

URBAN LANDSCAPE STUDIES
EUPHORIGENIC LANDSCAPES

Euphorigenic Landscapes – issue 1.0

Sören Schöbel, Daniel Czechowski (Ed.)

(Schriftenreihe - LAREG, Bd. 12/

Monograph Series - Department of

Landscape Architecture and

Regional Open Space, Vol. 12)

© 2013

Fachgebiet für Landschaftsarchitektur

regionaler Freiräume

Technische Universität München

All rights reserved. This publication is protected by copyright. No part of this book may be printed without permission of the editors.

LAREG



SHANGHAI
31° 12'N 121° 30'E

| | |
|------------|---------------------------|
| SIZE | 6,340.5 KM ² |
| POPULATION | 23,019,148 |
| DENSITY | 3,600/KM ² |
| ELEVATION | 4 M |
| TIME ZONE | CHINA STANDARD (UTC+8) |

SHANGHAI, A TYPICAL BUT ATYPICAL CHINESE CITY

Jixiong Pan

Chinese cities are growing fast. A few months ago, some words of my German friend made me lament: “In the past 20 years, my family went skiing in Switzerland each winter, and my parents always told me to buy a loaf of bread for breakfast at the same shop. Basically, nothing has changed in that place in Switzerland. 20 years later, waiters in the small village are the same persons, just their hair having turned white.” As a Chinese under 30 years old, this is hard for me to imagine. If you can find a group of Chinese at my age, let them find their houses and playing places of childhood on Google Satellite: most of them will respond with an embarrassing smile after a hard search. Concerning Shanghai, the biggest Chinese city, the extent of change of the urban landscape allows you to see a new world every six months—as I witnessed the tremendous changes in my four years living there. The road behind the campus was rebuilt because there will be a new overpass; the main entrance of my university turned into a construction site due to the new subway lines; the world’s tallest building is under planning across the Huangpu River, again;

those things happen every semester. Furthermore, compared with London, Paris, Hamburg and other European metropolises, China’s major cities have an obvious feature: they are too giant. For instance, Shanghai is 20 times as big as Munich compared to its urban area. I can imagine that, if someone who lives in Munich wants to spend an outdoor weekend with his family, he can drive out of Munich and will reach within one hour a very beautiful countryside. Unfortunately, this is not the same in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. It costs you much more time and fuel to get close to nature and landscape facilities, which mostly are located a few hours driving away. That is why I believe that in Shanghai, as a typical Chinese metropolis, the “euphorogenic landscape” is more reflected in the concrete and brick.

Concerning the “fast” and “giant”, euphorogenic landscape of Shanghai can be read from a perspective of “changing” and “urban landscape”.

THE LAYER OF NATURAL MORPHOLOGIES

Shanghai, located at the East China Sea coast, is the largest city in China, which gradually has been formed through a long history with many vicissitudes. Like all the world’s largest commercial centres, it was not a famous place at

the beginning. Though once a bustling port, in the eyes of the ancient Chinese capitals, Shanghai was just a coastal rural place. Located in the Yangtze River Delta, Shanghai has fertile fields, a vast hinterland, and convenient transportation. The local people lived on fishing, farming and textile. Decades of development have changed the coastal plain landscape, once full of wetland and salt marshes. Like a late-maturing child, although there are nearly a thousand years of city history, Shanghai only grew rapidly in the last century, with amazing development.

In spite of the few hilly mountains of the southwest, the average altitude of Shanghai is just 4 meter, all of broad flat plains. The general trend of the land topography is slightly tilted from east to west. It makes the construction of skyscrapers and underground infrastructure difficult with the serious soil subsidence phenomenon (but the amount of Shanghai's skyscrapers ranks third in the world, New York and Tokyo coming in second).

