

A Temporary Balance Between System and Lifeworld ——Social Space Research on the Resistance to the Urban Renewal Movement in Shanghai

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Abstract

The illegal shops on the ground floor of Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun which is the socialist utopian collective houses built for workers in the early years after the foundation of People's Republic of China had shaped the long-term vitality of urban space in Shanghai. From 2017, Shanghai government has conducted a new urban renewal movement focused on the control of these illegal shops transformed from residential space. However, two years later, these once sealed-up shops reopened in an informal way, creating a new way of public communication. Through the windowsill shops, the underclass have taken a resistance to the autocratic system and achieved a temporary balance in the public-private relations. Based on the spatial analysis of typical streets and social investigation on relevant public sectors and groups, the paper attempts to discuss the deep reason behind the temporary success of this resistance from both the aspects of urban spatial structure and social relations. In addition to witnessing the vulnerability of the underclass and the irrationality of urban space structure, this paper is to argue that government should adopt more guiding solutions instead of cover up the appearance of the problems when facing social contradictions. Moreover, a better communication about the lifeworld advocated by Habermas needs to be established and architects as well as urban planners should be more involved in this communication to propose the possibility of spatial solutions on social conflicts.

1. Introduction

The Workers' New Village(or Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun in Chinese), Shanghai's typical settlement built after the founding of the People's Republic of China, is a form of space produced in early years of socialism exploration in China. These residential areas generally occupy a whole street block of 140-450 meters and shaped the main urban fabric in Shanghai's urban expansion during the 1950s-1980s. After the reformation of economic system in 1980s, the ground floor of these residential buildings were converted into retail shops, contributing to the urban life of residents and vitality of street space for decades. However, as the Shanghai municipal government conducted a new urban renewal movement starting from 2017, these illegal shops were sealed-up, forcing thousands of migrant workers to leave the city. Under the urban violence led by the government, the space of self-construction were vulnerable and the everyday life between the buildings was almost completely destroyed.

Three years after the renewal movement, a phenomenon of the recovery of urban life in once renovated areas is recently noticed. The sealed-up shops have resumed cautious business activities after the momentum of the movement passed. And the city managers seem to turn a blind eye to this phenomenon. The question we want to explain is the reason why this disparate spatial political conflict result in such a delicate balance today. For this question, the research focuses on the spatial and social background of this movement, trying to clarify the reasons related to the urban spatial structure, city management and social relations behind.

To study the behind logic of this urban spatial phenomenon, the paper will analyze it from



Figure 1. A typical urban fabric of shaped by Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun in Shanghai. Photo from Google maps, 2000.

four aspects. First of all, based on the process of formation of Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun since 1950s and its social background, land system and ideology, the historical reasons for the current urban spatial structure are clarified and the contexts of the study are presented. Second, through the analysis of the relationship between the overall urban planning and the management policies as well as its implementation process, the paper discusses the real political goals behind the official slogan and analyzes the absence and ineffectiveness of the public voice. Third, focusing on the everyday life that emerged after three years of the renewal movement, the paper presents the cautious commercial activities and a brand-new mode of public communication in the renovated streets. Fourth, through the analysis of the urban spatial structure and the interview of social groups, the author tries to explain the reason why a balance in the spatial political conflict has been reached. Based on the above analysis, the article finally puts forward arguments in three aspects: the imbalance between urban spatial structure and functional allocation for the lifeworld, the autocracy of decision makers and the lack of effective communication, and the absence of architects' and urban planners' social participation.

2. History of Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun

The current urban spatial structure of Shanghai was formed by the multi-round urban expansion in history. From 1950s to 1980s, it was the construction of new socialist settlements for workers (Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun) that brought the suburban farmland into the scope of the Shanghai city. As French sociologist Henri Lefebvre said, space is the production of social relations. And the series of Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun built in Shanghai from the 1950s to the 1980s exactly presented a utopian vision of a new socialist country for the residential space of the working class. The new nation needed a new typology of residential space for workers to show the superiority of the socialist system and the unity of the working class.

