URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Throughout China's turbulent social history, Shanghai's communal housing has stood as a reminder of its past. But does it have any place in China's future?

The preservation of a city's rich cultural heritage may require a balancing act when weighed against market demand. Shanghai's historic row houses, known as the 'Lilong', are a legacy of western influence after China's defeat in the Opium War and its loss of commercial coastal cities to foreign powers. Now these houses are facing extinction at the hands of post-reform property developers seeking valuable land for high-rise condo development. Once the realm of local servants, the Lilong houses have come to symbolise the pressures of industrialisation as migrants from across the country have settled in them. They represent China's first encounter with spatial modernity.

Soon after Shanghai became a treaty port in 1842, British developers built Lilong houses to provide basic accommodation for Chinese labourers. A typical Lilong neighbourhood is a walled community composed of a main lane running all or half way across each block - as 'Li' means 'neighbourhood'; 'Long' means 'lanes'. Branch lanes connect perpendicularly to the main lane in order to pack as many housing units as possible into any single cluster. The developers saw this layout of Lilong neighbourhood as the most economical and efficient way to accommodate high densities, foregoing any concern for spatial needs or appropriate sanitary conditions.

The residents did not see the limitations as an obstacle, and instead found unique ways to flexibly utilise the space to meet their daily needs. They turned a narrow circulation path, initially designed to minimise construction costs, into an every-day 'community'...
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In the late 1990s, Shanghai's local government fully embraced property-led redevelopment schemes to maximise revenue from 'under-utilised' land. These schemes included demolishing existing older, low-density neighbourhoods in favour of hyper-urbanisation. This was undertaken without any consideration of societal cost, such as family displacement, gentrification, and social stratification, let alone more complex issues in regard to cultural identity and historical value.

Today, Shanghai is undergoing unprecedented urban development, due to economic reform and skyrocketing land values, both of which tend to encourage more high-rise construction. Aside from the sterile high-rise towers that have sprung up since China opened its doors to capitalist-style economic development in the early 1980s, the urban form of Shanghai remains dominated by neighbourhoods of the low-rise Lilong, which crisscross the city in urban super-blocks.

Studies of spatial consumerism have usually been based on economics and quantitative sociology. In the context of China's abrupt transition to a pro-growth, consumer driven society, these techniques have proven inadequate, not only when studying the underpinning politics of how 'space' is perceived and consumed, but also when seeking a critical analysis of how the change has altered late-socialist spatial restructuring. Today, the top-down "Better City, Better Life" pursuit for urbanisation is met with resistance from the people on the ground. In light of this referential shift precipitated by exploding urbanisation, it is beneficial to embrace urban anthropology to fully understand the underlying cultural conditions within the framework of society.

When China began the enforcement of the infamous "One Child Policy" in the early 1980s, the curtailing of the size of the nuclear family afforded the opportunity to build high-rise dwellings with small-cell rooms. This resonated with the government's anti-sprawl efforts to advance a viable model of the modern Chinese City as vertical mass housing, thereby conserving ground space for commercial purposes. Unlike the traditional courtyard houses and the communities built around small neighbourhood-lanes, this inevitable segregation of residential and commercial sectors leaves little room for interaction between citizens, nor does it promote an overall sense of belonging in society. Other factors within post-Mao China that exacerbate this insufficiency include the accelerated speed of rural to urban migration and an economic revolution based on consumerism. As a result, community ambience has been overlooked in the conflict between

