Beyond Scarcity: Making Space in the City

Deljana Iossifova examines everyday life in Shanghai

In the urban, everything is calculable, quantifiable, programmable; everything, that is, except the drama that results from the co-presence and re-presentation of the elements calculated, quantified, and programmed. (H. Lefebvre, The Urban Revolution, 2003)

For China, the transition from planned to market economy has meant a progression from services and goods available to all urban residents (at least in theory) to services and goods available to those who can afford them. When authorities first started down the course of large-scale state-led gentrification, they argued that the neglected urban housing blocks and left-over shantytowns of the previous six or so decades had become unfit for dwelling, posing serious health and safety risks; that displacement and resettlement were acts of protection in the interest of residents. They no longer bother. Authorities sell swaths of urban land en bloc, developers disenthrall entire neighbourhoods from their collective memory – demolishing all buildings and displacing, to the edges of the city, all residents (unless, of course, they are wealthy enough to buy themselves the right to come back). The members of an urban middle-class, only just beginning to emerge, then take their residence in spacious flats, located in the new-built, gated residential compounds (the proud bearers of names such as ‘Fragrant Jasmine Garden’ or ‘Beautiful Venice of the East’).

Competing for foreign investment in order to become a Global City and zealously preparing to host the World EXPO 2010, now almost forgotten, Shanghai embarked on an ambitious journey to showcase what “Better City, Better Life” (the official motto of the EXPO) might look like on the ground. Countless strategies to eradicate or hide away all evidence of the poor, the old or the unworthy...
were put in place. By 2008, most such ambitions were already beginning to show their effect in time for the Beijing Olympics. Surrounded by mushrooming commodity housing compounds – displaying Shanghai’s vision of a prosperous future – and located on the banks of Suzhou Creek, now ceaselessly frequented by visiting foreigners on sight-seeing boat tours, a last remaining fragment of one of Shanghai’s biggest and infamous shantytowns thus became the natural target of the district government’s modernisation and image-improving attempts.

The Village, as it was known to residents in the area, was home to long-term, mostly unemployed residents and recent rural-to-urban migrants who lived in self-made or provisionally mended dwellings. Because green space was hardly available within the boundaries of the Village, its residents had made it a habit to cross the street and pass the guards at the gate to the fenced Compound opposite, where they took advantage of readily available (but rarely used) manicured green spaces and play areas. Only about half of the 5,000 or so Village residents were said to be from Shanghai; they were left behind by the many that had moved out as soon as they were able to afford a better place, renting their old homes to the myriad of migrants that kept on arriving into the city.

Migration restrictions in China (i.e., the infamous hukou – or residential registration, whereby citizens were divided in two categories, rural and urban, and were only entitled to public services at their place of registration) had been relaxed in the late 1970s. According to some China scholars, this was done in response to more than 150 million surplus labourers in the countryside. Initially, migrants were welcomed as cheap and exploitable labour force in factories and at constructions sites in the country’s cities. But this sentiment changed over time. Many of the elderly residents in the Village – migrants, notably, themselves, who had come from the countryside in the late 1940s – thought of their neighbourhood as rapidly deteriorating due to the influx of their new migrant neighbours. Many were self-employed, running small businesses that ranged from selling goods to service provision. Living in small rooms in old houses or converted warehouses that they rented from the government or private landlords, they often formed homogenous communities based on their place of origin. At the centre of the Village, for example, a former warehouse was entirely occupied by a group from Sichuan Province, all of them related to each other in one way or another. They shared tiny rooms defined by flimsy cardboard partitions. Families sat in the yard and told stories whilst cleaning vegetables and preparing meat and seafood skewers for sale in the streets during the evenings and nights. Many told of their surprise to find that nothing matched what they had seen on TV about Shanghai and expected to find upon their arrival in the city. Their hard work, they said, pays for English lessons for the young ones back home; they were looking forward to the few weeks during summer, when their children would visit
to spend their summer holidays and when the small yard would be buzzing with life.

