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Public space and its publicness in people-oriented urban regeneration: A case study of Shanghai

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the role of public space development in helping Shanghai strive for an “excellent global city,” an ambition prescribed by the city’s latest master plan, through quality- and people-oriented urban regeneration. Drawing on qualitative data collected for two case studies, namely the Huangpu River waterfront public space connection project and the community public space micro-regeneration initiative, the research discusses the publicness of these publicly produced public spaces with an extended place-shaping continuum as analytical framework. The research finds that public space development in present-day Shanghai, essentially a state project shaped by specific local ambitions and forces, not only opens up physical space for citizens’ daily enjoyment but also materializes the people-oriented ideals through the design and delivery of public spaces and discursively supports the city’s visionary narratives of building an “excellent global city.” This reflects the multifacetedness of publicness and complex scenarios of publicization, re-publicization and de-publicization.

KEYWORDS

Public space; publicness; place-shaping continuum; Shanghai; urban regeneration

Introduction

In recent years, Shanghai’s ambitious pursuit of a global city status has been accompanied by a growing recognition that urban development and regeneration should prioritize quality over quantity. Across China, the obsession with economic growth and expansionary development took a turn in 2015 when the central state introduced the “city betterment” (*chengshi xiufu*) strategy to promote urban life quality through enhanced urban facilities, environment and landscape and overall character (Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, 2017). In Shanghai, the Shanghai 2035 Master Plan (adopted in 2017), the city’s core development guide, envisioned the city to become an “excellent global city” (*zhuoyue quanqiu chengshi*; Shanghai Municipal People’s Government, 2018). Conforming to the city betterment idea, this global excellence would depend less on “traditional economic-centered development” and more on “people-centered scientific development” (Zhang et al., 2018, p. 37). As manifestations of urban quality and people-oriented development, public spaces ranging from flagship projects to more inconspicuous neighborhood transformation have flourished across the city. Despite involving more complex actors and development mechanisms, most of these new public space projects are initiated, owned, or managed by public actors. This, combined with the prominent people-oriented agenda in urban regeneration, provides an opportunity to engage with the wider debates in global public space research on the end versus revival of public space.

A large body of public space research focuses on the issues of privatization, or broadly speaking the phenomena and consequences of the ownership, development and management responsibilities of public space being transferred away from the public sector. Chinese public space deserves a more

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nuanced interpretation, not least given the role of the state as the strongest player in all aspects of urban development and regeneration and that the state vision plays a prominent part in space production. Working with different social and market actors, the state maintains its strategic intervention capacity on different scales (Wu & Zhang, 2022). At the same time, the tension between centralization and decentralization, layered governance, and the relationship between the state and urban citizens complicate the scenes of local development (Logan, 2002). Consequently, public space development also needs to be understood in relation to state and local visions as well as project-specific dynamics. The paper therefore aims to untangle public space as a state project shaped by specific local ambitions and forces. Instead of pursuing a familiar path to interrogate the privatization of public space resulting from marketization and commercialization, this investigation hopes to show a more complex picture than the dichotomy between “end vs. revival” of public space. Taking empirical cases from Shanghai where a quality- and people-oriented urban regeneration path has been actively pursued, the research asks: In what way does public space development help deliver Shanghai’s people-oriented urban regeneration vision? How do these endeavors speak to the wider end versus revival of public space debates?

To engage with the theoretical debates, the research uses publicness as the main entry point. Publicness is often interpreted as the quintessential quality of public space and employed normatively as a critique of the conditions and practices that lead to the loss of public space. However, for the purpose of this research, which is to explore how the notion of “people-oriented” as a proxy for public underpins the production and construction of recent public space projects, a non-normative approach to publicness is more useful. Here, publicness is not a fixed quality but a particular condition of space resulting from the varied and even contradictory agenda of different urban actors. Drawing on Tornaghi’s (2015, p. 25) argument that publicness is “a (varying and relational) way of being ‘space,’” this paper defines publicness as the ways space is, materially or discursively, shaped as public, with the meaning of public dependent on the specific context and the rationale of the actors able to define the meaning of space. Ultimately, the paper will show that in the particular context of Shanghai public space development, there is a more complex picture of different layers of publicness coexisting, creating scenarios of publicization, de-publicization, and re-publicization that challenge the dichotomy of end and revival of public space.

Two case studies are presented in this paper, each featuring an urban regeneration project where public space development or improvement has been central. The first case, the Huangpu River waterfront public space connection, is a top-down, flagship urban regeneration effort centered around the connection of 45-km-long public space along the Huangpu River, a development made possible by years of land deindustrialization and requisition and associated property development. The second case, the community public space micro-regeneration, represents a new stage of Shanghai’s long-standing inner city renewal where the upgrade of leftover neighborhood open space takes the place of complete demolition or reconstruction of residential buildings. Equally driven by public actors, micro-regeneration is more “grassroot” as it is primarily carried out by sub-district level governments and their subordinate residents’ committees, as opposed to the municipal and district level players in the other case. In addition, with each individual pilot project measuring up to hundreds of square meters, micro-regeneration is indeed micro compared to the 500-hectare scope of the waterfront public space. Despite being “extreme instances” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 40) that differ significantly in scale, stakeholders involved and development mechanisms, both cases represent the latest progress of Shanghai’s decades-long urban regeneration efforts under the influence of the quality- and people-oriented urban regeneration agenda. These cases are purposefully chosen, not to be compared in analytical dimensions but to show how the urban agenda is manifest in diverse types of public space development.

Main empirical materials for this paper were collected during fieldwork conducted from March to October 2019. The first round of follow-up information was collected until July 2021 from various online sources. In August 2023, a week of additional fieldwork was conducted to revisit key sites of both cases and gather project updates. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation of spaces and 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. Thirty-seven face-to-face and questionnaire interviews were conducted for the two cases with architecture and landscape designers ($n = 28$), urban planners working for the municipal planning authority and urban design institutes ($n = 6$), developers from state-owned development companies ($n = 2$) and residents' committee representatives ($n = 1$), all of whom were directly involved in various stages of either project. Nine interviews with space users were also conducted alongside informal conversations with users in situ. The textual data including interview transcripts, field observation notes, policy documents and new reports were analyzed qualitatively, using the different aspects of the extended place-shaping continuum framework that will be explained later in the paper as "orienting concepts" (Layder, 2013, p. 140) in the coding process.

