

Urban Design for Existing Urban Areas from a “Park City” Perspective: The Zhangcun River Area, Qingdao

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Abstract

As an advanced model of urban development embodying the principles of ecological civilization and high-quality development, the “park city” is increasingly being implemented in the context of urban transformation and stock-based regeneration. This transition places new demands on urban-design methods and expands their value. Taking the Zhangcun River Area in Qingdao as a case, this paper integrates park-city development with the redevelopment and qualitative improvement of existing urban areas. It emphasizes ecological empowerment and local character and examines urban-design methods at multiple scales and across multiple dimensions, from regional ecological structure to detailed place-making. The study is intended to inform the localized application and broader implementation of park-city development.

Keywords: park city; existing urban areas; urban design; ecological empowerment; locality

Since the concept of the “park city” was first proposed in Chengdu in 2018, it has entered public discourse as a new paradigm of urban development in the era of ecological civilization. In April of the same year, the vision was further articulated as a city that functions as one large park, allowing residents to step outside as though entering their own garden. This people-centered conception not only offers a vivid image of the city in the new era but also identifies a new path for China’s transition from incremental expansion to the regeneration of existing urban areas.

As the birthplace and a national demonstration area of the concept, Chengdu has played a pioneering role in theoretical innovation and planning practice. Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Qingdao, Zibo, and other cities have also introduced related plans. Most existing initiatives, however, focus on citywide systems and action plans; few directly connect park-city construction with urban-design strategies and methods. Urban design is an important component of the territorial spatial planning system and a key approach to creating high-quality living environments and attractive places [1]. Its strengths in optimizing spatial structure, continuing historical context, organizing functions and activities, and guiding urban character can improve the governance of spatial and environmental quality during urban transformation [2]. It therefore provides important support for high-quality park-city development. Drawing on the project submitted by Academician Duan Jin’s team to the 2023 urban-design competition for the Zhangcun River Area, this paper examines the application of urban-design methods to existing urban areas from a park-city perspective.

1. The Park-City Concept and Its Application in the Era of Stock-Based Development

1.1 Definition and Connotations of the Park City

A park city is an advanced urban form that comprehensively embodies the development principles of the ecological-civilization era. It is defined as a composite system that organically integrates park form with urban space; coordinates spaces of production, living, and ecology; combines nature, economy, society, and culture; and achieves a high degree of harmony among people, city, environment, and industry. It represents a new model of sustainable urban development for the new era [3].

Earlier concepts—including the garden city, landscaped city, pastoral city, shanshui city, and forest city—represented successive explorations of urban development based on harmonious coexistence between people and nature. Each promoted, in different ways, the integration of human-made elements and the natural environment. The park city builds on this legacy but is not merely a terminological variation. Compared with conventional eco-oriented urban practice, it places greater emphasis on converting ecological value, ensuring equitable urban sharing, and improving public well-being [4]. Its essence is often summarized as “one public foundation and three forms of life”: ecology, daily life, and production are all organized on a shared public base [3]. This formulation underscores the public interest as the premise and core of a beautiful city built for its people.

The park-city concept also calls for three shifts in development thinking: from “industry-city-people” to “people-city-industry”; from “building parks in the city” to “building the city in a park”; and from “constructing space” to “creating scenarios” [3]. These shifts reorient development logic, the relationship between city and park, and the conversion of ecological value. They are better suited to China’s current stage of development and have demonstrative value that can be adapted and replicated.

1.2 Interaction between Park-City Construction and Stock-Based Development

As urbanization enters its second half, urban development is moving from large-scale expansion to the regeneration and more efficient use of existing urban areas. The emphasis has shifted to high-quality growth,

high-quality living, and resilient urban space. These priorities closely match the core logic of the park city. If the transition from incremental expansion to stock improvement addresses the shift from “whether something exists” to “whether it is good,” park-city construction offers a framework for answering “how it can become better” through the reshaping of urban value.

