The Reborn Street Life of the Traditional Community in the Urban Reform

As the forces of globalization sweep across the world, many cities, especially in developing countries, rush to catch up with the opportunity for their economic and social development; meanwhile they anxiously dismantle massive traditionally low-density communities to meet with the everexpanding housing demand and economic growth. When urban heritage gradually dies out in the disordered urban fabric as a result of mass-produced housing projects, policy makers recognize the significance of city identity, and then cast their eager sights upon the historic residential community. Due and economic growth increasing population, urban reform does not stop at the front gate of the traditional community. Is there a possibility of increasing the density of communities, as well as preserving in positive aspects the traditional neighborhood, even though it sounds like: "You can not have your cake and eat it too." In the study of new neighborhoods, Michael Southworth, professor at UC Berkeley, and Eran Ben-Joseph, Professor at MIT state, "a key element in the shaping of cities has been ideas of what the residential street work should be, since streets are the public frameworks within which neighborhood life takes place"1. If the public street promotes interpersonal connection in a community, how can neighborhood streets be more than a passage for traffic? What should be the character and pattern of streets to rebuild the neighborhood? What activities should happen in the streets? How do the elements of the street relate one to another? Can we develop the street life into a vertical direction or other multiple directions, instead of its original ground level? In this paper, I will discuss current preservation projects in residential communities historically Shanghai, China, and the traditional street life in these communities. In addition to critically examining the Shanghai model, which cannot accommodate the constant increasing housing demands, I'm going to analyze successful European projects to consider my methods of transforming of the street life in the Shanghai residential community. My research is aimed preserving the character of the traditional street life within the contemporary needs of economic growth and higher requirements. How can the public and private spaces of contemporary Shanghai communities organized reflect be to traditional street life that promotes interpersonal and community interaction?

Shanghai Shikumen Residential Community

Shanghai, located on the eastern coast, is the largest center of commerce and finance in mainland China. Since Shanghai opened its doors to foreign trade due to the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, western culture has thrust its roots deeply into the soil of traditional Shanghai's culture, which gave the birth of the unique architectural style: the Shikumen Residences, which means "stone gate".

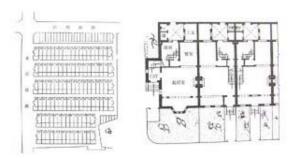


Fig.1 The community planning and the residence plan in the Shikumen community, Shanghai, China, Li Zhenyu, " City. Housing. City", 2004 by Southeast University Press, p.23

The form of the Shikumen residences came from Chinese southeastern residence, with a front yard, living rooms, bedrooms, a

kitchen, bathrooms and storage. (Fig.1) Unlike traditional Chinese residential community that arranges several residences surrounding a yard, the Shikumen residences are connected along with straight alleys in the typical mode of townhouses, commonly seen in Anglo-American countries. In the early 20th century, the Shikumen residences were popular in the upper class to demonstrate their social status. When it comes to the middle 20th century, the Shikumen residences became to the main accommodated of housing and approximately 60% of Shanghai's population.

Since the economic reforms of 1990, people nationwide have surged into Shanghai for better job opportunities, which resulted in the housing crunch. To meet the explosive housing demand, the government approved the "sweep-out" reform policy to replace the low-density Shikumen residences with grand, but inhospitable, high-rise dwellings. Then, the Shikumen residences gradually faded out of the historic urban stage. From an economic aspect, this reform was extremely successful on investing the minimum capital to satisfy the massive housing demands. However, viewed from the architectural and urban cultural respects, it decreased the architectural diversity in this historic city, destroyed the original urban fabric and continuity, and changed social lifestyle. The historic and culturally influenced neighborhood died out along with the Shikumen residences.

Confronted with this huge cultural loss, Chinese architects voiced their dissent against the ongoing "sweep-out" policy and made great efforts to save these traditional residences. However, how to save them becomes a Gordian knot. Preserve them as historic museums or give them new breath? After years of controversial attempts, there have three representative projects endeavoring to revivify the Shikumen residence: the Shanghai Xintiandi project, the Bugaoli project, and the Tianzifang project.

