

# **Micro-regeneration in Shanghai and the Public-isation of Space**

Representative of many developed cities in China, Shanghai is entering a new urban regeneration phase as the city adopts a more humanist approach to improve the quality of urban life. Micro-regeneration emerges in this context as a light method to tackle the spatial and social problems of the declining inner city through interventions on residual spaces in and around residential neighbourhoods. The present research approaches micro-regeneration through the lens of public space and publicness and seeks to explain how micro-regeneration represents the public-isation of community space and serves Shanghai's people-oriented urban regeneration agenda. By looking into the prototypical 'Walking in Shanghai' Community Public Space Micro-regeneration Scheme as the primary case study, the paper argues that micro-regeneration publicises community space in three interconnected ways, which are the public-isation of the design and planning processes, public-isation through eventification, and public-isation by cultivating civic consensus. These different public-isation mechanisms not only reflect the multi-layered nature of publicness but also manifest different ways micro-regeneration goes beyond local spatial transformation and contributes to Shanghai's people-oriented urban regeneration vision materially and symbolically.

*Keywords: micro-regeneration, public space, public-isation, urban regeneration*

## **1 Introduction**

The incomparable speed and scale of urban development in China in the past decades, whilst hailed as a notable achievement, have produced a variety of 'urban diseases' such as declining inner city, unsustainable expansion and social inequality (J. Li & Fan, 2015b, 2015a; S. W.-H. Wang, 2011; F. Ye & He, 2015). In recent years, the goal of urban (re)development is shifting from economic growth to sustainable regeneration with an emphasis on social participation (L. Ye et al., 2021). At the national level, the 'city betterment' strategy has been put forward to highlight the importance of upgrading the urban built-up area by improving service provision, spatial environment and landscape, and urban characteristics and vibrancy (Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, 2016). Shanghai, with an ambition to 'strive for an excellent global

city' (Shanghai Municipal People's Government, 2018) that is liveable, humanistic and people-oriented, is among the first cities to start experimenting with a more organic urban regeneration approach in order to make the transition from 'traditional economic-centred development' to 'people-oriented development' and from 'expansionary development' to 'endogenous growth' (S. Zhang et al., 2018, p. 37). One such experiment is the so-called 'micro-regeneration' that started to attract wide public attention with the launch of the first 'Walking in Shanghai' Community Public Space Micro-regeneration Scheme (hereafter referred to as 'Walking in Shanghai') by the municipal planning authority in 2016. Over the years, a variety of new micro-regeneration projects other than the 'Walking in Shanghai' scheme have been implemented, widening the spatial scope and diversifying the mechanisms behind micro-regeneration.

To date, there is no official, technical definition for micro-regeneration. In essence, micro-regeneration covers a variety of neighbourhood-level design-based interventions or 'design fix' (Y. Zhang & Zhang, 2022) ranging from sporadic small building renovation and neighbourhood corner space improvement to more systematic upgrades of local public space and amenities (Figure 1). These interventions are mostly initiated and funded by government bodies but increasingly joined by other social forces. As micro-regeneration is 'micro' in scale, it is less likely to displace communities or disrupt social connections, requires smaller financial input, and balances multiple stakeholders' interests (Duan et al., 2021; D. Li et al., 2021; Y. Zhu & Ye, 2022). Micro-regeneration is also considered more 'humanistic and emotional' because it enables community residents to 'feel the connection between their immediate living environment and the broader urban development process' (Ma & Ying, 2016, p. 11).



Figure 1. A variety of local spatial upgrades that have been broadly categorised as micro-regeneration interventions. Source: author, various dates, 2019

Previous studies of micro-regeneration largely centre on general theorisation (Zhao et al., 2021), introducing model projects (M. Chen, 2018; Y. Liu et al., 2018), cataloguing regeneration strategies, design techniques and governance models (Duan et al., 2021; D. Li et al., 2021; Ma & Ying, 2016; D. Tang et al., 2022; Wu & Xiong, 2022; Zhong & Leung, 2019), and analysing stakeholder involvement, community social profile and public participation (W. Chen et al., 2022; L. Liu et al., 2020; Y. Tang et al., 2019; D. Wang & Dong, 2022). A less researched area is understanding micro-regeneration through the lens of public space, which partly results from the conceptual and practical complications with 'community public space' in the Chinese urban context. Community space is conceptually ambiguous as both 'proxemic space' (Wallin, 1998, p. 101) characterised by familiarity with 'few opportunities for the residents to socialise with people whom they were not acquainted with' (Yang, 2009, p. 84) and public space shared by people outside one's household and conducive to new social dynamics beyond one's private and familial bonds. Practically, in Chinese urban planning and administration, community space differs from urban space because the two are supported by different (albeit similarly public) budgetary arrangements. Even so, the community as a state-employed governance unit to construct a clear and controllable social order (Ding & Xu, 2019) could not be separated from citywide urban processes and power dynamics, and community space acts as a natural extension of the urban realm spatially, socially and politically.

