Rural to urban migrants are the dominant component of population growth in China’s coastal cities and the source of an affordable housing challenge. China’s unique household registration system has concentrated most migrants in urban villages—a social phenomenon that has come to be China’s greatest urban social planning challenge. In this paper we analyze urban village features and migrants’ housing needs from a social capital perspective. A case study of Shenzhen shows how social capital is generated and migrants become attached to particular urban villages. We found that classical cost theory cannot fully explain the significance of urban villages to migrants and that social capital plays an important role in their housing choices. Social networks, social norms, trust among neighbors, and a sense of belonging are of key importance to migrants’ establishment in urban village communities. This study reveals a new aspect of urban villages that will be useful to planners by paying greater heed to social capital in consideration of urban village demolition and migrant housing provision. A more inclusive and human-oriented community model for migrants is identified in lieu of the homogeneous, isolated and gated model that prevails in China today.

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