million yuan). However, in recent years, local finances across the country have gradually tightened, making it difficult to support such large expenditures. History has shown that when resources are scarce, politically expedient measures may overlook the significant role played by design governance tools. Therefore, how to optimize the development of the City Chief Designer system in the context of limited local government financial resources in the future becomes crucial.

4 The multi-actor cooperation of City Chief Designer System and the existing issues

4.1 Participating actors and their main roles

The work of the City Chief Designer system spans the entire process of project planning, construction, management, and operation, involving complex coordination among multiple stakeholders and disciplines. Due to the lack of unified technical and implementation standards for the City Chief Designer system, there are significant differences in exploration and innovation across regions, leading to diverse compositions of participating actors. However, the main actors typically include government entities, City Chief Designer teams, construction unit, land developers, land design units, and the public (Figure 2).

Taking the participation of actors in the City Chief Designer system at the Shenzhen Bay Super Headquarters Base as an example, government entities include the Housing and Construction Bureau of Shenzhen Municipality, key projects management office in Bao'an District and so on. The composition of the City Chief Designer team includes a Development and Construction Command, responsible for decision-making and approval; an office within the municipal planning and construction management department, responsible for coordinating administrative tasks among various relevant departments; Shenzhen Investment Holdings Co., Ltd., responsible for all public construction and operations; and the City Chief Designer team, responsible for coordinating technical teams from different design units, comprehensive transportation teams, municipal teams, landscape teams, and other professional teams,

effectively integrating the results of multiple disciplines to achieve the best overall outcome. Land developers include 15 companies such as OPPO, JD.com, China Merchants Bank, Vanke, and Tanyin, etc., while land design units include 11 companies such as Foster, GMP, and Zaha Hadid Architects, etc. It can be seen that the implementation of the City Chief Designer system in key urban areas involves such a wide range of stakeholders and a large scope of work complexity.

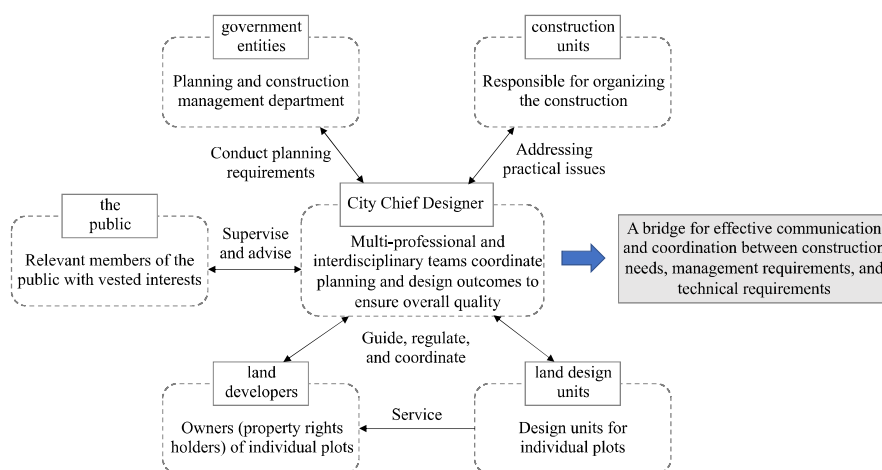


Figure 2 Participating subjects and their relationships

4.2 Existing issues

4.2.1 Unclear boundaries

As the City Chief Designer system is still in the early exploration stage, there is limited and insufficient in-depth research regarding its conceptual boundaries, work boundaries, and the flexibility boundaries of control. This lack of clarity has led to numerous problems in the actual implementation.

Regarding work boundaries, although the implementation methods in various regions have roughly defined the work content of the City Chief Designer, local governments often expect the City Chief Designer to address all issues in project development and construction after hiring them. Moreover, they hope that the City Chief Designer can devote all their time to the project. However, many aspects of the project are not within the expertise of the City Chief Designer, and the City Chief Designer team usually handles many other projects simultaneously. These issues arise due to the lack of clearly defined work boundaries.

Regarding flexibility boundaries, compared to regulatory planning, the control elements of the City Chief Designer system have greater flexibility. This characteristic of design control

is both a feature of design guidance and a conflict focal point in the scheme review process. Excessive control by the City Chief Designer may affect the creativity of landowners and design units, leading to homogenization of design schemes. However, insufficient control may be exploited by developers, compromising public interests and public spaces. Therefore, the lack of clarity in the flexibility boundaries of City Chief Designer control will lead to many problems, which is one of the key issues that need to be addressed in the current system optimization.

4.2.2 Difficulty in coordinating various actors

On the one hand, the institutional factors determine the close relationship between the City Chief Designer and the government, which puts this system in a dilemma to some extent. The City Chief Designer is very susceptible to the influence of government departments in the decision-making process, making them appear weak. Although the City Chief Designer seems to have considerable power, they are still part of the government's design department and receive funding from the government, which at least partially restricts their independence. The decisions of the City Chief Designer may be interfered with by the decisions of the management department, and the hiring party hope that the City Chief Designer is an independent third-party technical entity, but it is difficult to achieve in reality without considering the intentions of the higher authorities.

On the other hand, due to the complexity of the interests of multiple stakeholders, various actors may hinder the decisions of the City Chief Designer. For example, architects may perform poorly in scheme reviews, government decisions may be influenced, other design institutions may not support due to competitive relationships, and developers may feel that their autonomy is diminished. These stakeholders may oppose the City Chief Designer system and the decisions made by City Chief Designers due to considerations of their own interests.

5 Conclusions

The transition from a single decision-maker to collaboration, from top-down power relations to interactive power relations, and from static management to dynamic and continuous governance make the City Chief Designer system an important innovative exploration for China to promote high-quality urban development and transition in urban design governance. The pursuit of better design by the City Chief Designer system is not limited to the narrow aesthetic level but involves comprehensive considerations of functionality, sustainability, economic feasibility, social equity, and more. The City Chief Designer system has established a mechanism that enables the needs of various fields and departments to be better coordinated, leading to better decision-making, promotion of key project implementation, efficiency improvement, and quality enhancement. However, as the City Chief Designer system is still in its early stages of establishment, many complex issues exist in terms of both system and implementation, requiring further optimization to meet the needs of development. This article takes the City Chief Designer system as a starting point, introduces the concept of design

governance, analyses the connotation of China's urban design governance transition, semi-formal governance tools, and the composition and role of participating actors, hoping to lay the foundation for further exploration of China's design governance and the development direction of future urban design governance.

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