From "end versus revival of public space" to a new publicness framework

Revisiting the end versus revival narratives

The narratives of the end or loss of public space have dominated public space discourse since the early 1990s (Banerjee, 2001; Kohn, 2004; Mitchell, 1995; Sennett, 2002; Sorkin, 1992). The privatization of space, or more broadly speaking the non-government agencies' involvement in delivering public space, has led to certain design features and privately constructed and enforced rules filtering out undesirable users and uses, thus severely limiting public space's social and democratic functions (Cybriwsky, 1999; Hunt, 2009; Low, 2006; Minton, 2009; Németh, 2009; Peterson, 2006; Turner, 2002). In addition to the private sector seeking to control public space, some sections of civil society can also attempt to deploy regulatory space management mechanisms that undermine other users' ability to access and even redefine citizenship and exclude certain populations from the public realm (Anjaria, 2009; Chitrakar et al., 2022). Countering the loss narrative, a series of studies suggest a revival of public space by revealing renewed interests in both the private and public sectors in public space, its design and space quality (Carmona, 2015). More privately owned spaces have been released to public use through "public-ization" (Carmona, 2022) or "collectivization" (Moroni & Chiodelli, 2013). In addition, some argue that privately owned and managed public spaces are not necessarily all exclusionary and less accessible (Langstraat & van Melik, 2013). Despite some degree of behavioral constraints, they can still be appreciated by users as safe and pleasant social spaces (Leclercq & Pojani, 2023). Many scholars have also argued that the loss of public space argument is fueled by a bias against the multiple modes of public-private governance (Langstraat & van Melik, 2013), and transferring management responsibilities to nonpublic stakeholders "do not per se compromise the access and use attributes of publicness" (De Magalhães & Freire Trigo, 2017, p. 754).

Similar phenomena of public space simultaneously growing and withering are also observed in China. Commentators suggest that public space in China is expanding but publicness of space is decreasing (Flock & Breitung, 2016). In terms of the expansion of public space, while parks and squares are important loci for different groups' social and leisure activities (Lin & Dong, 2018; Lin et al., 2020; Tan, 2021), they also offer space for political discussions and debates (Orum et al., 2009). As for places such as pedestrian streets, many of which have undergone evolution in physical form and social function, can offer more attraction and enjoyment for the public, and their consumption-oriented nature does not necessarily mean a loss of their public nature and vitality (Yang & Xu, 2009). Similarly, pseudo-public spaces in malls and commercial complexes, though considered less public than traditional public spaces, still play an important part in providing public space (Wang & Chen, 2018). The loss of public space is also undeniably obvious. In the process of commodification of property and marketization, local authorities retreat from regulating the planning, management and use of public space, enabling the developer to shape the space in a way that maximizes the value of its properties and consequently denies citizens their right to public space (Wang & Chen, 2021). The spaces produced in the entanglement of public and private interests are criticized as suffering from

problems such as window-dressing, privatization, gentrification (Miao, 2011), lack of distinct style and aesthetic quality, and alienation from people's daily life and real needs (Yang, 2007). The problem of neglect is also observed as public space often gives way to other more pressing matters such as housing demolition and rehabilitation (Xue et al., 2001).

Two issues need to be considered in the discussion of loss and revival of public space in the Chinese context. First, given that land use right and land ownership are separated and land can remain in public ownership even when its use right is rendered to commercial interests (Lin & Ho, 2005), the juxtaposition of universal public land ownership and various actual land use situations complicates the notion of privatization. Second, despite the reduced manifestation of political ideology, public space in China still needs to “convince economically and politically” as a stage to present the party state (Flock & Breitung, 2016, p. 160). Many motivations for the state to maintain public space such as fostering economic development, managing urban environments and maintaining space for healthy social transformation (Gaubatz, 2021) are seemingly utilitarian, but they reflect the use of the production of public space to control and serve the dominant political ideology (Hee & Ooi, 2003), to engineer social norms, values and identities, and to educate citizens and cultivate desirable social interactions, which is effective “the reversal of privatization of urban space” (Qian, 2014, p. 836).

The loss versus revival debate is often framed by the investigation of publicness. Previous studies have proposed various publicness models that share common dimensions such as accessibility, ownership, management, and inclusiveness (Benn & Gaus, 1983; Ekdi & Çıracı, 2015; Karaçor, 2016; Kohn, 2004; Langstraat & van Melik, 2013; Lopes et al., 2020; Mehta, 2014; Németh & Schmidt, 2011; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2008; Varna & Tiesdell, 2010), highlighting key qualities public space should embody. Studied in this way, publicness is approached in a critical-realist way as something out there and external to people (Varna & Tiesdell, 2010), and such models of good or ideal public space are inherently ideological (Iveson, 1998). The non-normative or deductive-interpretivist approach to publicness, on the other hand, sees publicness as socially constructed (Varna & Tiesdell, 2010). In this view, publicness is a relative quality rather than an absolute concept (De Magalhães, 2010) or “an established quality conveniently observable and measurable” (Qian, 2020, p. 8). Public space in the real world does not and indeed should not need to conform to the same norms and standards of the best public space (Carmona, 2015; De Magalhães & Freire Trigo, 2017). The non-normative approach to publicness essentially sees public and private as symbiotic and mutually constitutive rather than contradictory and clearly demarcated, thus allowing 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).