Shanghai Xintiandi, located at the downtown, has a site area of 128 acres of land. Like preservation methods generally developed in European cities, Xintiandi is reconstructed by preserving the "outer skin" of the residence, and while altering its structure and functions into commercial use. Antique in appearance

at the exterior, the interior design of the Shikumen residences employ modern design and details. The residences altered into restaurants are specializing in French, American, German, British, Brazilian, Italian, Japanese, as well as local dishes. They have outdoor seating that provides an active transforming space from its historic skin to its romantic interior space. At South Block, a modern shopping mall that blends of entertainment facilities, fitness center, stands elegantly as the back curtain to highlight on the "new" Shikumen building in the front of it. When the past meets with the present here, eastern culture also meets west.

The Shanghai Xintiandi project is successful in developing the commercial value of the Shikumen residences, but it is far from the best solution to deal with the current difficulties. Its high construction cost presents a huge obstacle to its avid followers. Furthermore, monotonous function of use only preserves the skin of the Shikumen residences, rather than the essence. It's hard to imagine the affable neighborhood and vivid street life in the surrounding bars and restaurants.

The Bugaoli project, also called "CITE BOURGOGNE", located in the old French concession, was designed by architects in the 1930s to host the wealthier class. Taking into consideration architectural quality, the Shikumen residences here is aimed to preserve its quality. residential Specific measures include: restoring the building's according to the original design, improving the physical properties of the outer wall and the roof, rebuilding the bathrooms, and upgrading the electrical system, plumbing system and the fire alarm system.

With the improvement of the living standards, residents are supposed to enjoy their living conditions. Surprisingly, as I interviewed some of residents. demonstrated their strong will to move out of that community. One man explained: residents here are low-income people who cannot afford themselves to new apartments when the house price in Shanghai soars up to 12,000 RMB (1,700 USD) per square meter. It's so crowed and noisy that people can hear their neighbors' television program clearly when they are going to fall asleep. The Bugaoli project considers the historic and cultural values of the Shikumen residences well, but ignores the local residents' concerns and wishes. It's still open to discuss whether this project is successful or not.

The Tianzifang project is at Taikang Road, where artists gather in downtown Shanghai. In this project, several blocks in the Shikumen residential community developed into Creative Art Park that includes galleries, artist studios, art shops and coffee shops, while the rest of the community is preserved for the residential use.

This idea worked extremely well at the beginning. Since many top Chinese artists opened their studios there in 1998, Tianzifang developed rapidly from its original alleyways into a sprawling labyrinth with galleries, artist studios and shops. Untill last year, Tianzifang Creative Art Park became one of the foremost creative centers in China with 137 art institutes from 26 countries. Commercial tax-income is used to improve residents' living standards and environmental quality. However, the revitalization of the Tianzifang project is not welcomed by everyone. Opposition comes from local residents, especially those who live near the Creative Art Park. They heatedly argue that have lost their peaceful living environment, and resolutely oppose all activities that disturb residents. In some extreme cases, groups of residents flock to the area to voice their dissent against the ongoing development. A retired teacher in the nearby primacy school angrily described the situation: the heavy music from the bars shakes my bed every night till morning. I'm 67 years old this year. How can an aged man tolerate it every night! every night! Additionally, as you see, to expand their business, they illegally built temporary buildings and stocked goods on the emergency roads for fire trucks! How can fire trucks come in to save us if the buildings with wooden floors are on fire? If one residence is on fire, it's easy to spread out into the whole community professional control! His concern made sense. It would be a disaster for this historic community with high-density population on

Tianzifang project reveals that one can introduce cultural and commercial elements

into the residential community, turning it to a multi-use complexity. However, this project cosmetically contributes to the improvement of environmental quality through planting trees, building new parks and other entertainment facilities; at the same time it leads the local community into social conflict and chaos. This outcome strays far away from architects' initially sweet dreams.

Upon reviewing the abovementioned projects in the Shikumen residential community, though all of the attempts are positive, they still cannot meet urgent housing demands. From the urban scale, the Shikumen residential communities occupy massive prime downtown land with low-density accommodation, but from the community scale, considering the fact that several families share one house, the heavy burden of the growing population has it "hard to breathe". To increase density, it is inevitable to build multiple dwellings or high-rise buildings in this community, which means many Shikumen residences will be removed. Thus, the following questions: Which part of the shikumen residential community will be replaced and which part should preserved, and how can we preserve them? Should we preserve their historic skin as the Xintiandi project or preserve them only for residential use as the Bugaoli project? How can we reconcile the conflict between preserving the existing community and developing the new area? Is there a compromise between resurrecting the residential Shikumen community and increasing its living density? There must be a way to reinforce the historic character of the Shikumen community, rather than wiping them out.