Although the park city is a forward-looking planning concept, few opportunities remain to construct it on a blank slate. In most cities, implementation must begin with complex and mixed existing spaces: inefficient industrial and warehouse districts, declining commercial areas, aging neighborhoods and urban villages, deteriorated waterfronts, historic conservation areas, parks and squares requiring renewal, and residual urban land. Park-city construction can therefore be coupled with urban renewal through shared objectives, pathways, and implementation methods. In the process of integrating park form and urban space, the transformation of existing areas can be treated as a strategic opportunity for park-city construction; the park-city strategy can provide an overarching framework for redevelopment, while existing spaces become the practical instruments through which that strategy is realized [5].

Whether redevelopment involves demolition and reconstruction, comprehensive renovation, maintenance, or functional conversion, the use of existing spatial resources is closely related to future urban form, functional mix, and local character [6]. A top-down approach should begin with a citywide perspective: resources should be integrated and optimized under the park-city strategy; an overall spatial and ecological framework should be established; and the direction, role, and sequence of interventions in existing areas should be defined under shared development goals and action plans. A bottom-up approach should regard existing space as a growing, life-cycle process rather than a finished object. As natural processes evolve and urban life gradually enters, these spaces can become “spatial generators” of park-oriented transformation [5]. Fine-grained design can in turn revise and optimize the overall structure. Through reciprocal interaction between macro and micro scales, ecological value can be continuously activated and harmony among people, city, environment, and industry can be achieved.

1.3 Pathways for Urban Design of Existing Areas from a Park-City Perspective

The 2021 *Guidelines for Urban Design in Territorial Spatial Planning* confirmed urban design as an integral part of the territorial spatial planning system and emphasized its value for people-centered and high-quality development. The guidelines also clarified changes in the content, methods, and institutional role of urban design under stock-based development.

Urban design in the era of expansion focused largely on shaping and displaying physical form and often took the form of an idealized blueprint. Conventional morphology-led methods are increasingly unable to resolve the complex social, economic, and spatial negotiations found in existing urban areas [7]. By contrast, urban design for stock-based development focuses on detailed and dynamic design, regulation, implementation, and operation at intermediate and micro scales. Its objectives are to prioritize public value and improve the substantive quality of human settlements. As Chen Cangjie and colleagues noted, the emphasis is shifting from the construction of “grand scenes” toward the everyday spaces of “ordinary narratives” [8].

From a park-city perspective, the overall direction should be the park-oriented transformation of existing space. Urban-design interventions at different scales can optimize the allocation of spatial resources, empower sites through design, and gradually connect points into corridors and corridors into networks, integrating park form with urban functions. The resulting “grand scene” of ecological civilization is a city built within a park—indeed, a city that functions as one large park. This is a creative, dynamic, and long-term process in which localized interventions accumulate under a shared goal. Bottom-up urban design should be continually adjusted to reflect public needs, replacing rigid control with negotiation and adaptation [9]. Four priorities are therefore proposed.

1.3.1 Coordinate Citywide Park-City Development and Use Detailed Design to Support Top-Level Strategy and City Branding

Each city’s distinctive matrix of mountains, water, forests, farmland, lakes, and grasslands provides the foundation for park-city development. Chengdu’s Ring Ecological Park, for example, established an ecological security pattern during the era of rapid expansion through ecological zoning and legislation. When the city entered the phase of park-city construction and quality improvement, this foundation enabled the outer ring to connect mountains, water, and farmland and the inner ring to integrate urban and park spaces. It thereby supported a citywide park-city system and provided a consistent value orientation, analytical framework, and spatial carrier for more detailed design (Figure 1).

Similarly, Shenzhen's "Mountains and Sea Connected City" action plan links an ecological framework of "one ridge, one belt, and twenty corridors" to integrate mountains, sea, city, and parks. This is both a localized expression of the park-city concept and an important guide for embedding natural ecological systems within a high-density urban environment and advancing a green transformation of development.