The distinction between the normative and non-normative approaches to publicness is important in the Chinese context. Sun (2020, p. 67) traces how the notion of public space was transported into Chinese urban design theory and has undergone a “compressed transculturation” process that transforms its meaning from open space devoid of social and political meanings to human space and further to space of society. Although the social and cultural meanings of public space is increasingly recognized in addition to the already pronounced focus on technical and operative spatial design guidelines, the imperative has consistently been making good public space in a normative sense and the fundamental discussion of publicness still tends to be missing from theoretical discourses (Chen, 2010). Therefore, a non-normative approach is valuable and much needed in investigating Chinese public space not only as a product that fulfills functional needs but also as a process intertwined with other dynamics in urban development.

Interpreting publicness with an extended place-shaping continuum

To untangle the relationship between public space and the broader urban regeneration and transformation dynamics, it is useful to introduce two additions to the interpretation of publicness. On the one hand, the place-shaping continuum (Carmona, 2014) offers a useful framework to understand the complex actions and practices involved in making public space; on the other hand, the dual process of

the social production and social construction of space (Low, 2000, 2017) can complement the place-shaping continuum's focus on the materiality of space with a dimension of space meaning.

The place-shaping continuum originates as a critique of the urban design discipline and particularly its obsession with product and neglect of understanding the entire process of places being created or recreated (Carmona, 2014). Urban design as an integrated place-shaping continuum has three composing elements of context, process, and power relationship. First, contextual factors concern the history and traditions of place and the ongoing policy context. As background for the rest of the place-making dynamics, the "accumulated history of experience and practice" and the "established ways of doing things" (Carmona, 2014, p. 12) are as important as the latest urbanism trend. Second, the place-shaping continuum includes four active place-shaping processes of design, development, space in use and management. The former two elements concern shaping space for use by processes of establishing visions, making tradeoffs, innovating, coordinating interests and resources and so on, and the latter two deal with shaping space through use with activities and adaptations, long- and short-term stewardship, and space curation. The final element is power relationships made of by agency and structure that determine how the processes play out. Being a useful framework to interpret how space is shaped by various material and social processes, the place-shaping continuum, when applied to the analysis of public space, has been criticized for not adequately considering how the publicness of public space is challenged in the entire place-shaping process since stakeholders do not act unanimously but come to the process with their own, and often contradictory, visions, motivations and interests (Zamanifard et al., 2018).

To address the dimension of space meaning, it is useful to introduce Low's discussion of the social production and construction of space (Low, 2000) and the addition of affective, discursive, embodied and translocal approaches (Low, 2017) to the place-shaping continuum framework. Discussing spatializing culture, i.e., producing and locating social relations, institutions, representations and practices in space (Low, 2017, p. 7). Low distinguishes between the social production of space concerning all the factors that "result or seek to result in the physical creation of the material setting" (Low, 2000, p. 127) and the social construction of space as "the actual transformation of space through people's social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of material setting into scenes and actions that convey meaning" (Low, 2000, p. 128). This formulation is later added the embodied, discursive and translocal approaches to reflect that space is created, represented and assembled by human and nonhuman bodies, language and discourse, and global-local dynamics (Low, 2017). These discussions usefully complement the place-shaping continuum in that they suggest more nuanced ways public space can be created and more diverse ends different layers of publicness can be put into.

The research therefore builds an extended place-shaping continuum, combining Carmona's framework with additional elements from Low's discussion of various approaches to spatializing culture (Figure 1), to interpret the publicness of space shaped by and simultaneously helping shape context-specific socioeconomic and cultural dynamics. In the scope of this paper, the context is specifically Shanghai's aspiration in pursuing people-oriented urban regeneration and ultimately becoming an "excellent global city." The original place-shaping continuum can be seen to fall largely into Low's conceptualization of the social production of space. In terms of the four elements in process, the research looks at key aspirations and stakeholder influence in design, negotiation, regulation and delivery in development, user of spaces and the consequences and conflicts in use, and place-based responsibilities for security and maintenance in management. As for the social construction of space and other approaches that Low points to, the present research looks at media stories and narratives that frame the "official" meaning making in public space. As the powerful stakeholders dominating urban development and restructuring often use discourses to create and manipulate the meanings of spaces (Low, 2017), the narratives that accompany the physical formation of public space further justify the power of urban actors involved in the making of public spaces. Adding this dimension of narrative associated with public space to the place-shaping continuum helps untangle how the powerful urban actors define the nature of public space and the preferable way to use and perceive space.

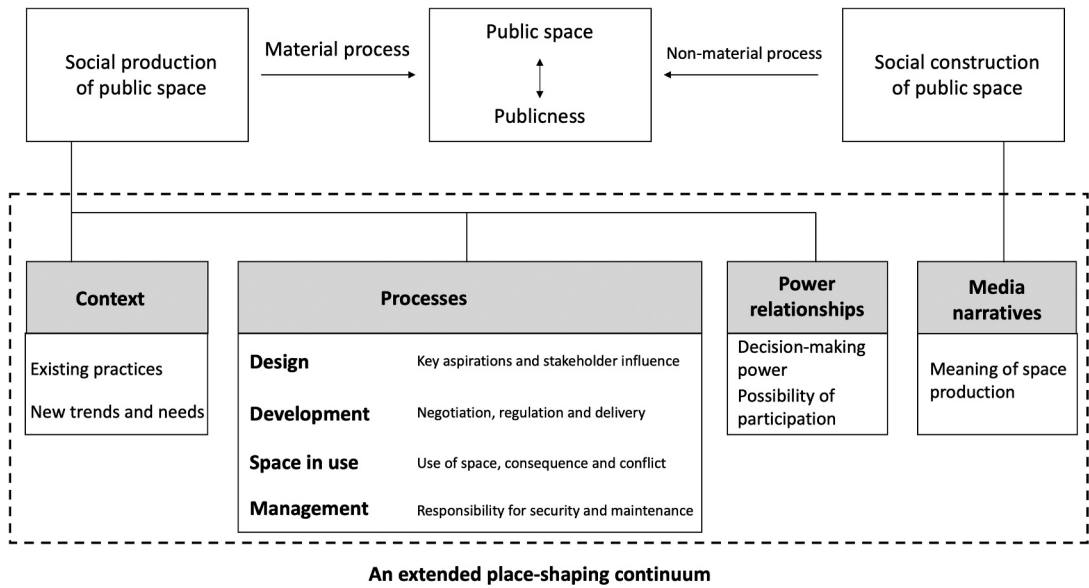


Figure 1. The extended place-shaping continuum framework.