Lefebvre demonstrated in *The Production of Space* (Henri Lefebvre, 1974) that the space production oriented by exchange value in capitalist society will inevitably lead to the homogeneity and convergence of urban space, thus asserting that the socialist space production oriented by use value should be diverse. However, due to China's weak economic and productivity in the early years, the construction of socialist settlements in Shanghai was based on the principle of "firmness, applicability, economy and

rapidity", forming extremely homogeneous residential units with low quality in spite of the social fairness it reflects. Although the residential units of the workers were partially rebuilt later, the overall spatial structure basically continued the original planning and left a profound impact on Shanghai's current urban space. (figure.1).

With Shanghai gradually entered the post-industrial era, Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun, which used to be the support of industrial production, have now become pure living spaces. The shortage of infrastructure and commercial services gradually emerged. At the same time, the residents who was originally closely linked with industrial production have also changed their status from workers to property owners. In this case, the commercial renovation of the ground floor converting the window into front door become popular. Although it is illegal to change residential space into commercial use, the managers of the city acquiesced in this phenomenon because it conformed to the country's economic construction-centered development route within a certain period of time. Moreover, this kind of space renovation effectively alleviates the negativity of the city interface caused by the huge scale of the wall around Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun and brought public life to the streets. Just as Jane Jacobs advocated in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Jane Jacobs, 1961), these illegal shops have become a solid foundation to support the vitality, diversity and public communication of streets as well as urban safety. (figure.2)

3. Population control and gentrification of Shanghai

Starting from 2017, Shanghai has launched a sweeping urban renewal movement to seal up these illegal shops that have existed for decades. The official reasons for this movement are obvious but also untenable: first, the commercial use of the house is illegal; second, the renovation behavior have damaged the structure of the apartments and threatened the safety of upper-floor residents; third, the illegal self-construction have damaged the image of the city which needs to be improved. Supported by these grand reasons, almost all the doors of illegal shops were sealed up to windows that cannot be directly accessed from streets. However, we only have to examine these official reasons further to find that they are totally untenable. First of all, the

problematic singleness of functional allocation in Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun left from a specific historical period has become a golden rule followed by city managers, which is really unconvincing. Secondly, the remove of the wall under the window will not affect the original structural performance. Finally, the shops along the streets that have provided commercial vitality and public life for Shanghai's urban streets could be considered as a good phenomenon in terms of the diversity and convenience of urban life but is chaotic in terms of the city management which seeks to the unity image of the city. (figure.3)

It's essential to see the changes and contradictions that have taken place in the social, economic and political relations in the new stage of Shanghai. In 2016, Shanghai has formulated an ambitious global city strategic plan in Shanghai Urban Master Plan (2016-2040) which has significant goals of improving city image and controlling the population. Besides, Shanghai is gradually moving towards a gentrification transformation which David Harvey profoundly expounded in his study of Baltimore: to replace daily and low-consumption life with a high-end fashionable consumer lifestyle. What's different is the gentrification of Chinese cities is often accompanied by the unified operation and ideology oriented of government. As a result, the pursuit of city image and gentrification is inconsistent with the everyday life of the low-income migrant businessman. This contradictions is the real reason for this renewal movement.

Under the city gentrification oriented by government conspired with capital, the underclass easily became the victims of the urban space movement. Their self-construction has brought long-term vitality to public space but they never have any right to participate in urban management.

4. Windowsill shops: a way to exchange, communicate and resist

Three years after the renewal movement, an interesting phenomenon has emerged in the renewal areas. The sealed-up shops were not destroyed but survived through the windows. Along with these shops, street vitality and urban life survived at the same time and the renovated shops have produced a new business and public communication mode. For the



Figure 2. The once vibrant streets shaped by the illegal ground-floor shops in Shanghai. Photo from Baidu maps, 2013.