Studying micro-regeneration from the angle of public space offers an opportunity to interpret the meaning of local community changes brought by micro-regeneration against the broader urban regeneration and place-making agenda. The ‘loss of public space’ critique has featured heavily in public space studies since the early 1990s (Banerjee, 2001; Kohn, 2004; Mitchell, 1995; Smith & Low, 2006; Sorkin, 1992), and this narrative is increasingly challenged by a narrative of revival that sees the condition of contemporary public space more positively (Carmona, 2010, 2015, 2022; De Magalhães & Freire Trigo, 2017; Langstraat & van Melik, 2013; Leclercq et al., 2020; Paddison & Sharp, 2007). Much of this loss/revival debate revolves around different interpretations of the privatisation of space in terms of ownership, development and management responsibilities and meaning-making. While similar issues with privatised public space occur in the property commodification and marketisation processes in China (Y. Wang & Chen, 2021), the universally public land ownership in this particular context disrupts the premise of the loss/revival debates. In addition, publicly owned public space in China deserves more attention because it is profoundly influenced by specific sociocultural and political contexts (Jiang & Nakajima, 2022). The present research therefore not only enriches studies of micro-regeneration but also contributes to international scholarship on the loss/revival of public space and publicness in contemporary cities.

Adopting this less studied perspective, the present paper explores the role micro-regeneration plays in Shanghai’s quest for a people- and quality-oriented global city status through the lens of public space and publicness. More specifically, seeing publicness as a particular quality of space contingent on different urban actors’ rationales behind the practices leading to the ‘public-isation’ of space, the paper asks in what way micro-regeneration publicises community space and its transformation and contributes to the different aspects of Shanghai’s people-oriented urban regeneration agenda. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section offers a condensed review of studies on public space and publicness in order to frame the micro-regeneration of community space within a broader urban regeneration and place-making context. The third and fourth sections, building on a combination of primary and secondary data, introduce the ‘Walking in Shanghai’ case study that is the focus of this paper and discuss various ways micro-regeneration represents the public-isation of community space. The discussion section also reflects on the implications of the different public-isation processes on the publicness of space, offers some practical

suggestions for further harvesting the potentials of micro-regeneration as a new place-making approach, and cautions against losing sight of the unresolved issues in power dynamics embedded in micro-regeneration like any other urban processes. The concluding section goes on to point out some limitations of the present work and directions for future research.

Empirical materials for this paper were collected during fieldwork conducted from March to October 2019, with follow-up project information until July 2021 collected from various online sources. Primary data were collected through twenty-six in-depth interviews with designers, municipal planners and residents' committee representatives involved in various micro-regeneration projects, non-participant observation of the spaces and their uses, and participant observation in project meetings and community events. Secondary data were collected from policy documents, online announcements published by government departments and urban planning bureaus and major state-owned media outlets. Interviewees were primarily identified from publicly available project information and they were contacted directly or in a snowballing manner through the author's personal contacts. These materials were originally collected as part of a research project that looked into the production and construction of public space in contemporary Shanghai urban regeneration guided by the 'excellent global city' vision. As the original aim was to examine how different public space projects were conceived and delivered to manifest the 'people-oriented' principles, the primary data mainly showcase the views of design and planning professionals, and other actors' perspectives were mainly derived from the professionals' account of the events and the secondary sources.

## **2 Public space, publicness and 'public-isation'**

International literature has reported a wide range of values public space brings to cities' economic development, social dynamics, ecological improvement and citizens' health and well-being (Carmona et al., 2008; Carr et al., 1992; Madanipour, 2019; McInroy, 2000; Shaftoe, 2008; Van Melik & Lawton, 2011; Woolley et al., 2004). Another strand of studies, recognising these values, laments the end and loss of public space (Akkar, 2005b, 2005a; Banerjee, 2001; Kohn, 2004; Mitchell, 1995; Sennett, 2002; Sorkin, 1992). The many faces of this loss such as privatisation, fortification, exclusion and sanitisation (Banerjee, 2001; Cybriwsky, 1999; Hunt, 2009; Mehta, 2014; Németh &