The exclusion of migrants from the formal housing market leaves them confined to dorms provided by their employer, or housing in urban villages, much like the Village described above. This is often discussed as the match between their demand for cheap housing and its availability in villages about to fall prey to urban expansion, but there is reason to question such prepositions. In the case at hand, an inquiry showed that in the Village, the availability of private bathrooms and kitchens seemed linked to the background of respective occupants: the majority of residents with urban hukou had access to such facilities; the majority of residents with rural hukou did not. Similar distinctions were found with regards to space: urban hukou holders in the Village had twice as much living space per capita at their disposal as rural hukou holders. Most significantly, however, migrants paid up to two times more per square meter and per month than their urban hukou holding neighbours – in both the Village and the gated residential Compound across the street! That migrants do not rent in the formal commodity housing market, then, seems rooted not exclusively in their ability to pay market rents, but rather, linked to recent policies released by the local government: over-occupation, here, served as an excuse to prevent landlords from renting out modern apartments to multiple parties (in many cases, rural hukou holders willing to share). Ample available accommodation in the Compound across the street from the Village thus remained out of reach for migrants; government and private landlords took advantage of this engineered scarcity of space within the boundaries of the Village, causing the cost of housing for migrants to soar.

The long-term residents, urban hukou holders that stayed behind in the Village, the long-term Shanghainese, continued to eagerly anticipate the day when a deal between authorities and a developer would finally be formalised, securing a future for them in new, modern resettlement homes – just like the ones they saw coming up a stone’s throw away, in the Compounds, albeit far away from the centre of the city. Once the desire for more space in an apartment with modern facilities had been kindled, continuing to live the modest lives of the past, without the added comfort of numerous white goods, an oversized TV set or a brand-new German car, seemed like a burden not many felt prepared to bear.

Meanwhile, the street in-between the old Village and the middle-class Compound – a space that Saskia Sassen might call ‘Global Street’ and I call urban borderland – came to be viewed by the authorities as a blight to the city: for all the manifestations of gregarious urban life (selling, buying, cooking, washing, knitting, sewing, cycling, driving, jogging, laughing, talking, quarrelling, drinking, eating, playing, crying) and the unruly activities of people who appropriate space as a place of encounter, exchange and interaction. Automobile traffic, disturbed by the ubiquitous presence of living beings and their countless activities as they disregard the fine line that separates the street from the sidewalk, became a welcome excuse for immediate intervention. On a week’s notice in the summer of 2008, the district government erected a two-meter high concrete fence in front of existing shop fronts along the street. This action was accompanied by a new set of rules introduced by the local government, prohibiting the common practice of using shops as dwellings outside of business hours. The consequences were, at least initially, devastating. Indeed, for a short period of about six months, people kept behind the fence and away from the street – mostly out of fear of prosecution. Many shopkeepers were forced to shut down their businesses as the fence kept them away from the

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Common living conditions for many rural-to-urban migrants in Shanghai: a former warehouse divided up in tiny rooms, separated from each other by rickety cardboard partitions. Tab water, fresh air or light are not available inside the rooms. (photograph: Deljana Iossifova)
street as much as it kept their customers away from their shops. However, with time, as they began to test a range of tactics to determine how tolerant local authorities would prove to be, the fence became the subject of creative experimentation. The spaces in-between the original façade and the fence became popular waiting areas for customers, featuring welcoming sofas and chairs; the fence itself came to serve as an extended façade. Selected concrete bars were skilfully dismounted and stored away during daytime and seamlessly replaced whenever needed. Some were removed completely to be replaced with slightly more welcoming metal gates. Life on the borderland returned, slowly, to business as usual.

Space, so the narrative goes, is scarce in cities. For those who lack in buying power, the city, in a world governed by the principles of capitalism, cannot make space. So it unfolds that perfectly good social housing on ‘prime land’ in central cities around the globe is demolished or its inhabitants displaced, giving way to much more profitable commodity developments for wealthier residents; that – in times of housing crisis – homes sit empty, awaiting those who can pay the outlandish rents; and that we are driven to believe in the realness of invented scarcities: of homes, of land, of space – skilfully engineered to drive up desire, demand and, eventually, market prices. Scarcity, in the context of a global capitalist society, is the result of generated demand and regulated supply and thus no longer exclusively a function of the natural abundance of resources or goods. It is a distinctively sociomaterial process. From London to Tokyo, one of the biggest challenges to those who plan, design, manage and build cities is that of providing shelter and vital services to an ever increasing number of urban residents. Reality in most parts of the world, however, is that they succeed in housing themselves, making do with whatever little space is left in-between the fragments of the planned city, or contributing to its unlimited growth beyond official boundaries. When formal systems of planning fail so miserably to make a city that embraces all of its residents – at least, I would argue, they should not obstruct citizens’ possibility of making the city themselves •

Orange seller, October 2007, before the fence was erected

More and more concrete bars are removed from the fence. Life on the borderland returns gradually to business as usual (photographs: Deljana Iossifova)