Figure 1. From Chengdu Ring Ecological Park construction to a citywide park-city system.

Source: Compiled by the authors from the Chengdu Beautiful and Livable Park City Plan and the Chengdu Ring Ecological Park construction scheme.

1.3.2 Convert Green and Ecological Value to Resolve Complex Existing Problems, Support Old-New Symbiosis, and Enhance Urban Value

Highlighting and converting ecological value in urban renewal is both a refined method of governing existing space and an effective way to improve the living environment. In aging neighborhoods, underused green potential can be transformed into pocket parks and distinctive streets that accommodate public activities and recreation. In inefficient commercial and industrial areas, new uses can be combined with public landscapes, interactive installations, and art to enrich park-based aesthetic experience. Residual spaces beneath elevated roads can become sports parks, children's playgrounds, art spaces, or public-service facilities. Locally unwanted facilities such as wastewater-treatment plants and substations can be redesigned as educational parks, turning urban "pain points" into visible assets. Urban design should therefore coordinate park-city construction with urban renewal, revitalize idle and inefficient land, and transform residual spaces into high-value urban corners.

1.3.3 Emphasize Human Experience, Urban Spirit, and Local Cultural Continuity through Differentiated "Park+" Spatial Operations Shared by Residents and Visitors

Park-city development in existing areas should not be reduced to increasing the number of parks or improving greenery. It should discover, reinterpret, and convert cultural, historical, and landscape resources through "Park+" spatial operations, creating highly identifiable, functionally integrated, and distinctive new-economy scenarios. This requires site-specific and type-specific strategies supported by targeted, fine-grained design.

The Jinling Style Romantic Center in Nanjing, for example, inserted twelve small, highly refined landscape buildings and artistic uses into a conventional lakeside park under the principles of revealing mountains, opening views to water, and allowing greenery to permeate. The combination of nature and art created a culture-and-tourism project centered on romance. Xiahe Park in Hangzhou preserved, displayed, and adaptively reused former oil-storage facilities beside the Grand Canal, creating a cultural landmark that integrates land and water transport, cultural experience, sightseeing, and recreation. Hefei Luogang Park retained the former airport runway and buildings and transformed a transport hub into a super ecological hub with diverse leisure and consumption settings. The renewal of Jiaozi Avenue in Chengdu used a roughly 50-m-wide green belt and building setback to introduce commercial pavilions, while landmarks such as the Jiaozi Ring pedestrian bridge and the Tianfu Twin Towers helped create a park-style street for new consumption, urban events, and public celebration. Each case has become both a recognizable urban landmark and a setting for everyday civic leisure, enabling residents and visitors to share the space.

1.3.4 Use the Flexibility and Adaptability of Urban Design to Implement New Park-City Values and Fine-Grained Governance

The technical advantage of urban design lies in its flexibility and its capacity to improve spatial and environmental quality in response to particular sites, needs, and problems. In the era of ecological civilization, urban design should embed human-made beauty within the authenticity of nature. This value orientation is consistent with the park city. Practice can incorporate recent research such as park-city indices and technical standards, apply contemporary green-design methods and smart technologies, remain at the forefront of park-city experimentation, and feed lessons back into territorial spatial planning.

Urban design should also coordinate stakeholders and professional disciplines, explore new development models, contribute to public policy, anticipate dynamic change, reserve adaptive capacity, and continuously revise schemes as issues emerge during construction and operation.

2. Urban-Design Practice in the Zhangcun River Area, Qingdao

2.1 Project Background

The Zhangcun River Area lies near the geometric center of Qingdao's eastern urban area and in the northwest of Laoshan District. It is a long, narrow river valley enclosed by mountains on three sides. Qingdao's territorial spatial plan identifies science, technology, innovation, and services as its principal development direction. Together with the adjacent Jinjialing Financial District to the south, it forms the eastern urban center (Figure 2).