Hollander, 2010; Turner, 2002) spur great interest in the concept of publicness, essentially 'a dynamic balance between public and private activities' (Carr et al., 1992, p. 23). Many authors have proposed different publicness models to evaluate public spaces' status quo (Ekdi & Çıracı, 2015; Karaçor, 2016; Langstraat & van Melik, 2013; Lopes et al., 2020; Mehta, 2014; Németh & Schmidt, 2011; Varna & Tiesdell, 2010), compare the 'before and after' publicness of space (Akkar, 2003, 2005b, 2005a), and evaluate different stakeholders' contribution to the increase or decrease of publicness (Ho et al., 2020; Németh & Schmidt, 2011). These studies represent a normative approach that sees public space as a product whose quality can be evaluated against certain criteria and ideal such as public ownership and universal accessibility, and publicness as something 'out-there' and 'external to people' (Varna & Tiesdell, 2010, p. 578).

The normative conception of publicness is built on a clearly delineated public-private distinction, which can be challenged on at least three grounds: ideal public space has never existed, the superiority of being public is ideological, and the singular public ideal is increasingly challenged by the plurality of contemporary society. First, implicit in the various critiques of contemporary public spaces is the assumed existence of an ideal public space modelled on a Greek agora or a Roman forum where citizens could participate in open deliberation of public affairs. However, this is a 'false romanticisation of historic public space' (Madanipour, 2010, p. 7) that downplays the non-democratic aspects of these spaces, and indeed 'there is no "point zero" in urban history when public spaces were truly and essentially "public" or "open for all"' (Listerborn, 2005, p. 382). Second, although 'public' is often conveniently accepted as being superior to 'private', this is not always the case. At certain points in history, the private realm, granting 'the control of unwanted interaction' and the individual's 'right to the left alone' (Rapport, 1980, p. 31, cited in Pow, 2006), was highly regarded as opposed to the public space under constant state intervention and disciplinary surveillance (Horwitz, 1982) representing 'the legitimate sphere of regulatory, paternalist government power' (Mnookin, 1982, p. 1429). Third, in the diverse contemporary urban world, the existence of a singular public is constantly challenged. Not only 'what is regarded as public will wax and wane' (Lang, 2005, p. 7) but 'the public' is also being replaced by multiple 'publics', leading to different public spaces becoming representative of the varying powers, needs and desires of different social groups (Atkinson, 2003) and challenging the once seemingly straightforward

understanding of to whom public space should be open and accessible (Neal, 2010). Even though public spaces are often deliberately designed ‘for an illusion of public, for a diverse, democratic and classless public’ (Brill, 1989, p. 14), the realities are much more ambiguous and contested.

These critiques represent another interpretation of publicness, a non-normative or a deductive-interpretivist approach that sees publicness as socially constructed (Varna & Tiesdell, 2010) rather than ‘an established quality conveniently observable and measurable’ (Qian, 2020, p. 83). Proponents of this approach argue that public space in the real world does not and need not conform to a same set of best public space standards (Carmona, 2015; De Magalhães & Freire Trigo, 2017). Since the various desirable qualities of public space such as accessibility and visibility are themselves constantly evolving and being contested, publicness should not be confined by a normative ‘conceptual straitjacket’ (Qian, 2020, p. 78). The non-normative interpretation of publicness therefore allows a more process-oriented investigation of ‘locally constituted interpretations of public versus private space and the different roles/hierarchies of these spaces according to local politics, culture, customs and traditions’ (Luger & Lees, 2020, p. 73).

Following this non-normative approach, the present research sees publicness not as a manifestation of to what extent space is public or not but as a way of being space (Tornaghi, 2015). In other words, publicness is a particular public quality of space with the meaning of ‘public’ contingent on different actors' interpretations, rationales and practices, and as such it is the result of public-ising space to various ends (J. Zhu, 2022). Carmona (2022) uses public-isation to describe the processes of privately-owned spaces to public uses. The present research, however, sees public-isation differently as the processes that materially produce and discursively construct space into a particular version of being public, reflecting the complexity in different urban actors' diverse and sometimes contradictory perceptions of how space could and should be public. Using public-isation to frame micro-regeneration and community spatial changes not only provides a framework that goes beyond public space research as either behavioural or architectural (Low, 2000) and enables an exploration of the complex rationales, mechanisms and practices behind place-making but is also especially helpful for understanding local changes in such a complex environment as the contemporary Shanghai urban regeneration where space gains different meanings on multiple scales simultaneously.