As a typical southern city full with criss-crossing rivers, long agricultural civilisation makes river corridors play an important role in Shanghai's landscape pattern. Among all the rivers, the greatest impact on urban pattern comes from the Huangpu River. The urban morphology along this river was

a clear asymmetry. Before 1990, urban construction focused on Puxi (the west bank), conversely, the development of Pudong (the east bank) is just limited to the area along the river. According to high-density development and huge investment, glamour and flourishing of the whole city gathered on the west. Since the 1990s, thanks to the completion of the cross-river bridge and tunnel, Pudong has developed rapidly, but the pattern of asymmetry just appeared in another way. Compared with high-density irregular streets and blocks, steady streams of people, relatively low but historical architecture, Pudong is full of wild and tidy roads, well-dressed white-collar elite, brand-new skyscrapers and seems to be sophisticated anywhere without any gap between the rich and the poor, not to mention the traces of urban development. Decades ago, there was a saying popularized in Shanghai's real estate branch: "Rather have a bed in Puxi than a house in Pudong". This has changed today, from the economic point of view, but still they are like two different cities.

As previously mentioned, natural landscape and rural fields are far away from downtown of most Chinese big cities, nonetheless, Shanghai has a large number of parks and forest parks. Mild and humid climate makes street trees (most of them are camphor and London-plane)

grow tall and flourish. After the Expo, the green coverage of the entire city has significantly increased.

Because of the unique role in modern history, Shanghai is not only endowed with abundant natural landscape, but also has many historical and cultural landscape resources. From the original shanty towns, Shikumen buildings ¹ (a traditional architectural form of Shanghai), the Bund ² (the most famous landscape and attraction of Shanghai), to the skyscraper skyline on the east bank, you can find the transformation of the urban landscape of this city, under irresistible external influences.

THE LAYER OF GLOBAL AND REGIONAL HABITUS

Modern Shanghai is a microcosm of modern China. Excellent geographical environment and the special historical background let the city be first to accept the fresh air of Western civilisation. Landscape changes in Shanghai can almost represent modern landscape changes of China, which should be talked from the treaty ports opening in 1840's. Britain, the overlord of the European maritime trade in the 19th century, was extremely dissatisfied with the closed-door policy of the Qing Dynasty—there was only one port: Guangzhou. As a result of the treaty of the Opium War, Shanghai and four

other cities became the open doors to the trade with the West. Along with the emergence of the concessions, Shanghai, to some extent, gradually drifted away from China's vast culture and social life and started learning everything from Western countries (concessions to be accurate) on urban construction, radiating new architecture, gardening and landscape to the whole country.

With the large number of Westerners doing business and settled in Shanghai, Western-style buildings and gardens mushroomed all over the city. The microcosm of various western architecture schools and different architectural styles of each period can be found easily in modern Shanghai. For instance, the style of British, Greek, French, Russian, German, Spanish, Nordic, Japanese, and so on, mixed standing shoulder to shoulder. There won't be a second city in the world that can accommodate such a diverse and contrasty architecture, the Bund is the most characteristic landscape of Shanghai, known as "World Fair of Architecture", facing to the Huangpu River and backed by architecture with rigorous modelling and different styles. No matter it is day or night, its extraordinary scenery with its special charm will always attract tourists. The river, its long embankment, the green belt and the magnificent buildings constitute a unique style of street

which has become the most important landmark. In addition, there are also rich cultural connotations because of the unique geographical location and role in the economic field of Shanghai and the whole China over the past century.

Shanghai has become a bridge between China and Western countries, a transit point to Western civilisation outputs to China. Shanghai has changed with the exemplary role of the concession; China as a whole has changed with the exemplary role of Shanghai. This is the track of modern China's urban and social evolution, and above all, life changes are the most obvious part of all changes.