During the first decade of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform (1978-88), the Chinese Communist Party urged local governments to invest in entrepreneurial-style urban development, prompting the first coastal cities to travel the path towards capitalist investment. This resulted in the vast destruction of a number of Lilong neighbourhoods, making way for monumental open spaces and high-rise development.
Despite being small and mostly ill-suited to social interaction, residents of high-rise apartments have accepted and enjoyed their 'mod cons', such as natural ventilation, modern central heating and cooling, and en-suite bathrooms. These facilities cannot be added to traditional housing, where the infrastructure is at least a century old. Although the arrangement of rooms in high-rises reduces opportunities for traditional social interaction, Chinese residents continue to thrive by finding alternative ways to socialise. The service areas and hallways have replaced the 'community corridors' of the Lilong, providing spaces in which to talk, eat and even exercise. Now, pitted against the national agenda of historical preservation is the commodity of convenience. But if we trace the roots of the Lilong, we do not find original invention or cause for nostalgia, but simply buildings designed by foreigners to accommodate Chinese labourers. So, how can we justify the importance of the Lilong?

Western architectural scholars, especially from North America and Europe, have offered a series of proposals for housing design in China. Among the most disappointing design proposals have been those that only suggest 'forms' based on the historical appearance of the Lilong, without considering whether the form reflects the community's dynamism. The Lilong is an appropriate case study not only due to its historic quality, but also because it sits on the threshold of change.

Scholars often perceive Lilong as housing with a fascinating history, without asking whether the residents who have lived in the Lilong share their enthusiasm. The advantages of an apartment unit in a high-rise building include the low maintenance cost of a studio-type room, cheap rent, and, especially good ventilation and natural lighting. These are comforts that 'houses built for labourers', like the Lilong, cannot provide.

Often when the Lilong are razed to the ground in order to make way for high-rises, former residents are offered the option of moving back into the new accommodation. As a result, they are able to hold on to the social history that emerged from the close-knit structure of the generations of neighbours who lived in the Lilong, while enjoying the benefits of better housing. For others not so lucky, a move to the new (sometimes less developed) fringe localities is necessitated in the hope that the rapid expansion of the city will soon bring them the convenience promised through public transportation and urban infrastructure. It is these citizens' responsibility to earn their way back into the city's folds.

A nd so we find contradiction in traditional sociological and historical research, which presents high-rise development as the cause of diminishing social bonds within communities, and necessitates the preservation of the Lilong. Along with the change in family sizes, there have been changes in the preferences of housing among multi-generational Shanghai residents and immigrants for which the Lilong may or may not be the answer.

Historians claim the Lilong has been an efficient form of housing for Shanghai residents, particularly from the 1980s to the present day. Yet such assertions rely on theoretical analysis and nostalgia. To date, there has been no ethnographic investigation into the personal experience of Lilong residents to determine the efficacy of such dwellings. We need to know how space is utilised by the residents, who mediates between the communities and the city as a whole. We also need to know if Shanghai can accept the Lilong as its dominant dwelling structure. Is it purely financial necessity that has rendered such housing significant? Who are the Chinese who have 'inhabited' these spaces and how do they understand all the changes they have witnessed? And does the smaller family size resulting from the One Child Policy affect housing preferences? Only first-hand experience in Lilong communities can answer such questions and shed light on this unlikely phenomenon, with ramifications for developing urban spaces and ageing metropolises alike.

Residents of any city tend to covertly resist changes imposed upon them from above. While appearing to conform to the wishes of the authorities, they will continue living as generations before them have done. If those responsible for creating their living spaces took this entrenched attitude into account, both architects and academics would be better placed to create living spaces which retain both a pleasing form and a useful function.

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LEFT | Factory Construction, Outside Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, 2004
Hold Out
Shanghai, 2004
PHOTOGRAPHY | Edward Burtynsky’s photographic depictions of global industrial landscapes are included in the collections of over 50 major museums around the world. His images have appeared in numerous periodicals, including The Smithsonian, National Geographic and The New York Times.

His book, Burtynsky: China: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky, explores the intricate link between industry and nature, combining the raw elements of mining, quarrying, shipping, oil production and recycling in eloquent, highly expressive visions that find beauty and humanity in the most unlikely of places. Burtynsky’s latest body of work provides visual form to China’s industrial and urban transformation, where industrial forces are gathering on a scale that the world has never experienced before.

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