### **3 Case study: 'Walking in Shanghai' as a prototype for community space micro-regeneration**

This paper uses the 'Walking in Shanghai' Community Public Space Micro-regeneration scheme as the primary case study as it was the first systematic initiative that brought micro-regeneration into the official urban regeneration agenda and public discourse. The Shanghai Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau (SMPNRB) launched the 'Walking in Shanghai' initiative, now a prototype whose main principles have been inherited and adapted by subsequent micro-regeneration projects in Shanghai, as one component of the 'Four Actions of Shanghai Urban Regeneration' to produce a number of urban regeneration exemplars across the city that could help raise the general public's awareness of the ongoing Shanghai urban transformation (Shanghai Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau, 2016). The SMPNRB established an affiliated department, the Shanghai Urban Public Space Design Promotion Centre (SUPSDPC), to lead these new regeneration initiatives and to liaise with stakeholders such as district planning authorities, sub-district governments and designers. The 'Walking in Shanghai' experiment started from neighbourhood public space for three main reasons. First, the deteriorating old neighbourhoods never central to previous housing renovation projects (Kuang, 2018) were perceived as the main challenge in the next phase of Shanghai regeneration and hence required immediate attention (Xu & Song, 2018). Second, community public spaces as where residents' daily lives unfold are symbolically closest to people's real concerns. Improving these spaces, therefore, represents the people-oriented nature of the ongoing urban regeneration as it could 'address the detailed and intimate concerns of urban residents' (Interview with designer N, October 2019). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, unlike major new urban regeneration projects that generally undergo lengthy formal planning procedures, upgrading old neighbourhood space does not necessitate land use changes and hence does not require formal planning approval. This was an important consideration for the municipal planning authority who was keen to kick start an urban regeneration experiment quickly and produce exemplary projects to be further promoted (Interview with municipal planner M, June 2019).

Since its conception in 2016, the 'Walking in Shanghai' scheme has followed a similar basic format. Each year, the SUPSDPC would select a number of pilot sites through a combination of top-down designation and bottom-up nomination and



publishes calls for design proposals on various platforms. In the first two years, eighteen out of twenty-two pilot sites were residual space within selected residential neighbourhoods across the city, and four were local streetscape improvements. In the subsequent years, the scope of the scheme was extended to include urban under-bridge spaces (2018, 2019) and service facility buildings (2020). This shows the SUPSDPC's intention to experiment with different spatial types and produce an array of exemplars. Designers participating in the competition each year would attend a brief introductory meeting organised by the SUPSDPC, survey their chosen sites and draft design proposals that should ideally tackle various site-specific predicaments creatively and economically. One winning proposal for each pilot project with overall high design quality and feasibility would be selected at the design review meetings by architectural design and urban planning professionals, representatives of local governments and sometimes community members. The winning teams would then work with their local clients to refine and implement the project. Notably, after the winning proposals are selected, the SUPSDPC ceased to have much direct impact on the implementation of these projects as it did not have administrative powers in sub-district and neighbourhood affairs. By October 2019, seventeen out of the twenty-five pilot projects in the first three rounds of 'Walking in Shanghai' had been implemented. The implemented projects mostly refurbished the spaces and added new greenery and convenience amenities such as benches, children's playgrounds, and exercise installations (Figure 2). Eight pilot projects were aborted halfway through due to changes in local leadership and development priorities, lack of budget, difficulty in stakeholder negotiation, or change of macro policy direction (Interviews, various dates in 2019).

