Low and dense urban elements, Shanghai, China

Project description by author

Over the past 15 years, the majority of new residential construction in Shanghai's city center has targeted the high-end luxury market—providing over-sized apartments in high-rise and often gated communities. While the verbality of these compounds aims to project an image of an impressive built form within the city, their quasi-historic ornamental nature seeks to portray the idea of European eminence. The high vacancy rates of these complexes, however, emphasize their lack of viability for Shanghai's future. In addition, their lack of a direct engagement with the street sends the unfortunate message that Shanghai is not a city for pedestrians. Meanwhile, the still quite recently prominent low and dense turn-of-the-century lane houses of Shanghai, Lilongs, continue to be destroyed by private residential developers. The public policy which permits this destruction of historic urban fabric in favor of a grand city image, complete with tall towers and elevated highways, is short-sighted. Despite the city's master plan, which emphasizes that new construction should be harmonious with the city's existing historic buildings, and that it should complement preservation and conservation of any surrounding older sites, economic policy continues to support development which has the possibility for profound detrimental effects on Shanghai's unique character.

This project argues against the increasingly generic high-rise trend in Shanghai and other large cities in China. It favors a more reciprocal infill strategy of preserving urban heritage and re-introducing low-rise high-density fragments. In order to realize the anticipated additional housing space the existing buildings shall be extended and renovated, courtyards shall be built and the public areas revitalized. Such a transformation will strengthen social cohesion and shared responsibility. This community building process of a small scale also facilitates joint investments in alternative energy production, rainwater harvesting and in other sustainable endeavors. The project is commended due to its valuable contribution to the evolution of urban typologies that manage change with social and cultural continuities. 

Relevance to target issues by author

Quantum change and transferability

The idea to abandon the prevailing trend in most mega cities to erect taller and taller buildings for housing or business purposes and to replace it by the proposed concept "low and dense" represents without any doubt a quantum change which is easily transferable to many other places with similar conditions as Shanghai. 

Ethical standards and social equity

Soft evolution of the existing instead of radical replacement by new high-rise buildings allows the residents to be part of the development. It respects the cultural heritage and keeps the social fabric alive. Inhabitants are able to shape their future dwellings and neighborhood according to their needs and preferences instead of being migrated by force to a new living environment. 

Ecological quality and energy conservation

It is evident that new buildings can make use of the latest technologies and materials. Hence they should have less negative impact on the environment and generate more energy savings than old ones. If one strives for an honest and comprehensive overall balance of the energy and material fluxes also the soft transformation of the existing building stock reveals astonishing potential.

Economic performance and compatibility

Developing the existing buildings is in many cases far more economical than demolition and replacement. It also allows a step by step transformation taking into account the individual and collective capacities for change and the availability of financial resources.

Contextual and aesthetic impact

The construction of new buildings based on a tabula rasa philosophy doesn't guarantee by itself a better aesthetic appearance. In contrary the contextual balance is much more likely if the transformation is based on the existing buildings and the traditional urban fabric. Heritage preservation isn't just a trendy buzzword but it helps people to retain and nourish personal identity and social cohesion.