The Rise of the Private: Shanghai's Transforming Housing Typologies

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Rising tides of the private

'On top of the sea' is the literal translation of Shanghai, whose urban structure was built around thin canals that crossed the city. These canals, just like the traditional streets in Chinese culture, were able to move people and goods while creating a public arena for interaction. It was infrastructure – streets and canals – that formed the basis for the city's morphology and the architectural typologies housed within it. As the rivers and streets eventually grew, merged, and monumentalised, they created separation. Thus, infrastructure, which once was used to collect, now divided – as is witnessed in the new six- (or more) lane-streets, or the Huangpu River, isolating Puxi from Pudong. This transforming notion of infrastructure is directly linked to changes in Shanghai's housing typologies. The traditional *lilong* housing structure is comprised of a unit that multiplies through group linkages to create streets. In these *lilong* dwellings, the street and the architectural typology are one. More recently, an influx of high-rise apartment typologies has dislocated the relationship between infrastructure and building. Here, infrastructure is used to subdivide massive plots onto which built form is whimsically placed. The disconnection and monumentalisation of infrastructure that corresponds to these shifting building typologies reveals an even deeper transformation of the public sphere. It is here that we witness the rise of the Private and the emerging loss of public life.

Oriental Manhattan

Shanghai is a city that has redefined the notion of rapid urbanisation. This new urbanisation is directly linked to the end of Maoism in 1978 and the succeeding Open Door Policy implemented by the Communist Party. Before the reform of the economic system, housing in Shanghai was considerably dilapidated and in dire need of infrastructural improvements. Between 1949 and 1978, ownership was viewed as a Capitalist tendency,[1] encouraging few Shanghai residents to own property. The government, public institutions, or employers housed most residents. At the time, government investment was being poured into production rather than consumption, leaving little means to improve existing housing conditions or provide new housing. Furthermore, the proliferation of migrants from rural areas created vast increases in population with inadequate housing[2] – between 1949 and 1965, the per capita living space in Shanghai declined from 3.7 to 2.15 square meters.[3] To give an idea of the magnitude of the dilemma – in the late 1970s, Shanghai's population was five times that of London, while the city stood devoid of high-rise housing.[4]

In April of 1984, the city was offered a renewed spirit of urbanisation when the government announced the opening of the Shanghai markets. Meager improvements to the city's over-crowding, infrastructure, and physical appearance during the Maoist era left the city in disarray during the 1980s. Not only was housing in crisis, Shanghai as a city needed to remake its image to match the world-class

Fig. 1: New housing developments tower over the old row houses.

cities that it hoped to compete with. The rebuilding of Shanghai was part of a strategic plan to create a forward-looking city that eradicated most signs of the past while simultaneously striving to resurrect Shanghai's cosmopolitan image. Former Mayor of Shanghai, Huang Ju, confirmed this sentiment in a speech that made front-page headlines:

'Shanghai of the future must be a metropolis equal to New York or London,' said Mayor Huang Ju as he outlined revisions to the city's development plan designed to create an 'oriental Manhattan'… He was addressing the City Planning Meeting, the third since 1949…. Marking the city government's efforts to revive the past glories of Shanghai and make the city an international metropolis in the 21st century.'[5]

The rebuilding of Shanghai into a metropolis occurred and is occurring at an unprecedented rate. The form of the new metropolis – the 'Oriental Manhattan' – was to be comprised of endless towers. A symbol of progress and open-market capitalism, the tower typology satisfied the needs of Shanghai's rapid re-urbanisation. These towers were deployed across the urban landscape at a speed that would frighten most city planners – in 1980, a mere 11 towers between 16 and 29 storeys graced the skyline (and none above 30 storeys), while just fifteen years later the city was infiltrated with 811 towers between 16-29 storeys, and a further 53 with more than 30 storeys.[6] Not only were towers the iconic symbol of the new Shanghai, they provided much needed relief to the housing crisis. This rapid development has been successful at ameliorating the living conditions that were stagnant during the Maoist era: more new housing was built in Shanghai between 1979-89 (40 million square metres) than between 1950-80 (23.13 million square meters).[7] Better living conditions naturally implied more living space per person – which rose dramatically from 5.2 square metres in 1985 to 8.8 square metres in 1997.[8] Residents of demolished housing were relegated to either remote suburban areas or into tower developments that remained in the city. These residents make up a significant part of the Shanghai population – 25% of residents live in new housing with 1.5 million living in homes built between 1993-1995.[9] The two forms of settlement that accompany this urbanisation – the tower and suburban dwelling – have significant ramifications for the public sphere. Suburban sprawl has been extensively documented, particularly in the North American context, and more importantly does not concern the urban condition. What is of particular importance here is how the urban public sphere has transformed with the shift from *lilong* housing to the tower. Both housing types are characteristic of their respective time periods and were endlessly and furiously implemented across the urban landscape. It is the dramatic supplantation of one typology by another that carries powerful repercussions for the public sphere.