THE LAYER OF EVERDAY LIFE

In the history of Shanghai, the poorest of the poor lived in large areas of squatter settlements. Arched by a bamboo frame and covered with mats, a small shack was finished, which had no windows, just a hanging straw mat at the entrance. Thousands of huts were connected to constitute a shanty town. In the 1920s, Shanghai had more than 50,000 huts, most of them were small, low, dirty, and hardly solid enough to withstand a storm. This is the darkest but most original part of Shanghai's urban landscape. Today, these dirty and crowded residential areas still exist at

the core of the city (along the Shanghai Railway Station), they have just improved from crude huts to masonry dwarf rooms. Perhaps, for people who have just seen Shanghai's modern high-rise buildings and feasting, it is hard to imagine such an urban landscape and life style, so out of touch with modern civilisation in the centre of the city. Sharing the narrow aisle of less than one meter and limited taps at the door, with sewage flowing everywhere, people are washing, cooking, even brushing the toilet basket in the small space in front of the door.

The middle class in Shanghai lived in the neighbourhood housing, commonly known as Shikumen. Since the 1850s, as Shanghai's real estate developers want to profit from the influx of refugees as soon as possible, a kind of relatively simple and practical adjoining form of housing was constructed. It first appeared in the British Concession, and then extended to other concessions or even the entire city. The Shikumen are divided into old style and new style. The structure and layout of the old Shikumen evolved from the traditional low-rise courtyard houses of China, suitable for a large family. The whole building is closed, the high walls and heavy doors give the tenants a sense of security. New patterns of the Shikumen developed later, in order to

meet the requirements of tenants with different incomes. Prepared for smaller families and lower income families, there were low cost and simply decorated single-bays, a rough van or two small houses. Concerning the middle class with higher incomes, there were elegant single houses with a range of facilities. New Shikumen buildings were built with reference to Western-style houses and gradually detached from the Chinese courtyard style.

Today, the Shikumen landscape more becomes a symbol and concept. The most representative is the Xintiandi project, with 1.8 billion yuan of building costs. After the package, it became a funky playground under the appearance of Shikumen with costs reaching 20,000 yuan per square meter. Developers requested a “concept” from tenants, which means the furnishing of each tenant should not be less than 2 million yuan. Inside this Shikumen Starbucks, Michelin restaurant, ice cream shop of Venus Italy, Xavier clothing stores, all clubs and salons and so on – a variety of fashionable elements – are in-laid into the narrow old alleys, to get a perfect blend of old and new, tradition and trend, nostalgia and popular. It fits with the aesthetic psychology of modern Shanghai, fine enough to make a faint sense of alienation. Although it has succeeded in stimulating business

and tourism, it cannot create a warm sense of belonging for local people. Perhaps, deliberately nostalgic new buildings precisely embody a fact: nostalgia is a cultural selling point, but also the embodiment of the lack of cultural diversity—with not more culture to show.

THE MEDIATING LAYER, THE CULTURE OF CITIZEN AND FEATURE OF CITY

There should be a mediating link between the different layers of natural morphology, global influence, and everyday life. What is the constant linking point, when all aspects of the different layers are changing? It is the culture penetrated in every aspect of city life and the temperament of the people which has been shaped by living environment, exotic lifestyle and traditional Chinese culture.

Many outsiders think that people of Shanghai are rigorous, hard-working, and receptive to new things, all these traits are factors in Shanghai’s economic take-off. However, people of Shanghai are also said to be selfish and stingy, fawning on foreigners, self-sustaining, aloof, and lacking cultural identity.

Contrary to the expansion in workplace or public space, living space in Shanghai was extremely crowded. Except the small number of wealthy people enjoying spacious and comfortable dwellings, the vast majority of citizens lived

crowdedly in rented Shikumen houses, sharing limited living resources with others. Lacking of private space made the people inevitably become smart and calculating.

Eileen Chang, a famous female Chinese writer, said, “a Shanghai person is a traditional Chinese plus the results of the tempering by the high pressure of modern life”, “they have a singular wisdom”. Thanks to the use of this wisdom, the general public happiness under high pressure is reserved to the metropolis. Material deprivation in the old time did not prevent people from being happy; on the contrary, it brought a lot of interesting products, which can be clearly demonstrated by the food culture.

