Nostalgia has consistently been a motivation for the study of contemporary Chinese urban life. Scholars have produced an abundance of work on urbanism from a pro-historic preservation perspective and, for example, have long claimed that the lilong house (‘li’ means neighbourhoods, ‘long’ means lanes) is an efficient form of housing for the residents of Shanghai. Non Arkaraprasertkul argues, however, that these studies fall short in terms of future city planning, as they omit the personal experiences and viewpoints of urban residents regarding the efficiency of such dwellings.

As a result of the One Child Policy (dushengzinuzhengce), there have been changes in the preferences for housing among multi-generational Shanghai residents and immigrants for which lilong may or may not be the answer. The study of the relationship between the physical infrastructure of lilong and the social formation of neighbourhoods is important to the process of urban housing policy planning and could provide a counter-balance to high-rise development. Within the context of China’s unprecedented social reform, the knowledge and ideas gained from cultural and social anthropology are essential.

In an earlier paper, ‘Towards Modern Urban Housing: Redefining Shanghai’s Lilong’, this author presented a comprehensive study of the history and architecture of lilong and offered a new way of looking at the design of new housing in contemporary Shanghai. The idea was put forward that the low-to-mediumrise and high-density (UMHRD) housing is the most suitable for the city, but with a caveat that the author was ‘aware that this research might not completely fill the noticeable void in contemporary thinking on architecture and urban housing in Shanghai’.3

This paper is not an extension of this previous work on the lilong, quite the opposite in fact, this paper aims at disrupting and renegotiating the common perception – an axiom if you will – about the study of urban housing and design. It adamantly rejects the value of scholarship (including some of the author’s own work) as it ignores some of the most important aspects of design that is, the understanding of the community-in-action from an anthropological perspective. Needless to say, as the introduction of this paper discusses, there are differences in several academic attitudes and perspectives towards lilong, which are important to the thorough understanding of housing design.
Addressing the missing middle ground

To reiterate, given the scholarship of historians (particularly that from the 1980s to the present time) who have long claimed that the lilong has been an ‘efficient’ form of housing for Shanghai residents, this paper seeks to ask a deeper question, from a community perspective, about whether or not lilong should be considered as part of the future planning of Shanghai? The research on urban housing should be based on the study of the relationship between space and people, rather than just being led by a nostalgia for the lilong. This approach is necessary to define how space is utilised, justified, and re-justified by the resident users, the people who stand in the middle ground between the physical form of their micro-communities and the ever-changing culture of China’s largest city. Does Shanghai accept the lilong as its dominant dwelling culture? Or have financial factors resulted in these houses and neighbourhoods becoming as important as they have done?

The suggested primary research methodology is a ‘lighter’ version of ethnography as presented by Jan Wampler and this author in the work Community-Oriented Urban Housing Design for Beijing: Strategies for Lmrhd and Urban Design (2008). In this paper, some basic study methods were suggested, such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews, which architects and urban designers can employ in order to understand the dynamic of communities. From this study of the community, the strategy paper proposed a series of experimental designs that represented ideas of ‘community-oriented housing’. That is to say, mixed-use, mixed-metre, and mixed-housing type developments, as well as humanised and walkable neighbourhoods, and high-density, integrated open space, and environmental morphology. The study revealed that the process of familiarisation is crucial to architecture. In other words, ‘the site visit’ is a pathway to the preliminary understanding of the quality of space alongside the requirements of any programme. Without this first process of deep familiarisation with the locality of the site, architects will fail to design a work that works and, as Jan Wampler points out, ‘[i]n fact, many architects contributed to the problem by designing buildings [and their space] that do not fit with the culture or the landscape and do not make places’.4 However, it would be unecenomical for an architect, commission to study and design a housing project, to spend a week or a month ‘hanging out’ like an anthropologist in the community to try and understand how things work in order to understand the dynamic of communities. From this study of the community, the strategy paper proposed a series of experimental designs that represented ideas of ‘community-oriented housing’. That is to say, mixed-use, mixed-metre, and mixed-housing type developments, as well as humanised and walkable neighbourhoods, and high-density, integrated open space, and environmental morphology. The study revealed that the process of familiarisation is crucial to architecture. In other words, ‘the site visit’ is a pathway to the preliminary understanding of the quality of space alongside the requirements of any programme. Without this first process of deep familiarisation with the locality of the site, architects will fail to design a work that works and, as Jan Wampler points out, ‘[i]n fact, many architects contributed to the problem by designing buildings [and their space] that do not fit with the culture or the landscape and do not make places’.4 However, it would be unecenomical for an architect, commission to study and design a housing project, to spend a week or a month ‘hanging out’ like an anthropologist in the community to try and understand how things work in order to produce a good design. Instead, the lighter version of ethnography for housing research requires architects to pay attention to what they observe and to ensure they be keen to ask questions about the rationality behind certain activities that take place in the community, rather than to just look at the characteristics and physical condition of the existing architecture. That is, it is possible and feasible—to conduct an ethnography study of an urban community in order to derive the true understanding of the community for design.5 (see fig. 4).