In recent years, industrial upgrading along Zhuzhou Road and the relocation of urban villages on both banks of the Zhangcun River released approximately 10,000 mu of land (1 mu = 667 m²). The area consequently became the largest redevelopment site in Qingdao's main urban district and a focus of high-quality development. In 2023, the Laoshan District Government launched an urban-design competition. One of the submitted schemes—while following the development principle of “one priority and three high standards”—responded to urban transformation and changing economic conditions by adopting a path distinct from conventional design practice. Starting from the area's ecological base and landscape resources, it used the park-city perspective to explore ecological-civilization values and the localized application of park-city development.

2.2 Reframing the Overall Development Approach around the Park City

Qingdao is a well-known coastal city whose planning and construction have been strongly oriented toward the sea, producing a spatial character shaped by mountain, sea, islands, city, and bay. In comparison, the low hills and river valleys extending from the western foothills of Laoshan—including the Licun and Zhangcun rivers—developed more organically from villages into towns.

The design first reassessed the site's value and recognized that its ecological base and landscape resources were fundamental to spatial character and environmental quality. Historically, industry developed along Zhuzhou Road while urban villages occupied the riverbanks, creating a fragmented structure in which different areas operated independently. The overall environment, central functions, and ecological value of mountain and river remained underdeveloped. Earlier design proposals lacked a regional perspective and largely reflected the expansion-era preference for self-contained, strongly centralized, large-scale, high-density, and modern clusters. They did not adequately respond to the holistic spatial values of ecological civilization.

The new design therefore asked how a late-developing river valley could assume a new urban role in the ecological-civilization era. Using the park city as its value framework, it proposed four shifts.

2.2.1 Shift in Development Mission: From a Site-Centered to a Citywide Perspective

The project uses the area's late-development advantage to establish a new river-valley-centered paradigm in Qingdao's urban-development history. The Zhangcun River Area should perform its role at the geometric center of the larger landscape structure. A “landscape courtyard” integrating scientific innovation, community life, and ecological interest can become a public and ecological anchor, link surrounding valleys, and support the transition of eastern Qingdao from a north-south development axis toward integrated sea-river development. This approach promotes citywide coordination and balance.

2.2.2 Shift in Development Logic: From “Industry-City-People” to “People-City-Industry”

Given the area's existing industry-first trajectory, the design reasserts that people are the core of the city. Development should be oriented toward attracting talent and should prioritize spatial quality, the living environment, and the differentiated needs of multiple groups.

2.2.3 Shift in Development Carrier: From Functional Orientation to Ecological-Value Orientation

Rather than allowing functions or industries to determine spatial form, the project begins with ecological restoration and the conversion of ecological value. Urban renewal becomes an opportunity to create settings in which functions and scenery are integrated throughout the area and to establish a demonstration zone for the park economy. Environmental quality becomes the area's principal competitive advantage.

2.2.4 Shift in Development Content: From Westernized Modernity to Local Identity and Place-Based Development

Whereas Qingdao's waterfront combines Chinese and Western influences with an international modern image, the transformation of the Zhangcun River Area should begin with its own ecological, cultural, and settlement characteristics. Locality and contemporary innovation should be combined to create a new-value space rooted in regional cultural context and local aesthetics of inhabitation.



Figure 2. Location of the Zhangcun River Area and overall spatial concept.

Source: Nanjing Southeast University Urban Planning and Design Institute Co., Ltd., submission to the Urban Design Competition for the Zhangcun River Area, Laoshan District, Qingdao (2023).

2.3 Urban-Design Strategies Oriented toward Park-City Construction

Building on these shifts, the design established the vision of “a landscape courtyard where scientific innovation, community, and everyday delight converge; and a valley park where blue, green, and cultural networks coexist.” From macro to micro scales, it addressed the area's stock-based conditions and implementation requirements through multi-dimensional strategies.