Case study: Making public space in people-oriented urban regeneration

Huangpu river waterfront public space connection

From comprehensive development to public space connection

The waterfront public space connection is the newest installment of the grand Huangpu River Waterfront Comprehensive Development first conceived in the early 1990s, when the city faced the pressure of industrial upgrade and needed to release the waterfront land for higher value uses. Shanghai municipality started the Comprehensive Development in 2002 to change the riverfront land use from industrial to a mix of public uses and to make improvements in open space and green space system, flood protection, historic preservation, transport network and so on (Yu, 2002). The transformation was expected to “give the river back to people,” since transferring the industrial land to the city for public uses was not only to serve functional upgrade needs but also symbolically “strengthen the relationship between people and water” (Shanghai Municipal Leading Group for Development of Huangpu River Banks General Office, 2010, p. 76). However, the public uses envisaged back then broadly included a variety of residential and commercial functions in addition to public space for which there was no specific quality requirement. Consequently, the public spaces produced in this initial stage of waterfront regeneration, many of which created as auxiliary space to property developments promoted by local government-private developer coalition (Xiong, 2005), suffered from different degrees of privatization and segregation. The subsequent preparation for the 2010 World Expo played a vital role in accelerating waterfront regeneration in general and in renovating several waterfront public spaces as part of the citywide beautification efforts. Even so, at this stage the entire waterfront was being regenerated without much coordination, not to mention creating a continuous and well-connected public space system.

By 2015, as the arduous reclamation of waterfront land had basically been achieved, the complete open-up and connection of waterfront public space became both possible and highly desirable. The municipality published a three-year action plan in 2014, envisioning that all the public spaces along both riverbanks, altogether 45 km in length, would be built and connected by the end of 2017. Creating continuous public spaces was considered one of the prerequisites for making the Huangpu River waterfront world-class, a crucial step for Shanghai toward becoming an “excellent global city.” Given

these pressures, the construction of waterfront public spaces accelerated and was in some cases prioritized over the property development on adjacent land plots to meet the open-up project deadline.

The new connected waterfront public spaces were to be implemented by different district governments or their affiliated waterfront development companies. Nominally private enterprises but having district government officials as company directors, these development companies essentially represented the local governments' development aspirations, their practices more in line with the local socioeconomic agenda than profit oriented. In the early days of waterfront regeneration, the primary function of these development companies was conducting "primary land development" and building necessary infrastructure to prepare the land for subsequent lease. Sometimes partnering with development companies to develop land parcels after gaining land use rights, private developers played a greater role in providing public space in their projects. Although developers were encouraged to build the noncommercial part of the development, i.e., the public space, to increase their potential profit, they still tended to put limited efforts into the quality of public space and the coordination with neighboring plots, creating "bottlenecks" that later became the main challenges for the public space connection project. More recently, the development companies became more invested in the so-called "secondary land development," or functional development that was more proactive and involved introducing specific industries to create their own unique brands and images. Making the new waterfront public spaces with distinct characters also helped with this image-making task.

Connecting the waterfront with "three paths": An example of East Bund

Over the years, the piecemeal and uncoordinated waterfront property development left many "bottlenecks," i.e., the natural or man-made barriers or gaps, on both banks of the riverfront. A key task of the 2017 waterfront public space connection, therefore, was to unblock the bottlenecks through more coherent public space design.

The connection project at the river's east side, commonly known as the East Bund, was the epitome of the key aspirations behind the whole public space connection project. Here, the East Bund Investment Company coordinated among designers, the planning institute and other development companies responsible for different sections of the waterfront. To solicit ideas for creating a connected East Bund, the East Bund Investment Company, together with the municipal planning authority and the district government, started a "three-in-one participatory process," with the three elements being an international conceptual design competition, a more local-facing young designer competition held together with a public questionnaire survey, and a "parallel design" produced by the local planning design institute based on the first two elements. The "three paths" connection idea comprising a slow-mobility system of pedestrian, jogging, and cycling tracks running continuously along the riverbank emerged from this design process and became the most representative images of the waterfront public space connection project (Figure 2). The concept originated from the winning proposal in the international conceptual design competition. Responding to the design brief that asked for opening segmented space and linking up bottlenecks with surrounding areas as well as supposedly drawing inspiration from public comments in the questionnaire survey about people wishing to be able to jog or cycle along the river, the design team proposed the three paths as the key element to connect the fragmented waterfront public spaces and to host new functions and activities.

To implement the three paths and more importantly to ensure their continuity, the East Bund Open Space Plan, the official name of the aforementioned "parallel design," was made to amend the land use of small land parcels along the river into public land. It also introduced a new planning tool called the "additional plan" that specified the location of the paths, which wasn't a conventional element of the statutory detailed control plan. Later, during the detailed design of each waterfront section carried out by various design teams, case-by-case adjustments were conducted to ensure the continuity of the waterfront public space and the unobstructed view of the river from the paths (Figure 3). The continuity of the three paths had strong political backing behind it because the connection was



Figure 2. Examples of the waterfront “three paths.”



Figure 3. A segment of the “three paths” needed to be elevated to bypass the unmovable buildings.

supposed to demonstrate people-orientedness, and local government leaders stressed to the planners that “you can’t ask people to make a detour because it is no longer ‘connection’ that way.”¹

“If I don’t practice my instruments here, I have nowhere else to go”

When asked how they had envisioned the public space they designed would be used, one designer responded, “There are so many people in Shanghai. It is impossible that you make a space but then no one uses it.” Indeed, since its delivery, the waterfront public space has quickly become a popular destination for tourists and locals alike. This is despite much waterfront hinterland being not fully developed at the time, making certain waterfront public spaces less accessible and inadequately supported by urban amenities. After a period of gradual upgrade, more facilities including public toilets, water fountains and vending machines have been installed, providing convenience for visitors who, despite the not particularly restrictive design of space, mostly only engage in the “designed-in” activities such as strolling, jogging, and cycling.