The significance of the street life in the Shikumen residential community.

The streets, which Rob Krier defines as "a product of the spread of a settlement once houses have been built on all available space around its central square"², not only act as a skeleton of the city for land distribution, but also serve as a stage for people's social life. In The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, William H. Whyte exemplifies people's activity on this stage as the regularity of chance meetings, the tendency to reciprocal gestures in street conferences, the rhythms of the three-phase good-bye. According to

Whyte's observation from neighboring buildings, he concludes that ordinary street life can attract people to pause to look at what's going on. He describes the street life as amphi-theater, with several tiers of people looking at people who are looking at people who are looking at the show.³



Fig.2 The Street Life In The Shikumen Residential Community, Shanghai, China, Author

The street life in the Shikumen residential community echoes Whyte's words as Chinese "amphi-theater". The width of alleys is approximately 10-12 feet, a little wider than the traditional scale. Residents advantage of spare rooms to build up tiny gardens, sinks, chess tables and bicycle parking lots. It's not unusual to see elderly people read newspapers in the morning and play chess or enjoy sunshine in the afternoon; children play games and run around after school; women talk and laugh when they prepare food near the sink at dinner time; men discuss and argue some political or social issues after dinner. (Fig.2) There is the local habit that residents hang their wet clothing out to dry under the sun. The dancing clothing waves like colorful flags flying over alleys. At the crossing of streets, there usually is a small square, decorated by cloud-kissing trees and vigorous flowers, acting as the public stage of the community. Residents gather together spontaneously to sing or dance there to celebrate the urban life.

The complex and diverse street life of the ground level is the beauty of human civilization. People are social animals, living through interpersonal ties. It is the need for people to communicate in order to survive and have better lives. Thus, the street might be something more than mere circulation. It provides an open space to encourage people to meet with each other, which is the basis of real communication. Meanwhile, the street acts as an intangible bridge between private life and the community, collecting vivid elements of life. It is especially true that street life builds the affable neighborhood character that makes traditional life so

intriguing. Can we rebuild this street life in a new community? Is there a possibility of transforming the traditional street life from its initial ground level to the vertical direction?

Street life in Western Society

In Europe, the street is a part of people's daily lives. In this respect, Italians have their unique affection for street life. Yoshinobu Ashihara claims in The Aesthetic Townscape⁴ that Italians view the street as the extenstion of their living room, the place to meet with friends and have parties. The material built up the wall is also used to pave the street, thus the boundary between public space and private space will soften imperceptibly, especially when people open the window or the door. Aldo Rossi describes the street life of residential community in The Architecture of the City: The street is a rectangular stage set where encounters, gossip, games, fights, jealousies, courtship, and displays of pride occur.⁵ He states the residential community is a significant part of "collective memory"⁶ of city.

Similar to the situation happening in China now, most European cities experienced the industrial development and urban reform in the 19th-20th century. Soaring population and housing demands pose quite a challenge to the "collective memory" of city. The "Bye-Law"⁷ Street Ordinance in England in 1875 is a case in point. In one project in Leeds, 238 residents were moved out and 59 residences were dismantled. Unfortunately, Nothing remained of the past intimacy...nor are there any mitigating effects from nature---no intervening grass or trees between the street and the house.8 The uniformity of the layout was destroyed, as well as the urban fabric. European architects recognized if the golden street life in the traditional community has gone, it would be difficult to return. Aldo Rossi states: The English architects rediscovered a constant theme in residential typological models when they realized that the breaking up of slums brought with its simultaneous breakup of communities which had traditionally lived in high-density areas and which, without undergoing substantial changes, were unable to establish new roots automatically in the low-density, suburban areas to which they were reassigned. 9 There have been extraordinary attempts to revive the traditional neighborhood in the new projects.