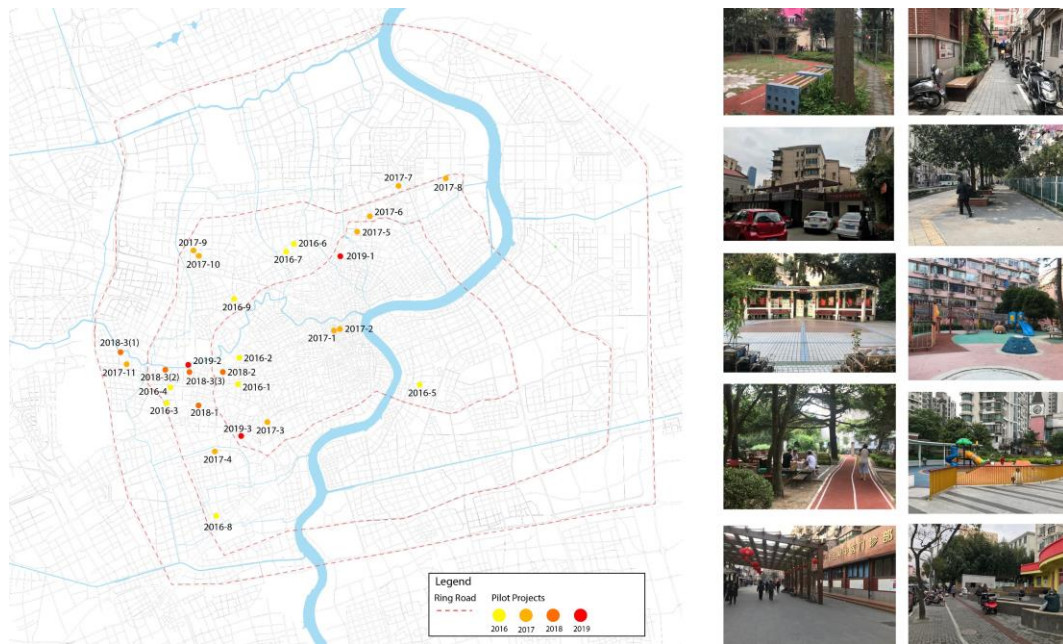


Figure 2. The distribution of 'Walking in Shanghai' projects from 2016 to 2019) (left) and representative designs (right). Source: based on information from the SUPSDPC project archive <http://www.sdpcus.cn/> (left); author, various dates in 2019

Over the years, the micro-regeneration approach has gained more recognition from an array of actors especially different levels of local government. On top of their conventional annual neighbourhood upgrade plans that renovate residential buildings and basic infrastructure within their jurisdiction, district and sub-district governments have increasingly incorporated elements of micro-regeneration, such as upgrading parking space, greenery, urban furniture, signage and lighting, into their respective neighbourhood renewal schemes (often called 'Beautiful Home' or 'Beautiful Neighbourhood' initiatives). In addition to these government-led micro-regeneration schemes, there are now also a few initiatives led by social organisations and community groups that are much smaller in scale and focus more on producing community-based social programmes than simple spatial upgrades. Despite occasionally sponsoring some projects, the real estate sector, a traditional key player in Shanghai urban regeneration, has only played a relatively marginal in various micro-regeneration initiatives so far. Overall, micro-regeneration is predominantly funded and managed by public actors at different levels, and whilst new intervention types do emerge, it remains community-oriented with a specific focus on local open space and public amenities.

## **4 Discussion: micro-regeneration and the public-isation of community space**

Evidence from the case study shows that micro-regeneration can ‘public-ise’ community space in three interconnected ways: by opening the design and planning processes, by eventification, and by cultivating a sense of consensus and shared responsibility in urban regeneration. These different public-isation processes give community space several distinct layers of publicness that each accentuates the people-oriented ethos of the present-day Shanghai urban regeneration in its own way. These dynamics on the one hand show the potential of micro-regeneration as a new placemaking approach in bridging the place and the social, the expert and the layperson, and the local and the urban; on the other hand, one still needs to be cautious about the persistent power imbalance in defining the goals and methods of place-making.

### ***4.1 Micro-regeneration and three public-isation mechanisms***

#### ***4.1.1 Public-isation by opening up design and planning processes***

Micro-regeneration opens up the planning and design processes of community space first by adding new layers to the professional practices in conventional community regeneration. Housing renovation or neighbourhood upgrade projects before micro-regeneration generally did not involve design professionals and were mostly implemented by contractors. With the micro-regeneration platform, more professional designers, especially young aspiring designers who are not yet as established and competitive as the star architects in the market of prestigious urban regeneration projects, became involved in designing community public spaces. Local governments and communities also increasingly recognised the value of design and realise even if they could manage these small projects in the old way, professional designers could help enhance the project quality more effectively and artistically (Interview with residents’ committee representative H , August 2019).

Second, micro-regeneration brings local residents closer to the planning and design processes in various formal and informal ways. In ‘Walking in Shanghai’, the SUPSDPC as the organiser and coordinator attempted to facilitate community participation formally by, for example, soliciting resident feedback when developing design briefs and organising introductory meetings at the beginning of the competition. Residents also became informally involved in the design and development processes by

simply co-existing with the construction sites daily and providing closer scrutiny. As space in old neighbourhoods was often limited, the construction sites couldn't be completely fenced off or shielded away from residents. This enabled residents, who normally either lacked the professional knowledge to understand the impacts of the project from the blueprint or the interest in formal participation or consultation procedures, to more intuitively understand and directly engage with the micro-regeneration taking place at their doorstep (Interview with designer X, April 2019; interview with designer N, October 2019). As the process of physically building these spaces concretised problems and solutions, residents were more likely to voice their opinions when they thought the project damages their interests, which seldom happened in the initial formal community consultation.