2.3.1 City Scale: Construct a Complete Habitat Connecting Mountains, Sea, and Rivers and Improve Qingdao's Overall Park-City Structure

Ecological analysis revealed that rapid urban expansion had progressively eroded habitat, reduced ecological space, and diminished biodiversity. Previous studies also indicated that the site is affected by a secondary “rain-island effect” in Laoshan District, increasing the likelihood of waterlogging during the flood season and extreme rainfall [10].

The design first used catchment analysis to identify ecological rainwater corridors linking the foothills and river. Portions of historic drainage channels were restored where existing conditions allowed, forming a large “sponge” in the valley lowlands for stormwater detention and flood management. Existing landscape components, land-cover data, and terrain were then analyzed to identify potential ecological corridors. Their overlay produced a habitat network conducive to local flora and fauna and to human-nature coexistence. At the city scale, this network establishes ecological anchors and a green public-space system connecting mountains, sea, and rivers. It creates a healthy and sustainable “landscape courtyard” habitat and fills the river-valley gap in Qingdao's park-city strategy, which otherwise focuses on a bay-centered structure of bays, mountains, corridors, belts, and nodes [11].

The project also planned a regional city-walk route—“up the mountains, down to the sea, and leisurely through the valley”—linking mountain, sea, and river landscapes with historical, cultural, and tourism resources. This improves the visibility and experience of regional landscape assets and integrates relationships among culture, nature, city, and ecology.

2.3.2 District Scale: Continue the Wisdom of River-Valley Settlement and Integrate Park Form with Adaptable Settlement Clusters

Qingdao's modern history and strong planning interventions produced a distinctive urban form closely related to the sea and characterized by hybrid Chinese and Western cultures. The less-urbanized valleys west of Laoshan developed differently. Compared with steep mountain terrain, the gently sloping terraces beside branching mountain streams offered better access, flatter land, proximity to water, and favorable conditions for building and cultivation. They therefore became preferred sites for traditional local settlements. Eighteen villages were distributed along the meandering Zhangcun River, generally backing onto mountains and facing water in compact clusters. The local saying “seven Zhangcun villages, eight Xiazhuang villages, and scattered Hangezhuang” captures this settlement geography.

Because the park city seeks harmony among nature, city, and people, it also provides a framework for translating Chinese cultural concepts into contemporary human settlements [4]. The project drew on Duan Jin's long-term research on “spatial genes” [12-14]—relatively stable spatial-combination patterns produced through

long-term interaction among urban form, natural environment, society, and culture—to shift planning from universal templates toward place-based design.

The analysis summarized the local settlement logic as “river valleys and streams nurturing terrace settlements.” It extracted the spatial genes of gently sloping terraces and settlement clusters and identified six groups of characteristics: terrace-based siting and respect for nature; compact and orderly overall form; human-scale internal environments adapted to climate; north-south courtyard buildings following terrain; direct streets and lanes connecting to the river; and village-neighbor interaction and riverside markets.

The design continued these patterns by embedding flexible settlement clusters within the habitat network and park system. It avoided continuous, strongly aggregated megaclusters and instead emphasized group character within the ecological and landscape setting. Clusters merge with nature and connect conveniently to riverbanks and mountains. Internally, they combine order and flexibility, mix functions, express local identity, and accommodate contemporary social interaction. Their cultural content can be further developed through consistent spatial elements that reinforce community belonging and identity. Each cluster can optimize existing uses and accommodate incremental growth according to its dominant function. As relatively small development units, clusters can adopt POD, EOD, TOD, and other models and can flexibly adjust uses and construction timing in response to economic conditions, policy change, and future innovation (Figure 3).

2.3.3 System Construction: Integrate Urban Functions and Experience through a Valley Park of Blue, Green, and Cultural Networks

Traditional urban parks are often separated from surrounding functional districts by clear green boundaries and have limited interaction and permeability. Their functions are commonly dominated by ecology and recreation. The park city instead emphasizes multifunctional green space and coordination between the urban green-space and park systems and the wider spatial structure [15]. Multi-level and multi-dimensional integration between park and city is therefore essential.