Figure 3. The illegal shops were sealed up with brick walls and restored to windows with temporary advertisement on it. Photo by the author, 2019.

existence of windowsill is the result of the renewal movement, it give these shops a spatial legitimacy. Thus, windowsills have become a protective boundary for internal businesses even though they are still illegal. Moreover, windowsills have become a medium between public and private through which communication and dialogue are taking place in the street. These windowsills continue to play the role of shaping the vitality of the street space, tying together with the everyday life of surrounding communities. (figure.4)

The delicate balance between the underclass and the city managers raises our question: what supported them to stick and resist the pressure of the government? What's the social and spatial reasons behind.

5. The incompatibility of value systems

For the house owners, the apartments on the ground floor facing the street are of low-quality due to humidity and noise. The conversion of ground-floor space into commercial use can be quite rewarding for them to choose a better living environment in the city.

For the migrant merchants, the rent of these shops is cheaper than that of the shops developed by developers. Low cost is important for them to engage in retail industry which is also an important reason why they still stick to these spaces. Besides, they believe that the movement will only last for a short period of time.

As for the residents upstairs, they hold opinions on the change in use of the ground-floor space for it invaded their private sphere and damaged the structure of the house. However, these worries could be solved through communication. Moreover, the mix of commercial and residential function has been encouraged by urban planners in newly developed urban areas proving that the shops on the ground floor bring more convenience and vitality to the streets than noise and pollution.

From the perspective of urban space, the phenomenon reflects the irrationality of the urban space structure of these old settlements. Due to the historical background of Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun, these large-scale blocks with single

residential function are extremely short of basic services. Therefore, from the perspective of urban function allocation, the emergence of these "illegal" shops has greatly solved the lack of the daily services for surrounding residents. (figure. 5)

Finally, the implement of the renewal policy was conducted by a temporary group composed of staff from different management departments in each street. They block all the "illegal" shops without due consideration because of the political pressure but don't think about the aftermath. Ironically, it is precisely because the purpose of street department was to achieve political achievements that the possibility of survival for the "illegal" shops was left.

Through the incompatibility of value systems of different social groups and government departments involved in this movement, we can see how a temporary balance between government and residents is reached today. Firstly, the house owners' and immigrants' driven of profit founded the internal motivation. Secondly, the problematic urban spatial structure and function allocation have generated the social needs of retail shops. And finally, the gap between the decision-makers and the implementers leaves a survival space for the underclass.

6. Conclusion

The single functional allocation of Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun were formed on the basis of the collectivist settlements for workers in the early stage of socialism in China. And the enclosed space structure is the result of the surrounding walls built in 1990s. The spatial structure and single function formed in specific history gradually restrict the urban life today. This study reveals that the imbalance between the current system and the lifeworld is the fundamental reason why these residential space are applied to illegal use. Therefore, this kind of spontaneous self-construction behavior actually exposes the serious problems of the current urban spatial structure and function allocation. Faced with the phenomenon, what the government should do is to realize the urban and social problems behind, rather than cover up the appearance of the problem. However, as the "illegal" shops continues to exist after the end of the renewal movement, social contradictions still exist. Based on the



Figure 4. Temporary objects are placed in front of the windows to make it easy for shopkeepers and customers to get in. The temporality of these objects also reflects the cautious attitude of these shopkeepers who are testing the red line of city managers. Photo by the author, 2019.