The Geschwister School school at Lunen, Germany, a secondary school for girls, was designed by Hans Scharoun in 1962. Scharoun defined universal classroom as "class room unit"10 and developed it as a small flat, called "Klassenwohnung ('class-dwelling') 11 . He planned the school like a small, child-friendly city and translated as " schoolhoods"12 in the same sense as neighborhoods in town planning. Scharoun thought education should develop general experience and the gradual formation of consciousness, which allows the individual to find the right contact with public life and with the political community. 13 Thus, class unities have distinct boundaries and identities by socially differentiated organization of space. Each class unit is considered as a social group and connected by an enlarged passage as the framework of neighborhood. The enlarged passage with an open courtyard is cloister"14, called а "meeting which generate encourages girls to meetings. Scharoun attempted to "turn circulation spaces into something more than mere passages"15, Thus, the circulation is carefully designed drops in encourage communal discussion.

Scharoun organized spaces based on the neighborhood network in the community, to provide girls a sense of belonging and protection and then to help them understand the idea of social responsibility. He created adequate open spaces for girls' collective activities and meeting opportunities and realized the idea that circulation spaces is "something more than mere passages" 16.

Inspired by the street-like quality of the Geschwister School, German architect Peter Hübner conceived the new school as a village with the community network Gelsenkirchen, Germany. Hübner emphasized a concept of a family of rooms, rather than strictly functional combination. To recreate the neighborhood in the community, Hübner organized a series of public spaces on the main street for communication. The passage, beginning with entrance, stretches itself through cafeteria, library, theater, cinema and chapel. Teaching spaces are designed as shops on the street used by different groups at different times, while classrooms are conceived as terraced housing.

Hans Scharoun, Peter developed each pupil's social responsibility them in planning involving construction. This idea came from his construction experience when he was a child at the school at Gelsenkirchen. During the course of collective activities, pupils had to negotiate with their immediate neighbors to build a "community" with a uniform design arrange. He believed encouraging pupils to participate in these construction projects would enhance their relationship personal responsibility, which can establish some kind of harmony between humanity and nature."17

As his predecessors, German architects Günter and Stefan Behnisch are hooked on the idea that street is more then the passage and developed it further as a horiontal and vertical neighborhood in their Genzyme Center project, Cambridge, USA. Behnisch established an atrium into the center of the building as a trunk that spreads its "branches"---paths--- to all twelve levels, integrating all of the departments. The space surrounding the atrium abounds with various terraces and gardens that encourage spontaneous meetings. Paths linking terraces in the horizontal direction are comparatively narrow, which recalls the experience of "a city with narrow streets and squares, with space both narrow and broad, composing and views into the height"¹⁸. Meanwhile, stairs around the atrium link terraces between levels, as extended alleys to integrate public space in the vertical direction. (Fig.3)



Fig.3 Genzyme Center, Cambridge, USA, Gunter Behnisch, Stefan Behnisch, Gunther Schaller,

"Behnisch, Behnisch & Partner, Building and Design", 2003 by Birkhauser, p.149

Behnisch gave the building a distinct hierarchy between the public space and the private space. He delicately organized the public space around the atrium, as pubic gardens, reception, visitors waiting and reading areas, and later developed space gradually from public to private by the arrangement of the open work station, private work areas, and closed offices. Social hierarchy divided workers into social groups and arranged them into various spaces. Behnisch aimed to create social identity to inform and reinforce a "we"¹⁹ feeling, and then developed the neighborhood between different workstations.

In addition, Green plants located at different levels create a vertical climate circle to entire building. spontaneously gather around green plants for rest and relaxation, which increases the opportunity for communication between workers. Recesses in the vertical direction result in incidental layers that perform as places for observation, as well as the place for being observed. They give people more choices when they engage collective activities.

Behnisch continued to explore the idea of linking paths in horizontal and vertical neighborhoods in the RiverParc project. The RiverParc project, located at the downtown core of Pittsburgh, USA, is a mixed-use community that offers seven hundred residential units with retail shops, restaurants and leisure facilities. Behnisch aimed at creating an environment in which walking is a priority and the neighborhood can thrive by intensive use of public space. At RiverParc community, Eighth Street is paved for pedestrian to act as a community's spine to connect diverse public spaces such as the theater, restaurants, and shops, as well as green gardens, and landscapes. People can satisfy their daily necessities including their jobs in the two-block walking neighborhood without automobile. Behnisch believed, the pedestrian interaction and general activities that occur daily along the waterfront really engage a multitude of individuals and their varied interests.²⁰ Buildings incorporate abundant ground-floor amenities, so that public streets and squares provide opportunities for neighbors to sit and socialize, taking ownership of, and animating the public sphere. Comparing pedestrian streets with four outdoor public plazas in the horizontal direction, Behnisch inserted various scales of green gardens wrapping to whole residential buildings as open spaces for collective activities in the vertical direction.



