



P4 Reflection

Updating Shanghai; Life from the ground up

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Introduction

The entire project, both research and design, focuses on two typologies; the shikumen neighbourhoods (or alleyway neighbourhoods) and the (residential) high rise, within the urban context of contemporary Shanghai. From the 1870's on, towards the end of the millennium, Shanghai was identified by the life that took place in the shikumen. These houses were built between the early 1870's and late 1930's and can be seen as a hybrid form of architecture, incorporating both Chinese and Western elements. Even after construction stopped by 1950 88% of the Shanghainese population was living in these type of houses. During the Mao era, Shanghai was in decline, while there was a big natural growth during this period, many of the people living in urban areas were moved to the danwei's (industrial work units) or back to the countryside to work on the land. By the late 1980's, after China's economic reforms, still 50% of all Shanghainese were living in the shikumen. During the mid 1990's, Shanghai exploded and thousands of high rise towers were constructed, propelling Shanghai towards becoming one of the world's leading metropolises of the 21st century.

While the shikumen are part of Shanghai's cultural heritage, in the past two decades large amounts have been destroyed to make way for the construction of new towers, where both the architecture as well cultural identity housed within these neighbourhoods is lost. This project aims to find a compromise between keeping the shikumen and their social structures while at the same time continue to develop the city, in the form of high rise.

Research

The research focuses on the social structures of both these typologies, and how the people are using the spaces in and around their homes. The research aims to answer the question how we can improve the contemporary high rise by finding and using the specific characteristics of the shikumen that allow for such vibrant social interactions. Both typologies were thoroughly researched and tested against theories on environmental psychology, such as Edward T. Hall's "Distance in Man". Within the shikumen there is a very gradual transition between public and private, while this is a lot less defined and subtle in the high rise towers. This makes it harder for the people living in high rise to *manage their social interaction* (as Altman defines privacy), and therefore leading to poor social interaction within the building. This was confirmed by a small survey conducted in Shanghai amongst residents of both shikumen and high rise.

Another aspect the research touched upon is the role of the neighbourhood/compound within an urban context. While the high rise usually exclusively are residential, the shikumen contain a multitude of functions, the majority also being residential, but also a lot of commercial and communal functions. All of these functions are accessible to everybody; the neighbourhood forms a porous entity within the urban context sharing its resources, while the high rise compound are shielded off from their surroundings.

Design

The location chosen for the project is located fairly central within Shanghai, in Zhabei district just north of the Suzhou Creek. The design location will be divided in three parts; three renovated shikumen lanes, one high rise tower and a public area, which includes retail and a public park. These three areas all function as a porous whole, accessible to everyone. The design is centered around the creation of the high rise

tower, which will house the original residents of the shikumen in small apartments or studios (40-60 sqm), while their (former) houses will get renovated to suit the needs of the upper class segment. The distance found in the shikumen, which coincide with the "Distance in Man" for the different interpersonal distances for social interaction, served as basis for the design of the tower. The design was build around these distances and the gradual transition from public to private it forms.

While it is uncertain if the current shikumen residents actually want to move and live in a high rise towers, this project aims to provide an alternative to the current procedure when it comes to shikumen.

Current state

Each shikumen house has multiple rooms, in this case the houses on the main alley have seven rooms, in each of these rooms lives one family. Sometimes a couple with children, a couple with their parents or any other combination imaginable. When an alley is marked for destruction, the local government will try to move all the people out. Usually they will get some forms of compensation, if this compensation is an alternative place to life, it is usually far from the city center, in one of the satellite towns of Shanghai. The rooms of the people willing to move out get destroyed, causing the people who are not willing to move to life in a half destroyed house, perhaps giving them more incentive to accept the compensation and move out. While providing a high rise with the concept of endorsing social interaction as it would have been in the alleyways of the shikumen might not be something all people would accept, it certainly is a big improvement over the current state of affairs. (Note; during this project the location is actually being destroyed, only to be rebuild later as a high end service area with expensive bars and restaurants)

Conclusion

Studying Shanghai, its history and current state, has given a deep understanding of the city and how the people use it. At times it was difficult to not romanticize the life of shikumen, which for a big part is the result of poverty and bad living conditions, or look down upon the more solitary but also more comfortable high rise lifestyle. But in the end, I personally believe a good balance was found between these two seemingly opposites. The choice of making modestly sized apartments did seem to limit the possibilities during the design, but I remain confident in the choice of purposely making them this small and therefore realistic and affordable.

The choice of ExploreLab seemed obvious, as it was the only studio where I could have done this project. As the project nears completion, I feel this is a unique project suitable for ExploreLab and an excellent foundation for my goal of working in Shanghai after graduation.

~ Bart Kuijpers
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