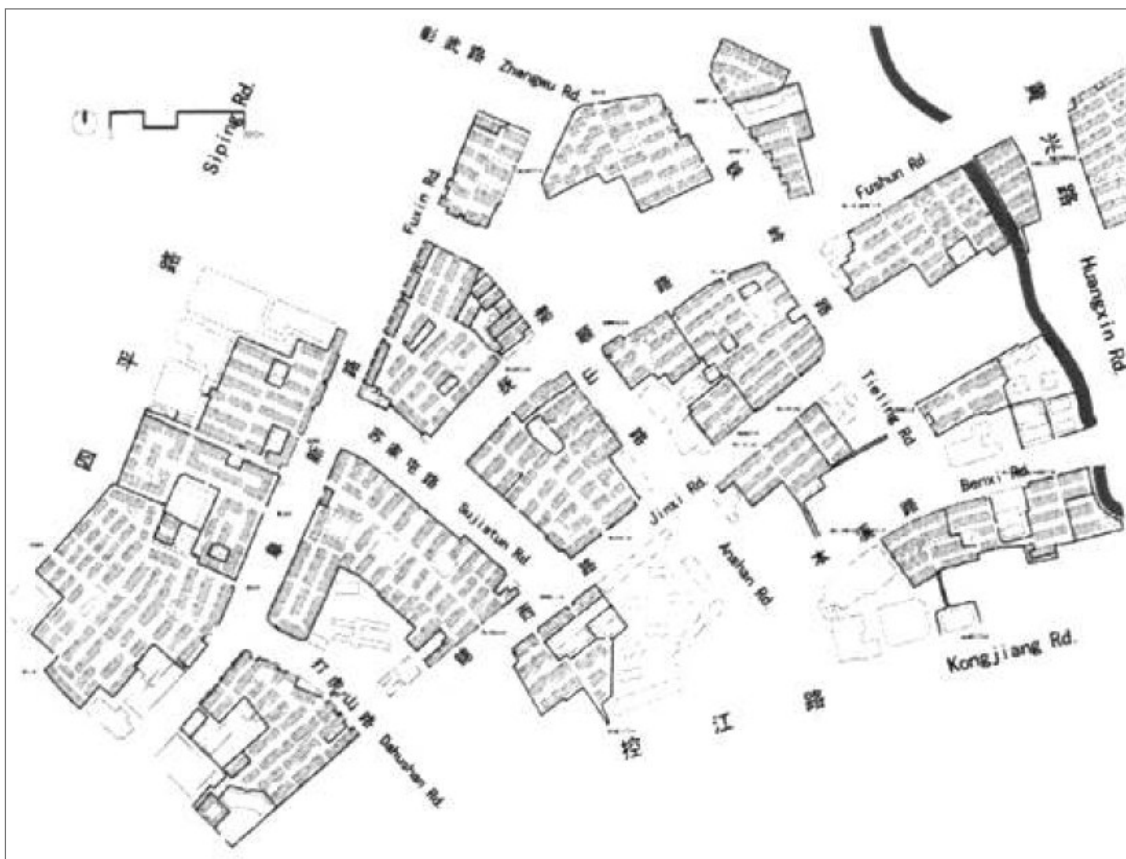


Figure 5. the enclosed spatial structure of urban areas of Gong-Ren-Xin-Cun. The closed wall surrounding the residential area forms a negative urban interface. Image from Zhang Juxin. (2008). Public Space under Enclosure —— Study on External Space of 45 Determinant Residential Districts in Shanghai. (Doctoral dissertation, Tongji University).

social and spatial analysis, the paper argues that unilateral political control cannot solve the social contradictions. Only coordinating and guiding measures based on a comprehensive understanding of current situation can truly solve the imbalance between the system and the lifeworld.

Through the divergent positions of all participants in the renewal movement and the disconnection between decision makers and policy implementers, it's obvious that there is a lack of effective communication between different social groups. The behavior of each group is only based on the limited information with value judgment and does not promote the real solution of the problems. Just as Jürgen Habermas believes that modern society is faced with the growing autonomy of subsystems. If activities can only be rationally justified within their own value system, the decision between different value systems can never be rationally grounded. As he suggests that the hope to overcome these problems lies in the communicative action and the rationalization of our lifeworld.

Habermas's suggestion also reminds us of the problems we must reflect on. In this urban space renewal movement, the voices of urban planners and architects are always absent. As architects and urban planners, we are familiar with ethics of public space and able to objectively coordinate the interests of different social groups and understand the policy of city management. It is possible for architects and urban planners to play a more active role in this urban renewal movement.

One of the reasons for the absence of architects and urban planners is that today's architects and urban planners are too trapped in market economy to participate in social practice and argumentation. Even though the intellectuals' voices are not welcomed to affect the efficiency of government, the paper still argues that architects and urban planners should strive for more rights of communication and coordination contributing to the spatial solutions to social conflicts.

Endnotes

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