Fig.4 RiverParc, Pittsburgh, USA, Greenmnp, "Behnisch Architekten –Pittsburgh RiverPark", 2008 by http://green.myninjaplease.com/?p=1272

Similar to Genzyme Center, he used stairs as paths to link gardens to an integrated communication-system in the sky. (Fig.4) This vertical garden network serves both as staggered spaces for occasional meeting opportunities and as a micro-climate oasis to regulate the humidity in the summer and strong cold in the winter. Behnisch realized his goals of rebuilding a pedestrian-friendly "life in the sky".

The case studies demonstrate several important principles of re-establishing the street life in new ways: 1. Public space along street can encourage people communicate and increase the opportunity of collective activity; 2. The street life in the vertical direction can be realized through building public spaces with horizontal and vertical neighborhoods; 3. Developing a sense of belonging and protection can reinforce social identity in the street life; 4. Green spaces can be regarded as ideal meeting places for interpersonal communication.

Rediscovery the street life in the Shikumen Residential Communities

In the Shikumen residential community, there are two things we need to do: preserve the main streets in the community, and develop the street life in multiple directions.

The main streets, with the traditional scales of the street and the city fabric, are the most positive aspects to preserve and rebuild the street life. Residences along the main streets can be used for cultural or commercial purposes, such as galleries, bookstores, teahouses, and retail shops. Restaurants also can be considered on the main streets, because "Food attracts people who attract more people."²¹ The crossing space of the main or primary streets can be enlarged as meeting places with green plants and seating areas. Residences surrounding the main streets can be preserved in their initial form, while the rest of the area will build multiple dwellings and high-rise residential buildings to increase community density. When you enter the community, you will experience the traditional street life at the beginning of the main or primary community streets. As you move through the traditional preserved area, you transition through spaces for collective activities, and, then, to 4-5 new multiple dwellings, and, finally, to high-rise residential buildings. Street life will not be dead at the end of the alley, but thrive along its increasing height. To enhance the sense of belonging and protection, several families will form a small vertical neighborhood unit in the sky, and share a green garden with semi-public spaces for cooking and drying clothing. Then stairs, sky-bridges, and paths in the horizontal direction will link all green spaces into a walkable network to experience street life vertically.

Jane Jacobs once said: "Think of a city, and what comes to mind? Its streets. If a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull."²² The street is a harmonious dialogue between the human and the place, and a unique bridge between collective memory and modern civilization. With the onset of globalization and industrial modernization, the street can be seen as a new way to give traditional communities a life in their new urban form.

Spaces" 1980 by The Conservation Foundation, p. 59

Yoshinobu Ashihara, "The Aesthetic Townscape", 1983 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

⁵ Also Rossi, "The Architecture of the City", 1982 by The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies and The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, p.86

⁶ Rossi, p.86

⁷ Michael Southworth and Eran Ben-Joseph, p.37

⁸ Michael Southworth and Eran Ben-Joseph, p.37

⁹ Rossi, p.85

Peter Blundell Jones, "Hans Scharoun A Monograph", 1978by Gordon Fraser, London, p.18

¹¹ Jones, p.18

¹² Jones, p.17

¹³ Jones, p.18

¹⁴ Jones, p.18

¹⁵ Jones, p.18

¹⁶ Jones, p.18

Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till, "Architecture and Participation", 2005 by Spon Press, London and New York, p.161

¹⁸ Gunter Behnisch, Stefan Behnisch, Gunther Schaller, "Behnisch, Behnisch & Partner, Building and Design", 2003 by Birkhauser, p.155