#### *4.1.2 Public-isation by eventification*

Micro-regeneration emerges and matures as the popularity of event-led city marketing and social media campaign grows, and micro-regeneration itself represents the eventification of urban regeneration, thereby publicising community spatial transformation and community issues. A further distinction can be made between micro-regeneration as an event and micro-regeneration as an event theme.

Different from conventional urban regeneration projects where much happens behind closed doors, micro-regeneration frequently involves different forms of public events such as community open days, family workshops and public exhibitions. Breaking micro-regeneration into a series of public events is not so much about soliciting design ideas or promoting participatory decision-making as spurring public interest and generating publicity. The 'Walking in Shanghai' scheme itself started as a public competition series and exemplified turning the strategy of micro-regeneration itself into an event in which the participatory elements for designers and communities demonstrate its people-oriented nature. Another type of eventification is using micro-regeneration, more specifically its various exemplary projects, as exhibition materials or themes in public events that feature debates on urban issues. An example of such an urban regeneration-related event that frequently features model practices of micro-regeneration is the high-profile Shanghai Urban Space Art Season (SUSAS) that, by exhibiting exemplary urban regeneration projects to discuss 'how to improve the quality of urban living and working space, strengthen citizens' life satisfaction and cultural

acquisition' (Hu, 2016, p. 17), simultaneously attempts to raise public awareness and public participation in Shanghai's ongoing urban regeneration process.

In general, the eventification of micro-regeneration, with its different forms of physical manifestation and the discourse generated throughout the event season, publicises local spatial transformation efforts and plays an educational role in cultivating a supportive atmosphere for changes in urban regeneration approaches and promoting model practices thereof. On the one hand, by inviting the public to see and discuss the ongoing projects, the publicity events, helped by different participatory and interactive activities, symbolise that citizens could all contribute to the ongoing urban regeneration. On the other hand, events, especially those organised by various government departments, are effective in enabling non-professional citizens and local officials to recognise the value of micro-scale interventions and establishing a shared recognition of new community regeneration approaches.

#### *4.1.3 Public-isation by evoking a sense of consensus and ownership*

In addition, micro-regeneration can publicise community space by cultivating a sense of civic consensus and shared responsibility that is essential to the promotion and justification of the adopted urban regeneration approach. Micro-regeneration has produced many exemplary projects that became raw materials to cultivate consensus in micro-regeneration as an effective way to improve community public space and conduct neighbourhood regeneration. The implemented projects, accompanied by public events and media coverage throughout the entire process, materialised the abstract idea of neighbourhood improvement and gave residents elsewhere means to imagine a possible future for their neighbourhoods:

'Local residents have never thought about how their neighbourhoods could be transformed. Since they don't have such imagination and they have never seen real-life cases, they cannot tell designers what they want...Although the first few pilot projects were difficult to implement because it was difficult working with residents, the subsequent ones in other neighbourhoods were easier as residents became more cooperative, because they knew in this way their neighbourhoods would become really nice...In the past, they didn't dare to dream about changing their surroundings, but now they have references.' (Interview with municipal planner M, June 2019)

The same applies to local decision-makers who also needed exemplary projects as references to recognise the value of the relatively new micro-regeneration concept. As micro-regeneration projects especially the government-led ones become increasingly widespread, which essentially means micro-regeneration is endorsed by 'the government', lower-tier stakeholders who would otherwise be unsure or unsupportive of micro-regeneration start to agree on its value. For designers, this gradually-formed consensus means 'communication becomes much easier and [designers] won't have to spend a lot of time trying to convince the local communities of the value of micro-regeneration' (Interview with designer M, June 2019).