Centered on the Zhangcun River, the project constructs a valley park in which blue, green, and cultural networks coexist. It replaces the conventional parallel arrangement of a “park belt plus urban-function belt” with a series of “finger-shaped park complexes.” The park is no longer a bounded green area; it penetrates the urban fabric and functions. The park system is treated as a precondition for the simultaneous development of industry, everyday life, culture, and ecological interest, delivering a comprehensive experience of building the city within a park (Figure 4).

1. **Coupling the valley park with industry.** The park system links existing and planned industrial parks along Zhuzhou Road with riverside talent communities, offering skilled workers a high-quality environment and lifestyle. Visible and participatory windows for industrial display are placed near parks. Innovation platforms are added within the valley park, and consumption scenarios are organized around science-and-technology interaction. Park aesthetics and regional culture are incorporated into full-function innovation spaces to stimulate the creativity of innovative talent.

2. **Coupling the valley park with daily life.** The park system organizes a 15-minute innovation-and-social-interaction circle. New and repaired characteristic streets connect internal green spaces with the park network, allowing green space to extend into development parcels and creating a boundary-free experience of living, working, and relaxing in nature. The project also promotes “rail + walking and cycling,” with the aim of reaching the river in ten minutes and the mountain landscape in twenty minutes.

3. **Coupling the valley park with culture.** Greenways connect existing historical and cultural resources; parks accommodate planned and new cultural facilities and provide cultural and artistic services; and spaces are reserved for festivals and major cultural events. Together, these interventions create a cultural-landscape system that combines local continuity with intercultural exchange and supports an urban environment rich in memory and humanistic spirit.

4. Coupling the valley park with ecological and recreational interest. A 38-km scenic route links 38 parks in a recreation network. Low-impact landscape design follows natural processes and creates a shared habitat for people and other species. Under a POD-oriented approach, the core valley-park area between Keyuan Weiye Road and Hefei Road is developed to destination standards. It combines ecological aesthetics, consumption scenarios, and public art; establishes scenic routes shared by residents and visitors; creates exploratory landscapes shaped by curved river bends; provides diverse settings related to terrain and habitat—valleys of flowers, bays within gardens, islands in water, courtyards on terraces, markets on floodplains, and landmark towers—and forms a skyline in which architecture is closely integrated with scenery.