What could perhaps best capture the undercurrent beneath the perfectly dynamic and vibrant image is a quick account of Minsheng Wharf, a section of East Bund. Originally, an industrial wharf, Minsheng Wharf was planned as a future hub for cultural and art events. So far, a complete regeneration of the area has yet to take off, but some derelict industrial structures have been repurposed to accommodate the three paths, and hard surfaces of the wharf were turned into public open space. After the public space opened, the area quickly became popular for grassroot entertainment activities like singing, dancing, and musical instrument practicing. In the height of summer in 2019, people brought their own karaoke players and amplifiers to sing karaoke individually or in small groups. There was even a “waterfront red song choir” drawing participants and passersby alike, occupying about half of the wharf area.

But the presence of these lively summer night concerts was clearly not welcomed by everyone. During fieldwork in 2019, a middle-aged lady who frequented the place to practice the saxophone (also bringing a radio and an amplifier to play the accompaniment) right in front of a warning sign reading “use of amplifiers forbidden” triumphantly told a story of how the security personnel had received complaints and tried to call the police on them only to be dismissed by the police officer in the end (Figure 4). The development company responsible for the area was not happy either, which is ironic considering the design vision for the area’s future featured both art and everydayness. They were not only concerned about the potential conflicts between different spaces users and the risks of having large crowd gatherings but were also wary that the grassroot activities clashed with the area’s intended image. Despite not having much actual effect, warning signs were put up at strategic locations and security guards patrolled the area as they did at the rest of the waterfront stopping uncivil behaviors such as picking flowers, climbing fences, and lying on benches. More recently, the space once appropriated by the red song choir has been occupied by new planters to accompany the “no noise” warning sign (Figure 5). The message that only orderliness and quiet enjoyment of the space is quite clear.

Community public space micro-regeneration

From “massive demolition and reconstruction” to micro-regeneration

As elsewhere in China, Shanghai’s urban regeneration since the early 1990s featured “massive demolition and reconstruction.” The unsustainable coarse-grained resident relocation and new property development not only destroyed the historical built and social fabrics but also created much social unrest (Wang, 2011). At the same time, inner-city areas having survived demolition continued to decline as development priorities were given to the city’s outward expansion and high-profile flagship projects. Spurred by the recent national agenda to pursue city betterment, Shanghai started to experiment with the so-called community micro-regeneration as an alternative to the traditional, mass-scale urban regeneration.



Figure 4. Practicing musical instrument right in front of the warning sign.



Figure 5. Planters are now placed (right) where people used to gather to sing “red songs” back in 2019 (left).

As its name suggests, micro-regeneration is “small and micro” design interventions on leftover or under-utilized spaces in and around deteriorating old neighborhoods. Such small-scale upgrade supposedly incurs minimal disruptions to residents’ daily lives and the existing urban built fabrics. It also requires comparably smaller financial inputs and a shorter time to implement, since these neighborhood projects would not require lengthy formal planning and administrative procedures. This was especially important for the municipal planning authority who wanted to use the micro-regeneration experiment to quickly test the water and produce exemplary projects to be promoted more widely. Apart from such practical rationale, choosing neighborhood public spaces to start new urban regeneration experiments was symbolically significant because they were where residents’ daily lives unfold, and the improvement thereof meant “addressing the detailed and intimate concerns of urban residents.”²

Experimenting with micro-regeneration: The case of “Walking in Shanghai”

Micro-regeneration as an alternative urban regeneration method was popularized largely thanks to the “Walking in Shanghai” Community Public Space Micro-regeneration scheme (hereafter shortened as

“Walking in Shanghai”) initiated in 2016 by the Shanghai Urban Public Space Design Promotion Centre (SUPSDPC), an affiliated department to the Shanghai Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau (SMPNRB). Echoing the overarching people-oriented value, the project aimed to encourage citizens to “become active in voicing their opinions and take part in events that transform the tiny corners and the general environment of the city” (Shanghai Urban Public Space Design Promotion Centre, 2016).

Since its commencement in 2016, “Walking in Shanghai” has followed a similar design competition format. Each year, the SUPSDPC would select several pilot sites through a combination of top-down designation and bottom-up nomination. So far, pilot sites range from residual space within neighborhoods (2016, 2017) to under-bridge spaces (2018, 2019) and service facility buildings (2020). After publishing the call for participation and the design competition brief, the SUPSDPC would hold various events to introduce the initiative, organize site surveys for interested designers and connect them to local residents and other stakeholders. Outside these organized events, designers were encouraged to study the sites and the local communities in depth with their preferred survey methods. The winning teams for each pilot site would finalize the designs per the opinions of local stakeholders and oversee the project implementation, although the realization of designers’ ideals is ultimately subject to subsequent negotiations and the availability of budget. By October 2019 and in the first three rounds of “Walking in Shanghai,” 17 out of the 25 pilot projects had been implemented, the interventions mostly being refurbishing neglected spaces and adding new greenery and convenience amenities such as benches, children’s play areas and exercise equipment (Figure 6).

Implementation and difficulties

As a supposedly more participatory process, micro-regeneration looks to involve residents in consultation and design but residents as nonprofessionals often lack a clear understanding of what micro-regeneration entails. Presenting them with a blueprint in formal consultation meetings or surveys might not be enough to convey the clear message, and residents sometimes only understand the projects more intuitively when they see them materialized into construction sites. This is why the construction phase of micro-regeneration tended to be more contested than the initial design and formal consultation stages. Since space in old neighborhoods is often limited, the construction sites of micro-regeneration projects usually couldn’t be completely fenced off or shielded away from residents. While residents might not always grasp all the details of the design interventions on paper, the process of physically building these spaces concretized what the changes would be to their neighborhoods and their personal lives. As a result, residents were more likely to voice their opinions and challenge the design during construction than in the initial consultation when they thought the project damaged their interests.