The “fritter” is a simple and cheap Chinese breakfast made with flour, which is hollow and fluffy after being fried. There is a traditional Shanghai dish called “seafood fried with fritters”: smart Shanghai people found that cooking seafood with fritters makes the dish not only good-looking and delicious, but also seems full quantity. Besides, “Crab fried with rice cake” is the same. There are so many such examples in Shanghai, using simple and inexpensive materials to produce exquisite experience. Happiness does not need to be based on big numbers of money or material, which also makes sense in landscape. Much original Shanghai

happiness is still found in the narrow crowded Shikumen residential areas on the west bank, and needs to be protected from the pursuit of higher, newer and faster represented by Pudong.

Shanghai has the largest number of fast food shops, from McDonald’s to various oriental snack bars. Although it may not be civilised behaviour, you can still find many people holding their breakfast, eating or drinking on their way to work or school, no matter walking or on any public transport. Of all Chinese cities, Shanghai is the best embodiment of “fast”, from the speed of urban development to the pace of ordinary citizens’ life. When I studied in Shanghai, I used to keep counting my pace speed when walking alone. I found my steps involuntarily speeded up, following other pedestrians in the streets. If there is no traffic jam, taxi drivers want to make their cars fly, as those Santana 2000, the old car models produced by Volkswagen which are still the most wildly used especially in taxi business, had been modified. The emphasis on efficiency is difficult to be caught up by other cities.

Having experienced Western domination, the lifestyle of Shanghai citizens is quite influenced by Western style. When you visit an authentic Shanghai family, perhaps, the host may first ask you “tea or coffee?”, if the answer is cof-

fee, the following question might be “Turkish or British?”. The inconspicuous old grandpa in a small alley can tell you which button on your Western suit should not be buttoned. Most of them have an English name, at parties or at the workplace. They pay attention to the details of life to emphasise their good quality and taste—somehow the definition of good taste may always have some connection with “Western”—which can be traced from the semi-colonial period. However, a sense of practical cannot be denied, they may be used to have Starbucks everyday but still deeply love “seafood fried with fritters” when back home. There seems to be a mediating layer between Eastern and Western featured clearly in every aspects of Shanghai. Maybe it is hard to judge what is the perfect speed for the proceeding trend of culture integration. At least, reservations of a city’s feature do no harm. It is particularly important for China to remain rational and keep arguing critically before rapid economic development.

Every city has its own feature. If Beijing means a male with cordial temperament rooted to the soil, Shanghai, in contrast, can be described as mature, wise female, soft, stylish, beautiful, smart, and versatile. If a foreigner wants to understand more about the Chinese traditional culture in one short vaca-

tion, Shanghai, as an atypical Chinese city, may not be the perfect destination. But in any case, Shanghai is the best example for a modern city which mixes both—Chinese and the world.

ENDNOTES

¹ Shikumen is the most characteristic of Shanghai's residential buildings. It originated in the period of the war of Taiping Rebellion. Generally, Shikumen buildings are found in the old alleys of Shanghai. The civil war forced wealthy landowners and officials of the Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces to take refuge in the city's foreign concessions, and foreign real estate agencies took advantage of a large number of residential buildings. In the twenties and thirties of the last century, Shanghai housing no longer paid attention to sculpture, but the pursuit of simple. As a combination of Chinese and Western, the Shikumen residence came into being. Shikumen means "stone gate" because the door frame was made of stone.

² The Bund is the must go for tourists in the centre of Shanghai, located in Huangpu District, with a length of 1.5 km along the west bank of Huangpu River. Known as the "world exposition of architectures", it is the financial centre of the old Shanghai and the concentration zone of the foreign trade organisations, composed by 52 different styles including Gothic, Romanesque, Baroque, and so on. Around the other side of Huangpu River, new landmarks such as Oriental Pearl Tower, Jinmao Tower and International Financial Center constitute the city skyline.