By populating media discourse with praise for participation, the everydayness of this new urban regeneration approach and the different small ways people can get involved, the promoters of micro-regeneration publicise local changes into a wider campaign for more civic engagement and shared responsibility and ownership in urban regeneration at large. The everydayness of participation in micro-regeneration is manifested by the way that citizens are encouraged to be observant of minor neighbourhood inconveniences in their daily life and to 'find the beauty of the city as well as the problems during their everyday walk in the city and become active in voicing their opinions, and participate in those events that transform the tiny corners and consequently the general environment of the city' (Shanghai Urban Public Space Design Promotion Centre, 2016). This way, micro-regeneration problematises and publicises the mundane spatial issues people find in their daily routines as important aspects of the broader urban regeneration agenda, highlighting the significance of micro-regeneration in the current urban transformation and its close relevance to the people. At the same time, by encouraging the public to 'actively participate and to make suggestions for urban design, so that they can feel the changes they bring to the city they live in and love', micro-regeneration also aims to 'inspire a sense of honour, belonging and mastership, and to create an atmosphere of every member of the society building, sharing and governing the city' (Shanghai Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau, 2016). In this sense, the people-oriented nature of micro-regeneration is not manifest in providing people with what they need but in asking them to be active citizens and take initiative, or in other words, micro-regeneration is not only 'for the people' but also 'by the people'.

#### ***4.2 Micro-regeneration, publicness, and the people-oriented urban regeneration***

To sum up, the preceding discussion reveals three ways micro-regeneration, as specific local projects and as a new urban regeneration approach, publicises community space and turns community space into places of experiment, of public appreciation, and of symbolic ownership. Adopting this public-isation perspective on the one hand echoes with a long thread of studies that discusses the fluidity of public space and the public-private space continuum (Lofland, 1998; Madanipour, 2003; Van Melik & Spierings, 2020), and on the other hand, usefully establishes the interconnectedness between community space - conventionally treated distinctly from public and urban space on conceptual and practical levels - and the broader urban processes in the particular empirical context of Shanghai. The use of ‘public-isation’ in the present paper is different from that in studies describing the process of private space becoming more public with changes in accessibility and openness, design, use and management (Carmona, 2022; Houssay-Holzschuch & Teppo, 2009; Schindler, 2018). In the premise of the present research, public-isation is the process of space being materially produced and discursively constructed to embody particular actors’ ideas of what constitutes public qualities. Therefore, it can be seen as one component of Terzi and Tonnelat’s (2017, p. 533) publicisation process that ‘entails not only the joint building of public spaces and public spheres, but also the construction of publics and of public problems’.

Looking closely at the three public-isation mechanisms, first, micro-regeneration publicises the production of community public space by opening up its planning and design processes and inviting more professional expertise and local participation in formal and informal ways. Second, micro-regeneration publicises community spatial transformation and community issues by its eventification, providing various opportunities for public interaction and discussion and connecting local micro-regeneration to the citywide urban regeneration progress. Finally, micro-regeneration publicises community regeneration by cultivating consensus for the value of this regeneration approach and evoking a sense of collective ownership, again bridging local practices to the wider urban regeneration and urban governance agenda. With these different public-isation mechanisms, micro-regeneration not only manifests alternatives to the ‘massive demolition and reconstruction’ paradigm to improve the quality of urban space but also demonstrates, practically and symbolically, different ways that these transformations improve the quality of urban life, respond to citizens’ urgent needs and

take their voices into serious consideration. This way, micro-regeneration is not simply a local spatial transformation process but contributes to Shanghai's agenda to promote quality- and people-oriented urban regeneration.

These different ways of micro-regeneration publicising community space in turn reflect the multi-layered nature of publicness, showing the different 'public' ideals different urban actors desire and contribute to. Three types of publicness can be identified here, namely localised publicness, procedural publicness, and symbolic publicness (J. Zhu, 2022). Micro-regeneration first and foremost opens up and improves the quality of previously closed or under-utilised neighbourhood spaces, and design professionals and local residents contribute to this increased localised publicness alike with their respective expertise and lived experience. Different new mechanisms of formally or informally involving professionals, residents and the general public demonstrate the emerging, albeit limited procedural publicness that micro-regeneration brings into local placemaking and urban regeneration as a whole. This layer of publicness is intertwined with the symbolic publicness that becomes apparent when micro-regeneration turns the materiality and associated discourse of community space into symbols of desirable social consensus and civic qualities. These different publicness layers show the multiple ways community space becomes public space, as open space for daily use, as placemaking experiments that could potentially spread citywide, as a topic of public discussion and engagement, and as a symbol for desired civic qualities.

#### ***4.3 Going forward: micro-regeneration and place-making***

The foregoing discussions also show micro-regeneration's potential as a place-making approach that unites the material 'place-building', the 'social attributes', and 'the ways in which institutions mediate the physical conditions and the daily life experiences of the area residents' (Arefi, 2014, p. 13). Building on the different public-isation mechanisms, some suggestions for practice and policymaking can be put forward to maximise the potential of micro-regeneration as an inclusive and sustainable place-making approach.