De-invididualise and de-privatise

How has the public realm changed in the light of recent rapid development in Shanghai? I believe Hannah Arendt's definition of the Public is both eloquently precise and offers insight into this discourse. According to Arendt, the public realm characterises a form of reality. People put forth ideas and thoughts into the public sphere once these are internally digested and ready to be presented. This act – of putting forth a part of oneself to be seen and heard – is what constitutes a form of reality. Arendt states, 'Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, de-privatized and de-invidualised, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance.'[10] For Arendt, the reality that ensues from making something public both assures us of the common world and ourselves. Arendt's second definition of the public realm resides in the world that connects and simultaneously separates

us. She uses the metaphor of a group of strangers sitting around a table. For Arendt, the table is the public sphere – it is the world that gives us a common platform to understand one another, yet allows us to be individuals. The continual concern for the same object – the common world – despite the rise of pluralist values, is the basis for the public realm. The decreasing concern for the common world is directly related to the rise of the Private. Arendt's definition of the public realm is important, for, as I shall argue, the transformation from the *lilong* to tower housing typology corresponds to both the rise of the Private as well as a loss of the arena to form reality.

Points of contact

The *lilong* typology that is characteristic of the 'old' Shanghai is intriguing because it presents a vivid public realm that is inherently attached to the typological form. Developed predominantly during the 19th and 20th century, *lilong* housing is a hybrid between two- to three-storey row houses of Western tradition and the classical courtyard house.[11] The word itself describes its housing structure – *Li*: neighbourhoods, *Long*: lanes – an urban typology that combines the street, and all its associated activities, within its form. The influx of population in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, created a housing shortage that favoured the notion of communal living. Built chiefly by the English, *lilong* are characterised by a unique hybrid of foreign and local influences. The notion of the row house was characteristically English, while the courtyard and allocation of public space on the street was largely Chinese. Initially built in 1842, *lilong* housing comprised 60% of the total dwelling area in Shanghai by 1949.[12]

Most *lilong* developments consist of both commercial (including service and small production) and housing units. The housing units are arranged into rows within the interior block, while the commercial units line the edges. Separated only by archways, the busy commercial street often bleeds into the tiny alleyways that form the neighbourhood. Each gateway demarcates the ends of the main lanes, which comprise the public circulation zone. Side-lanes, placed perpendicular to the main lanes, lead to the housing units. Often dead-ends, the side-lanes do not instigate through-circulation and therefore provide a degree of privacy. This 'fish-bone' circulation has a built-in mechanism for the subtle mediation between private, semi-private, and public zones. Furthermore, the mixed programs – commercial and housing – form diversity within the settlement.

Similar to the current proliferation of apartment blocks, the new-type[13] *lilong* were built at a fervent pace between the 1920s and 1940s to host the influx of population after the collapse of the Chinese empire in 1911. Despite the modest two- to thee-metre lane widths, the street developed into the gathering zone for families and neighbours.[14] In *lilong* housing developments the street becomes a place of gathering, conversation, debate, selling and movement. It alludes to many of the characteristics Jane Jacobs felt nostalgic for during American modernism. Intriguingly, the street attached to the *lilong* also contains many seemingly private domestic functions – kitchens, bathrooms, laundry, etc. These functions that normally are categorised as private within housing typologies are extracted and placed in the public realm of the street. Of course, this has more to do with economic constraints on the plebeian population, but what inadvertently ensues is a thriving public realm – a street programmatically filled with 'private' functions, forcing neighbours to intersect and interact. By presenting elements of privacy into the public realm, residents are forced to de-privatised and de-individualise even their most private domestic experiences. In Arendt's reading, this enables the reaffirmation of reality and the continual concern for the common object – the public realm.