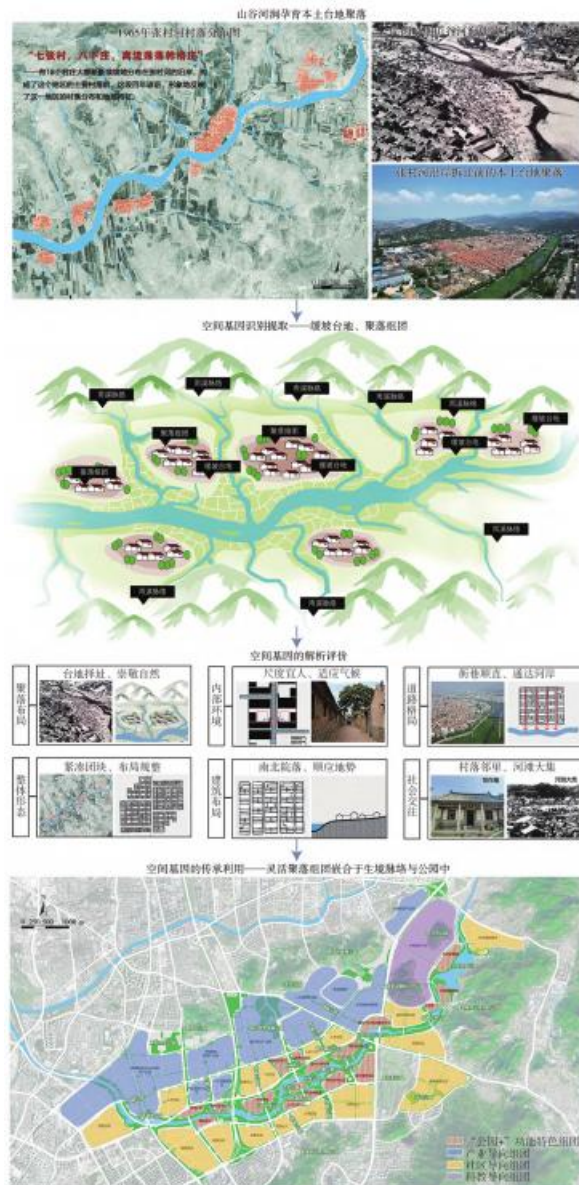


Figure 3. Identification, evaluation, and continued application of the spatial genes of river-valley settlements.

Source: Nanjing Southeast University Urban Planning and Design Institute Co., Ltd., submission to the Urban Design Competition for the Zhangcun River Area, Laoshan District, Qingdao (2023).

2.3.4 Scenario Creation: Use Green Urban Design to Convert Ecological Value into “Park+”

Places

Detailed design followed a “Park+” scenario approach. It excavated the distinctive spatial conditions, cultural meaning, and local character of each river section and began with ecological and park-oriented transformation. Human-made beauty was embedded within natural authenticity; ecological-value conversion mechanisms were explored; urban aesthetics were refined in a site-specific manner; and humanistic care added social warmth.

In the narrow eastern valley, a planned reservoir and surrounding universities and research institutions support the integration of a scientists' settlement with an open, shared "Inspiration Reservoir Park." In the former Kutao Village area, the local legend of "great beauty in heaven and earth that speaks without words" and the existing flower industry inspire a peach-blossom-themed floral park and talent community, with a "Flower in the Mirror" landmark.

The central section combines industry-city integration with the economic, cultural, and artistic value of the river corridor and becomes the principal urban-branding area. A park-style TOD core at Zhangcun Metro Station combines surrounding industries and landscape resources into an innovation-service base connecting mountains and sea. Given the conventional housing nearby, sports, healing, market, and aquatic parks are integrated with distinctive communities to create highly mixed neighborhoods suited to living, working, and visiting and to promote integration between community and destination. Around Keyuan Jingqi Road Metro Station, a creative center combines new-consumption, art, and green-business parks. It is conceived as an all-day, all-function super-park cluster, a future flagship district, and the main carrier of the night-time economy. On the western convex bank, wetland landscapes support a Science Bay Island and Science Exploration Park as public settings for experiencing technological innovation.

Because the western section contains more completed and planned development, design focuses on landscape improvement, functional insertion, and upgrading of urban character. Residual space is converted into valuable urban corners. Wetland parks and vertical greening improve gray spaces beneath elevated roads and strengthen the image of the western gateway to the valley. A water-purification plant is transformed into an educational purification park and extended as a social and recreational park serving nearby industrial areas.



Figure 4. Coupling between the valley park and urban functions.

Source: Nanjing Southeast University Urban Planning and Design Institute Co., Ltd., submission to the Urban Design Competition for the Zhangcun River Area, Laoshan District, Qingdao (2023).

3. Conclusion

Since the park-city concept was proposed in Chengdu, an increasing number of cities have explored related plans, policies, and practices as a new pathway for the transition from incremental expansion to stock-based urban development. Through flexible design thinking, urban design can identify, coordinate, and optimize spatial characteristics and elements at different scales. It can support park-city construction—especially the formation of distinctive spatial character—and provide fine-grained design, guidance, and control for the complex problems of existing urban environments.

The Zhangcun River project is an early attempt in Qingdao to integrate park-city construction with the activation and qualitative improvement of existing urban land. It emphasizes ecological empowerment and local character and demonstrates, from macro to micro scales, how to improve the regional ecological structure; integrate park form with urban space through place-based design; combine ecological space with urban functions and sensory experience; and create context-sensitive "Park+" scenarios. The approach provides a

reference for similar redevelopment areas and supports the localized application and wider implementation of park-city development.

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