Figure 6. An example of micro-regeneration intervention: play area and exercise equipment.

To date, most micro-regeneration projects are still initiated and funded by the government, and the singularity of funding source means that micro-regeneration projects are very reliant on their alignment with the local governments' policy priorities at the time. Indeed, several initial "Walking in Shanghai" pilot projects were aborted halfway due to changes in local government leadership and development priorities, impossible stakeholder coordination, and changes in municipal-level policy direction. Largely, the difficulty in coordinating different urban actors and their changing visions, particularly in "Walking in Shanghai," originated from the municipal planning authority's lack of administrative powers in overseeing project implementation. As the primary promoter behind the initial micro-regeneration experiments, the planning authority tried to coordinate designers, different levels of governments and administrative departments, but the communication with the stakeholders who would ultimately be responsible for project implementation is not always effective given institutional barriers, and the planning authority could not intervene in project implementation to ensure project quality.

The death and life of micro-regeneration interventions

The "micro" nature of micro-regeneration enabled it to develop fast as an urban experiment and endear itself to communities. But being micro also means these interventions cannot solve the fundamental problems faced by the old neighborhoods. Currently, most neighborhoods in Shanghai do not have long-term mechanisms or dedicated teams to manage community public spaces. About 5 years after their completion, many "Walking in Shanghai" micro-regeneration interventions have disappeared or again become poorly maintained. Some spaces become abandoned again due to poor construction and daily maintenance while others have acceptable physical status but remain under-used by the local communities. In one such case, an area previously carved out of the narrow neighborhood alleyways and refurbished with benches has once again become a parking space for motorcycles (Figure 7). In another case elsewhere, a piece of overgrown green space cleared up and furnished with a footpath and some benches is once again too overgrown to be accessible. These unfortunate cases show that although micro-regeneration can transform under-maintained neighborhood corners into usable spaces for residents, it does not by default help establish a space management mechanism. Nor does it necessarily change residential space into genuine neighborhood social space. As a result, the need to use the space for other more utilitarian purposes takes over that of maintaining space as public space.

The key to the success of micro-regeneration lies in its integration into the wider community governance practices. For example, one pilot site in the 2016 "Walking in Shanghai" featured a "good neighbor pergola," a small square decorated with a semi-circular pergola and greenery and refurbished with new benches and paving. In early 2019, Shanghai started the "waste sorting" movement requiring citizens to sort and recycle household waste. While most neighborhoods at the time responded to this



Figure 7. Public space created in micro-regeneration once again becomes encroached on.

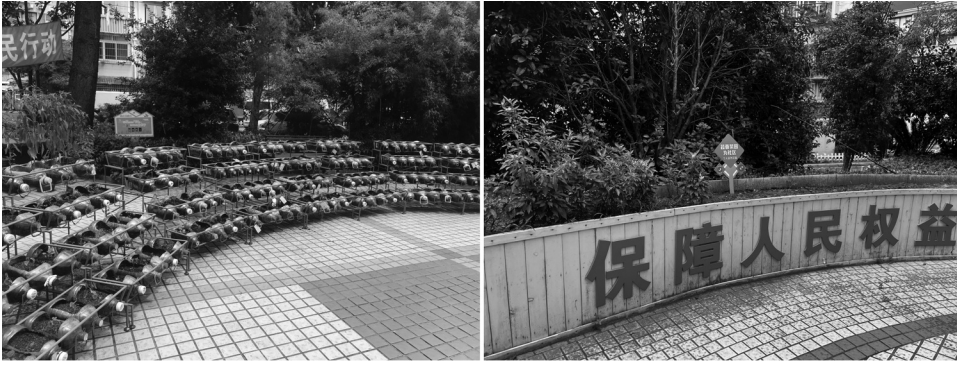


Figure 8. The upgrade of the bottle garden.

policy requirement by upgrading the bin storage rooms and urging residents to abide by the recycling rules, in the community where the “good neighbor pergola” was located, the residents’ committee set up a bottle garden on the pergola square. As an incentive to actively follow waste sorting rules, residents could adopt a flowerpot made of waste plastic bottle in the bottle garden to grow flowers. The bottle garden has since been upgraded into a small vegetable garden with proper planters and more durable structural materials (Figure 8). The residents’ committee works with volunteers to grow vegetables to distribute to elderly members within the community. This case shows that while micro-regeneration could transform the appearance of community public spaces, what is more important is a long-term management mechanism that not only keeps the freshness of the physical space but also invigorates it with active uses, thus turning passive spaces into active ones.

Media narratives and the meaning of making public space

Stories of the case studies in various media channels are essentially state-approved narratives of urban changes. The selectively reported stories, specifically those of inevitability and collective recognition, highlight the role of new public space in manifesting the people-oriented ideal and encouraging more active civic engagement.

The story of inevitability suggests that these recent public space projects are timely developments due to take place at this particular moment, serving to legitimize the spatial changes and the urban regeneration approaches in general. On the one hand, improvements of public space are inevitable because other world cities have also embraced the idea of quality after periods of growth. For example, small-scale spatial intervention is justified because it is “the answer western cities found after they have gone down a long and winding road” (Gong, 2016). This narrative not only justifies the city’s urban regeneration approach but also discursively positions Shanghai among the well-recognized global cities. On the other hand, public space developments are inevitable and desirable because the basic groundwork has been completed, necessitating more efforts put into “quality.” As public space is often considered a higher-level need compared to basic infrastructure, improving public space thus represents satisfying citizens’ higher-level needs and further highlights the people-oriented nature of the ongoing urban regeneration.