The affirmation of reality through street life

promotes the notion of gathering and trust. It is this sense of sharing that Richard Sennett so eloquently speaks of in *Uses of Disorder*[15] that enables the breakdown of the 'other' in poorer populations. Sennett's premise is that communities of economic scarcity do not have the ability to control their boundaries or internal composition. What results is tolerance and trust through the acceptance of diversity or the breakdown of the 'other'. Sennett's analysis goes further – he reveals that in poorer communities the notion of sharing such things as appliances or food is necessary for survival. Direct social interaction through sharing at these 'contact points', Sennett believes, creates a community of trust.

Economic scarcity of *lilong* dwellers often accounts for contact points of interaction. A sample inspection of Shi-ku-men *lilong*s found that 56.2% of households had no private kitchens; 72.5% had no gas-supplying appliances (and depend on briquette stoves which are often shared); and over 99% do not have toilet facilities.[16] The sharing of resources unintentionally creates a sense of understanding and trust between neighbours. Neighbours are often witnessed playing mahjong or watching each other's kids and stores. Moreover, shared street programs – kitchens, laundry, washrooms, etc. – create points of contact that promote understanding, diversity and the eradication of the 'other'. Infrastructure becomes the place of gathering and is linked and framed by built form. The interweaving of social, economic and private programs – residential and commercial – creates interaction between different demographics and promotes street activity. I do not want to make the mistake of romanticising the lilong settlements, as there are many detrimental problems in their design, such as bad infrastructure (water supply, electricity, etc.), limited space, lack of privacy, and difficult access. What the lilong does provide, however, is a unique typology that reaffirms a sense of reality and place in the public realm. Jos Gamble's ethnographic research on this subject is very telling. Through interviews with informants he received the following response regarding the shift to apartment towers:

Informants commented that although living conditions in Nanshi (a lilong district) were poor, relationships between neighbours were good – they all knew each other and would help each other, for example, to look after the children. On one occasion, I visited Nanshi accompanied by a former resident who now lived in a high-rise flat. He felt nostalgic for life in Nanshi and missed the closeness of relationships between neighbours and the frequent visits they made with each other. He contrasted this situation with his new accommodation where there was little or no contact with neighbours.[17]

In 1941, when Shanghai fell under the control of the Japanese, development of the *lilong* housing ceased. Economy and real estate slowed down until eventually Mao took control in 1949. During the Maoist era, *lilong* were considered non-competitive and inefficient in construction and delivery compared to modern apartment buildings.[18] Furthermore, *lilong* developments were not regarded as shang, or nice areas, which were typically characterised by a lower population density, and by being more clean and quiet.[19] The development of *lilong* lasted from 1842 to 1949. In the wake of the alienation that has often been associated with Modernism or suburban sprawl, the *lilong* provided a unique template for the formation of a common public realm in architectural form.

Private modernisation

As Shanghai modernised and individuals were 'emancipated' with more disposable wealth, a shift occurred in the predominant housing typology. The *lilong* were reminiscent of the 'old' Shanghai, riddled with poverty, and its associated pitfalls. Instead, the new Shanghai opted for a differing typology – the tower. The proliferation of towers throughout the city, each gleaming in the utopian skies of modern-

	1978	1985	1997
Income and consumption (urban)			
Indices			
Disposable income per capita	100	160	312
Retail Sales	100	239	2,031
Per Capita living space (sq.m)	3.6	5.2	8.8
Natural gas use (piped and bottled) (%)	14	22	76
Consumer durables per 100 households			
Washing machines	6	48	89
Refrigerators	0	7	76
Sofas	89	132	205
Soft beds	..	6	42
TV, b/w	32	67	26
TV, colour	..	17	100
Urban telephones (in 100,000s)	28	48	554
Long distance telephone lines (in 1,000s)	19	38	1,146
Mobile telephones (in 1,000s)	0	0	1,323

Fig. 2: Income Consumption. (For indices 1978=100, and subsequent increases are adjusted for inflation (data not available) Source: SSB: (1998a, pp.24-5, 128, 324, 325, 327, 568, 754, 1998b, p.128, 1997a, p.537; 1996, pp.26)

ism, in fact realised Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin. This remarkable shift – essentially from the medieval city to modernism – now used the infrastructure of the street to subdivide vast plots in which the towers were placed. These new streets, often six or more lanes, were monumentalised to the point of creating separation, with each tower complex isolated onto its own island block. The street – the traditional public space in China – is now replaced with the park, alluding to the romantic American notion of arcadia. What the tower in fact did was to separate the public zone of the street from the architectural form, leading to the emergence of the Private.