¹⁹ Gunter Behnisch, Stefan Behnisch, Gunther Schaller, p.78

²⁰ Greenmnp, "Behnisch Architekten –Pittsburgh RiverPark", 2008 by http://green.myninjaplease.com/?p=1272

²¹ Whyte, p.34

²² Jane Jacobs, "The Death and Life of Great American Cities", 1961 by Random House, New York, p.29

¹ Michael Southworth and Eran Ben-Joseph, "Streets And The Shaping Of Towns And Cities", 1997 by McGraw-Hill, p.2

² Rob Krier, "Urban Space" 1979 by Rizzoli International Publications. Inc, p.17

³ William H. Whyte, "The Social Life of Small Urban

Critical Commentary: The Intersection between Written Thesis and Design Thesis

Conclusion:

Throughout the thesis process, the focus of my research is always to preserve the character of the traditional street life within the contemporary needs of economic growth and higher density requirements, and organize the public and private spaces of contemporary Shanghai communities to reflect traditional street life that promotes interpersonal and community interaction. Besides those four essential principles I concluded in my written thesis, there has two key concepts in my design process: Vertical Walking Experience and Neighborhood Unit.

The Vertical Walking Experience does not mean simply to rotate the walking experience on the traditional street to the vertical direction. The Vertical Walking Experience should be rooted on a walkable system, expanding both on the horizontal level and the vertical direction; meanwhile, it should combine multiple traffic system and public programs into an entity. This walkable system can work well by itself theoretically, but it is a challenge to allow it adapts to an existing context with economical, political, social and cultural influences. Therefore, the site analysis is a fundamental and indispensable step in the design process.

Duolun community, a traditional Shikumen community, is located in the Hongkou District, northern part of Shanghai. There basically have two terms to describe the characters of the Duolun community: Duolun Road and Subway Station. Duolun Road is located at the eastern edge of the Duolun community. It is a very small street, but witnessed the historic and social

changes of Shanghai in the past a hundred years. There are many renowned art galleries, art studios and cafes along the street, endowed with "an open museum of Shang-style artwork". Ιt would intriguing to preserve the artistic values of the Duolun Road and lengthen the playful walking experience to the main streets of the Duolun community. Another interesting character is that a new Subway Station is planned to be built on the western edge of the Duolun community, which will turn this traditional community to a busy terminal open to the whole city.

In terms of these considerations, three plazas are arranged into the Duolun community on the eastern edge, the central part and the western edge of the Duolun community, to respectively serve people from Duolun Road and other communities surrounding the Duolun community, those from the Duolun community, and from the whole city. Three main streets, acting as the framework of the street life, connect different open spaces and public programs, bringing people the playful walking experience originated from the Duolun Road to the terminal plaza. The end of the mains streets is not the end of the walking experience. A walkable system grows on the terminal plaza encourages people to go the terminal, up to entertainment programs and residential Neighborhood Units, extending their walking experience vertically.

Another key word is the Neighborhood Unit, which is the core concept through the whole design. According to the analysis of

the traditional neighborhood in the Duolun community, it shows a good neighborhood has its appropriate size. It cannot be too large, which make people lose interests to communicate with their neighbors; while it cannot be too small either, which is hard to give people identity and a sense of belonging. Therefore, to build a good neighborhood, every three floors of the high-rise residential buildings are divided to constitute of a large Neighborhood Unit with three small Neighborhood Units. Each small Neighborhood Unit has eight to ten families, organized surrounding courtyard with three floor height. The courtyard has its individual circulation and green space, performing as the passage as well as public space for observing and being observed. It builds an intangible bridge between the private life and the community, collecting vivid elements of life. People will spend time there on chatting, exercising, reading papers and playing chess, spontaneously and contingently. Besides, a walkable system, with public programs as the Daycare Center, Fitness Center, Chess Room and Teahouses, connects each courtyard at the back side and integrate them into an entity. Then, the vertical walking experience from public space to semi-public space and then to private space will realize the vertical urbanism with the street life as amazing as that on the ground level.

The complex and diverse street life is an interesting and profound topic to study. Based on the site-specifics, my project only develops one possibility of the beautiful transformation of the street life from the ground level to the vertical direction. I truly believe that vertically developing the street life that promotes interpersonal and community interaction can be a way of preserving the positive aspects of the traditional neighborhood as well as of increasing the density of communities.