The story of collective recognition turns to another aspect of the people-oriented ideal: public space developments are widely supported by citizens because they serve the public’s interests, and citizens in turn need to take up their responsibilities in co-creation to help maintain public spaces. Stories of collective efforts depict how different stakeholders made sacrifices, engaged in different negotiations, and jumped technical hurdles. They show a collective recognition of the value of the various public space transformations and the necessity of these projects in shaping a better future for the city and all its citizens. At the same time, the co-creation narrative stresses citizens’ role in taking part in projects

and urban regeneration in general and calls for more active civic engagement. Participation and co-creation take different forms in these stories, ranging from designers surveying local communities to residents commenting on their surrounding environment, following project progress, and using the regenerated space for community activities. These are supplemented by reports of uncivil or inappropriate uses of space that call for citizens to be mindful of their behaviors. These stories stress that people-oriented is by the people as well as for the people. Not only should the government provide public goods but citizens also need to behave with civic quality, act as masters of the city, and make active contributions by participating in urban affairs in different ways.

Discussion

People-oriented public space development through the lens of extended place-shaping continuum

To summarize the case studies with the extended place-shaping continuum framework, in terms of the context, both cases should be understood in relation to the broader urban context and practices since the 1990s as well as the more recent turn to a more quality-oriented direction. Neither case is inherently new as both are built on foundational work that enables the later emphasis on quality. This duality of longstanding traditions and new needs in urban regeneration means that many existing design and development approaches and power dynamics have persisted to the present day exerting continued influence, but new practices are subsequently necessitated and indeed actively experimented with to address the more pronounced people-oriented needs.

Regarding the design of new public spaces, the pursuit for people-oriented development as an overarching aspiration runs parallel to solving various practical problems. Both cases show that specific design elements, design strategies and even the choice of intervention on the subject itself can all be used to highlight the people-orientedness of the transformation. In other words, the design interventions not only offer practical solutions to certain urban problems but also materialize the people-oriented ideas given the symbolic significance attached to these design elements and practices. To support the people-oriented urban regeneration, new public space developments have attempted to incorporate more formal and informal participatory processes with varying effects, showing that different actors have different abilities to influence the design vision. In both cases, public participation has been emphasized at various stages, and participation broadly includes design competition, various kinds of public survey and informal citizen engagement with projects in different ways. Despite these participatory elements, expert knowledge still plays a dominant role in producing public spaces. The people-oriented ideal does not always translate unproblematically into practice with people only gaining symbolic power in these participatory processes defined in the broadest sense.

Despite differences in development and implementation mechanisms, both cases show strong public leadership in the general delivery of the projects, which to a certain extent guarantees their public nature. Notably, both cases feature some experiments in planning showing more proactive and experimental actions from the planning authority beyond its traditional technical plan-making role and making the current urban regeneration more open and people-oriented. However, planning is still constrained by its status within the current urban governance system especially at the local level, which limits the potentials of experiments and innovations to fully address the quality- and people-oriented urban regeneration needs. This becomes especially problematic in local projects such as micro-regeneration that rely heavily on the government allocation of resources and case-by-case negotiation where the planning authority has limited power beyond communicating with other stakeholders.

In terms of the use and management of space, with both projects opening up previously inaccessible or underused places, citizens have been provided with more diverse space for everyday use and previously non-existent possibilities of use. The transformation of these spaces has created a series of familiar images that are widely circulated via different media channels. The new waterfront public spaces invariably feature large areas of greenery, brand new jogging and cycling paths and most

importantly visitors strolling or jogging happily against the magnificent skyline in the distance. Similarly, the micro-regeneration projects presented to the public always show brightly colored children's playground and exercise facilities, ornamented with benches, flowerbeds, and artistic murals. These images, however, do not show how these spaces are subject to conflicts in uses or do not suit users' actual needs. Neither do they show the admittedly evolving but still ambiguous management practices and the resulting restrictive environment marked by the omnipresence of noticeboards and warning signs or once again undermaintained spaces. In this sense, while the new spaces are physically open, they are still in danger of becoming closed again due to the restriction on freely appropriating space and inadequate quality of care. What is also worth noting is that inherent to the new public spaces is an expectation that citizens would behave with "quality" (*su zhi*). For both cases, there is a belief that the improvement of spatial quality not only makes people more civilized and well behaved but also encourages them to contribute to the shared environment. This view often accompanies discussions of the need to improve urban management and urban governance abilities to suggest that citizens are expected to play as important a role as the space producers and managers in the maintenance of public space.

Finally, the material production of public spaces is accompanied by the discourses of inevitability and collectivity recognition, stressing the desirability of change, the public's support, and the collective recognition of the importance of being responsible and active citizens. However, these constructed meanings, together with the foregoing analysis of the processes of space production, ultimately suggest that despite the new context and the different innovative approaches, the expansion of social participation is limited, and the stakeholder power relation is generally unchanged. First, participatory channels are overall limited, and citizens are more often consulted than given decision-making power in projects on different scales. Second, "the government" maintains a persistently dominant role in decision-making and resource allocation, and this dominance is simultaneously supported by the state-moderated narratives of urban changes in the mass media. Notably, though, "the government" is not always regarded as an unwelcome enforcer of unrealistic grand visions but a guarantor of the effectiveness or legitimacy of the chosen urban regeneration approach. In addition, "the government" is never a singular and homogeneous entity, as the responsibilities and functions of different government administrative bodies are often ambiguously defined. As a result, the outcome of a specific project often hinges on some key figures and their actions in particular circumstances despite the seemingly unified governmental agenda. This interplay between the formal system and the "human factors" complicates the seemingly straightforward public initiatives and adds uncertainty to both the conventional practices and the emerging experiments.