In Chinese culture, as in many traditions, the degree of enclosedness is associated with status. One need not look further than the countless enclosures in the Forbidden City that advocate the power of the Emperor. Enclosure also has a relationship to chaos (*luan*) in Chinese beliefs, wherein walls and boundaries are thought to prevent *luan*.[20] Many of the old housing settlements in Shanghai are thought to be imbued with *luan*. The reformation of the economic structure, and its associated affluence, allowed for the atomisation of Chinese households into new ordered structures. Not only did families no longer need to share amenities, they now did not need to share any communal space. Furthermore, affluence allowed for the acquisition of new technologies that promulgated the notion of separation. Increasing sales of television sets and air-conditioning[21] promoted the retraction of each family to their individual household. Even within households, increased floor space per person allowed for increased privacy [fig. 2]. If the old housing villages were infested with *luan*, the apartment tower marked a transition into a rationalised lifestyle. Fitted with proper plumbing, wiring, etc., and each a self-contained unit complete with kitchen, laundry and washroom, the tower did not require the interaction of its neighbours. Gamble's ethnographic survey is revealing:

Many informants told me that people preferred the new high-rise housing because it was 'one flat, one household', that is, each household has its own kitchen and toilet. This separation reduced the number of arguments between neighbors; contact between them was now so infrequent than they might not even recognize each other.[22]

Unlike the housing developments linked to the street, the stacking nature of the tower typology only allows for one point of gathering – the elevator. The disconnection of the street – infrastructure – from the unit means that each household is able to carry on in private. The parks that engulf these developments are often vast and devoid of life. Whereas the *lilong* alleyways were filled with sales activities, leisure, and discourse all within a small space, the parks at most have a few children playing or seniors carrying out their morning exercises. These parks have lost the diversity of street programs, reduced to either residential living or leisure – two activities that do not necessarily require the interaction of strangers. Not having to interact was a new luxury provided by increased wealth and a sign of the rising of the Private. This rise of the Private has also had its effects on the feeling of security and trust within the new developments.

Apartment block developments are often gated, literally separating the park space from the adjacent developments. Gates are commonly viewed as 'keeping people out', whereas in this case they in fact 'keep people in'. Largely rationalised as a mechanism for safety, despite the fact that Shanghai is one of the safest cities in China, if not one of the safest metropolises in the world. Neighbourhood surveillance is difficult in apartment dwellings as few doors face onto the street. More importantly, fewer relationships exist between neighbours within apartment dwellings, making neighbourhood surveillance difficult to carry out. What the gate in fact represents is the breakdown of trust. Gates are therefore used because of the threat of the 'other',

Fig. 3: Typical public activities that occur on the street in *Lilong* housing development. Photo courtesy of the author.

the threat of the chaos outside. Intriguingly, gates are also used as a symbolic artifact of ownership. This new importance placed on the symbolisation of ownership brought out with the opening markets of 1978, is nothing more than a symbolic representation of the rising power of the Private: to be Private was to be modern.

Cycles of destruction

So what has the rising of the private in fact done to the public realm and individual in China? According to Sennett, privatisation of the psyche creates a disconnection of the individual from the public realm.[23] The more privatised the individual, the more difficulty they have in expressing feeling and in understanding the public realm. In Arendt's terms, privatisation essentially dissolves the concern for the common platform on which the public realm depends. Furthermore, a loss of the public demonstrates a decreased sense of reality. What ensues is often a sense of alienation and isolation that is characteristic of American suburbia. It is this alienation that many philosophers and sociologists attribute to the machinery of Capitalism, and one could argue, began in China with the economic reform. Residents of apartments often describe their experience as 'isolating' and 'alienating'.[24] What affluence and shifting typologies have done is to dissolve the points of contact in the city. Without these points of contact, reality turns into alienation and trust into fear.