In terms of further publicising the design and planning processes, more efforts could be put into capacity building and community education. The discussions have shown that the micro-regeneration approach introduces various formal and informal



methods of listening to community voices, but since ‘incorporating local and expert knowledge into place-making required both the assessment of needs as well as taking stock of the resources and capabilities communities have at their disposal’ (Arefi, 2014, pp. 17–18), there need to be measures that not only inform but also equip communities with sufficient understanding of the value of place and the significant urban processes that are happening on a broader scale. This in turn requires professionals to go beyond being spatial designers and become curators, metadesigners, facilitators and negotiators (Teder, 2019) Regarding the eventification of micro-regeneration, as events could be useful for generating interest and inviting participation, what can be further explored is how to refine the engagement activities so that events do not simply function as a publicity tool but could produce discussions and creations that facilitate genuine change. Ultimately, the emotional bonds and attachment to places, those developed not based on one-off actions but through long-term understanding and engagement, are what motivate people to ‘seek, stay in, protect, and improve places that are meaningful to them’ (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Therefore, to cultivate civic consensus and shared responsibility, micro-regeneration should be built as a long-term spatial and social regeneration mechanism rather than a one-off project, incorporating appropriate elements of co-creation and capacity building.

Despite the potential of micro-regeneration and the diversification of its mechanisms since the earliest ‘Walking in Shanghai’ projects, it should be noted that most micro-regeneration initiatives to date are organised top-down, funded by local governments, or need implicit government endorsement if initiated by other social forces. Therefore, micro-regeneration differs from the ‘informal planning’ that builds upon grassroot initiatives and entails different forms of collaboration and dialogue with official planners (Certomà & Notteboom, 2017) and guerrilla urbanism and its emphasis on unsanctioned and unscripted actions (Hou, 2020) It is almost the antithesis of the radical approach to tactical urbanism that centres on ‘taking action without permission and asking for forgiveness later’ (Webb, 2018, p. 60) The various public-isation mechanisms do not fundamentally challenge the established power relations and narratives, and the emerging layers of publicness add some complexities to, rather than alter, the overall picture that the development of the city is ‘strongly associated with a particular urban vision that the local elites hold’ (Shin, 2014, p. 270). In the end, as in other urban processes, the fundamental question is who has the power to define space, its public-isation and publicness. To reflect on how micro-regeneration publicises

community space is to get one step closer to the complex power dynamics that only enable citizens ‘to partially re-arrange the deckchairs on a ship’s deck, but not to determine how the ship is run or its course’ (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019, p. 98).

## **5 Conclusions**

Rooted in the recent paradigm shift in urban regeneration in Shanghai and elsewhere in China, and sitting between local community changes and the wider urban transformation agenda, micro-regeneration provides a valuable case to engage with the complication with publicness, a fundamental issue in public space research. The present research draws on ‘Walking in Shanghai’ as the main case study of the micro-regeneration approach and suggests the public-isation of community space, in this case, does not so much concern the conventional dimensions of publicness on the micro-level like accessibility and ownership as problematises the seemingly local and mundane issues as key challenges in the macro urban transformation process and attempts to cultivate civic consensus and collective responsibility in local placemaking, urban governance reform and the people-oriented urban regeneration in general. Bridging the community space central to micro-regeneration and public space with the idea of public-isation, this research suggests three ways micro-regeneration publicises community space that ultimately reflect the different layers of publicness built on specific urban actors' rationales and practices against the grand backdrop of a people-oriented urban regeneration ambition.

The present work is not without limitations. The fieldwork primarily collected data that represented professional perspectives. This was partly due to the lack of publicly available information or personal network for reaching local government actors. In addition, at the time of the fieldwork, there were no ongoing projects that could enable a closer observation of activities of community members, and individuals who had directly or indirectly engaged with previous projects were impossible to trace during the fieldwork. Future research needs to better balance the different perspectives involved in micro-regeneration and reveal more micro dynamics and situated tensions of specific sites by, for example, adopting a more ethnographic approach. Another limitation is that the present research only captures a snapshot of micro-regeneration at a specific stage of its evolution. The ‘Walking in Shanghai’ case study, though prototypical, was only one of the earliest micro-regeneration experiments, and new

projects are constantly being developed. A more comprehensive review of different micro-regeneration mechanisms so far could add more nuances to the discussion.

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