Complexity in publicness and publicization

The foregoing analysis reveals three interrelated roles public space development plays in helping deliver Shanghai's people-oriented urban regeneration vision. First, the ongoing public space development has everyday utilitarian values and opens new material space for public use. For the citizens, more previously inaccessible or unattractive places are transformed into space for everyday activity, and for the city as a whole, the increase in the use value of spaces leads to improved urban images, further investments, and development opportunities. Second, public space development acts as a testing ground to confront spatial challenges associated with macrouban transformation processes, and the many exemplary practices in both case studies show different ways of improving urban quality and demonstrating people-orientedness. Third, public space development is also employed discursively to support the narrative of building a people-oriented "excellent global city." As a symbol of quality, openness and people-centered development, public space has many innate qualities that have been variably employed to respond to the needs of the current urban regeneration stage. These different roles of public space development in turn show the multiple ways space exists as public space in this context, or in other words the multi-layered publicness. Space gains localized publicness and becomes available for a variety of sometimes conflictual uses by heterogeneous users. In this

process, however, space is not necessarily equally accessible for all users or beyond physical openness. This is where the second layer of publicness, the procedural publicness of space, becomes desirable. With procedural publicness, space becomes public when the decision-making process is opened to more stakeholders, especially those who are conventionally excluded from such a process. As a result, the physical forms and meanings of space could be shaped by more forces. Embodying these two types of publicness still does not automatically make space more public as localized publicness and procedural publicness are both embedded in a third type of publicness. Symbolic publicness makes space public via the materiality and associated discourse of public space as symbols of certain social values that serve a particular public and therefore justifying the resultant space production and construction practices.

The co-existence of these different layers of publicness also suggests complex situations of publicization, de-publicization, and re-publicization rather than a simple demise or revival of public space. Publicization here is broadly the process of space being materially produced and discursively constructed to embody certain public qualities. The use of publicization 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). Here, the emphasis is on making space public by way of opening its design and delivery process and evoking a collective recognition of its relevance to the broader urban processes as well as creating physical accessibility. In this sense, this publicization process echoes with Iveson's (2007, p. 21) discussion of three ways a space might be made public, i.e., by becoming "a venue for public address," "an object of public debate itself," or "a means to understanding 'who belongs' in any definition of the public." Re-publicization is more contextually relevant to the present discussion as a process specific to the publicly owned public space. It describes the process of existing public space, already under public ownership and management status, regains its publicness either because it becomes more used by members of the public or because its channels of participation become more diversified and effective. Finally, de-publicization happens when the design and delivery of public space favors particular users or stakeholders, or collective meaning making is prioritized over spontaneous expressions. Similar to the re-publicization process, de-publicization in the scope of the present paper is also discussed in relation to publicly owned public spaces and therefore is different from Nissen's (2008) use of the term to describe a continuum of hybrid spaces with different levels of constraints of usability and accessibility. The processes of re-publicization and de-publicization are especially highlighted here because publicly owned public spaces are often expected to embody inherent qualities that enable them to function better than spaces produced and managed under alternative arrangements, but the foregoing analysis shows otherwise. Public ownership or management arrangement does not guarantee any ideal public space quality, and its close relation with the broader urban agenda may even undermine such qualities.

Conclusion

By engaging with the ongoing urban regeneration context in Shanghai, the study deepens the understanding of the role public space development plays in this particular urban transformation stage as an integral part of the very transformation process it is facilitating, responding to specific sets of economic, social, and ideological needs of the city. Using an extended place-shaping continuum as the analytical framework for the case studies, the research shows the use of a non-normative approach to publicness that consider both the material and conceptual realms (Németh, 2012) to interpret Chinese public space and reveals the rationales and mechanisms behind the production and construction of public space. The research uses two publicly owned public space projects as case studies to provide more empirical complexity to the end versus revival of public space debates that have primarily centered on the privatization of public space and its associated problems. The discussion of the three types of publicness demonstrates that publicness is not a preexisting quality but is shaped by the specific urban context and stakeholder dynamics. The extent to which the localized and

procedural publicness could translate into qualities such as accessibility and inclusiveness relies heavily on who has the power to define the symbolic values of publicness and who determines what “public” is to be served. By using publicness as an entry point, the research describes scenarios of publicization, de-publicization, and re-publicization that defy the simplistic dichotomy of end and loss. This helps with the argument that neither the loss nor the revival situation inherently revolves around issues with different forms of private involvement.

The research also shows how the dynamics in making public space, including but not limited to how different actors become involved and to what effect, who are consulted and who make the decisions, and how the design visions are implemented with various experiments and constraints, are profoundly influenced by specific sociocultural and political contexts (Jiang & Nakajima, 2022). As reflected by the case studies, the publicness of new public space development in Shanghai is inseparable from the people-orientedness ideal necessitated by the need to address existing “urban diseases” and pursue the “excellent global city” vision. This new vision, despite placing a stronger emphasis on urban quality and humanistic values than earlier growth-centric development plans, does not fundamentally change the existing power relations and the needs, ambitions, and associated narratives of powerful urban actors that underpin space production in general and public space development in particular in Shanghai. Although the new public spaces have brought new participatory possibilities unavailable in the past, the overall picture remains that the development of the city is “strongly associated with a particular urban vision that the local elites hold, which leaves little room for public participation to reflect those voices from grassroots organizations and local residents” (Shin, 2014, p. 270). In other words, even though public space development guided by people-oriented principles has introduced many positive changes, the predominantly top-down approach is still favored to implement the dominant urban actors’ visions and an idealized abstract public to apply the participation and co-creation ideal, which suppresses the more spontaneous and unruly practices that potentially challenge the status quo.

The present research is not without limitations. First, the research inevitably only presents a slice of a continuously evolving story and thus faces the risk of oversimplification. Since the original fieldwork, much progress has taken place in both cases such as extended project scope and more incremental improvement, not to mention the changes in macrouban regeneration trajectory and microbehavioral patterns following the pandemic. More in-depth follow-up study on both cases could certainly enrich the discussions presented in this paper. Second, due to difficulties in the fieldwork related to recruiting interviewees, the research primarily drew on the experiences of design and planning professionals who the author was able to contact in a snowballing manner through personal contacts. The perspectives of other actors, particularly those higher up on the decision-making ladder, were mainly derived from the professionals’ accounts of the events and secondary sources and were therefore limited. Finally, the timing of the fieldwork did not allow more in-depth participant observation of the processes of public space production. Future studies would benefit from a more participatory and ethnographic research design that would form the basis for future research on the increasingly rich meanings of public space and publicness.

Notes

1. Interview with a planner working at Shanghai Urban Planning Design Research Institute, July 2019.
2. Interview with an architect winning one “Walking in Shanghai” pilot scheme, October, 2019.

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