Intriguingly, the history of China is one that could be described as 'cycles of destruction'. As each dynasty succeeded another, time and architecture were often reset with a new vision. Shanghai is still a young city – the ground of its rapid development is still malleable. The speed of development is exciting, especially when compared to stagnant and nostalgic American cities. The speed of development, however, allows little or no time for reflection. Within a mere twenty years, Shanghai has fundamentally been rebuilt. The rapid loss of the Public and the associated sense of Reality is a result of this speed. Just as Shanghai was feverishly developed, it can be rebuilt again. Proposals for urbanisation anticipate approximately 20 million square metres of future development each year, equating to the addition of a 'Shanghai of 1949' every two years.[25] The first wave of urbanisation addressed many pragmatic concerns for a housing situation that was in crisis. Now, as the crisis has subsided, new emphasis needs to be placed on the Public realm within the housing typologies. It is this public realm that distinguishes a city from a mere grouping of people.

Notes

1. Wang Yaping, and Alan Murie, 'The process of Commercialization of Urban Housing in China', in *Urban Studies*, 33, 6 (1996), pp. 971- 989.
2. Ibid. p. 973.
3. Jos Gamble, *Shanghai in Transition—Changing perspectives and social contours of a Chinese Metropolis* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p. 127.
4. Ibid. p.111.
5. From: 'City of Future', *Shanghai Star* (July 2, 1993), p.1. See also, Jos Gamble, *Shanghai in Transition—Changing perspectives and social contours of a Chinese Metropolis*, p. 10.
6. Jos Gamble, *Shanghai in Transition*, p. 132. See also *Statistical Yearbook of Shanghai* (Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau. China Publishing House, 1996), p. 108.
7. Deborah Davis, 'My Mother's House', in *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the PRC.*, edited by P. Link, R. Madsen, and P.G. Pickowicz, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), pp.88-100; see also D. Pellow, 'No place to live, no place to love: coping in Shanghai', in *Urban Anthropology in China*, edited by G.E Guldin and A.Southall (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), pp. 396-424.
8. Targets by the year 2000 were to be 10 sq.m/ person. See Jos Gamble, *Shanghai in Transition—Changing perspectives and social contours of a Chinese*

Metropolis, p. 132; and Wenfang Tang and William L. Parish, *Chinese Urban Life under Reform - The Changing Social Contract* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 39.

9. Jos Gamble, *Shanghai in Transition*, p. 118. See also: BBC Summary of the World Broadcasts – Asia Pacific. January, 1996.
10. Arendt, Hannah, 'The Public Realm: The Common' in T*he Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 50.
11. Peter G. Rowe, 'Housing Density, Type, and Urban Life in Contemporary China', *Harvard Design Magazine*, (Summer 1999), pp. 40-45.
12. Qian Guan, *Lilong Housing: A Traditional Settlement Form*. (Montreal: McGill University School of Architecture, 1996) [Section: background]. See also: Wang Shaozhou, *Shanghai Modern Architecture* (Jiangsu, P.R. China: Science and Technology Printing Service, 1989), p. 6.
13. There are several categories of *lilong* housing; for the lack of space in the article, I will focus on the predominant *lilong,* characterised as the "new-type" *lilong.* These *lilong* comprise most of the remaining lilong in Shanghai.
14. Qian Guan, *Lilong Housing,* Section: 3.1; see also: Sheng Hua, *Shanghai Lilong Housing* (Shanghai, P.R. China: Chinese Architectural Industry Printing Service, 1987), p. 34.
15. Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 48, p. 141.
16. Yu Minfei, 'A Puzzle in the Renovation of the Old Residential Areas in Shanghai', in *The Research on Human Settlements in Shanghai*, ed. by Zheng Shiling (Shanghai: Tongji University Press, 1992), pp. 146-153.
17. Jos Gamble, *Shanghai in Transition*, p. 132.
18. Qian Guan, *Lilong Housing,* Section: 2.4.
19. Ibid. p.113.
20. Ibid. p.120.
21. In 1993 there were only five air conditioners per hundred households; by 1996 this had increased to fifty. (Source: *Financial Times Survey: Shanghai*, May 19, 1998, p. 19.)
22. Jos Gamble, *Shanghai in Transition*, p. 133.
23. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Norton and Company, 1975), p. 4.
24. Qian Guan, *Lilong Housing,* Section: 4.1.
25. Zheng Shiling. 'Shanghai Transformations' in *Urban Age: Shanghai, The Fastest City?* (London: London School of Economics, and Deutsche Bank, 2006), p.10.

Biography

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