Such fieldwork aims at assessing the nature of lilong neighbourh-ourbans via: a) the organisation of public space in such communities; b) the casual formation of semi-private space; c) the social networks (community networks including clubs, exercise groups, religious groups, chess clubs, etc.), which constitute spatial arrangement; and d) the personality of inhabitants actively creating and/or maintaining both

What I have learned specifically from my study of lilong is the ‘condition of resistance’ in the environment of a community that has an important role to play in the design of social space.

The principle methodology would be participant observation. While this could be construed as a ‘passive method’, ethnographers can never be passive in reality. In fact, people are going to expect contributions back from the field ethnographer and that is always a negotiated process. Regarding the research methodology, this research clearly distinguishes such methods from Participatory Action Research (PAR) which requires full involvement of people in every aspect of research towards a goal (or best cases, of their choosing) for principle or development. Another viable method is Participatory Appraisal (PA), which employs techniques such as ‘Photovoice’—giving selected groups a disposable camera and have them photograph their neighbours to record the community’s strengths and concerns. The aim of the method is twofold: firstly, to get the participants to engage in a group process of critical reflection on the community and secondly, to develop an opportunity to look into the deeper content of the community that cannot be seen using the outsider’s perspective. In fact, the PA method (developed by Robert Chambers) is widely used in international development studies, with the aim of incorporating the knowledge and opinions of people in the planning and management of development projects.

Conclusion

The study of contemporary urban housing in large and emerging Chinese cities should be a fundamental attempt to understand residents’ lives and their inevitable processes of adaptation to the ever-changing cultural context controlled by a set of formal and informal rules and regulations that differ from other places in the world. The latest developmental stage of community-oriented urban housing design sparks important debate on the relationship between people and the built environment in the recent study of spatiality. This is a place where the limiting knowledge to physical space alone is redundant and where ethnography and anthropological work can fill in the gaps. What have I learned specifically from my study of the lilong is the ‘condition of resistance’ in the environment of a community that has an important role to play in the design of social space. With the understanding of such conditions, architecture and urban design could break new ground for design with—more than just psychological—anthropological realism.

Whereas previous studies from various angles prescribe two extreme paths toward the development of Shanghai urbanism in order to cope with political change and economic reform, it is hoped that the suggestions contained in this paper could help to establish a long overdue ‘missing middle ground’. The study of the actuality of the community is urged. The goal is by no means to suggest policy or to advocate the preservation of lilong but, rather, to contribute towards a useful argument on the benefit of a balance between history and the contemporary condition of the city. Indeed, the aim of this paper has been to contribute vital substance to academic discourse on such housing typologies through an ethnographic view of dynamic communal life and the socio-spatial impacts of property led development in Shanghai’s lilong neighbourhoods.

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