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Shanghai: the fastest city?

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SHANGHAI:
THE FASTEST
CITY?
The Speed and the Friction

Deyan Sudjic

Fifty years ago Shanghai was an island of floodlit Art Deco cinemas, modern skyscrapers and electric trams, marooned in the midst of a China that had hardly changed in a thousand years. As the city expanded, it had to negotiate your way from the Chuang Hua Road to what was then called the Boulevard des Deux Republicques, to Edward VII Avenue and Broadway. You could have worshipped in your choice of onion domed Russian Orthodox churches, the product of the army of White Russian refugees who sailed out of Vladivostock with the Bolsheviks at their heels. It’s a history that suggests a city shaped by a mix of pragmatism, opportunism and anarchy. Shanghai was China’s window on the world, its most industrially advanced and commercially sophisticated city. And it still is, even as Beijing is working hard to re-establish pre-eminance with a building programme in the capital that is just as frenetic as Shanghai’s.

Shanghai’s decision to hold an Expo in 2010 is its own response to the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

There is a tendency among western observers to look at China’s two great cities, Shanghai and Beijing, as vast urban agglomerations that have broken the bounds of size and scale and so isolate themselves from conventional urban precedents. But in terms of population size, Shanghai, with around 20 million people is a city of the same order of magnitude as New York, and London, both metropolitan, and with a population of around 18 million. The most striking differences between Shanghai, London and New York are political organisation, and urban culture.

Shanghai is effectively a city-state, with the powers of the central government at its disposal to annex satellites towns and villages and to open up territory into its direct control. We know Shanghai is big because there is no discussion about the difference between the city in the political sense, and in wider definitions of it as an entity. But, as much as we are ready to analyse London or New York as urban regions, the perception is still shaped by its political boundaries.

Shanghai, where one in five of its population is made up of temporary in-migrants from predominantly rural China, is the key city setting the pattern for the explosive urban growth in AIA. It is a case study of our time as equally rapid and to its contemporaries – equally disturbing transformation of Western industrial cities of the early 19th century. It is a phenomenon which is producing one of the most remarkable changes in the history of the world. And this is the moment when, with the speed of transformation, a city that fills the gap between the imperatives of a Marxist control and command economy, the actual results, and often unintended consequences. This provides an echo of the gaps between the administrative mechanisms of the 19th century Shanghai, the city is also beginning to develop a more nuanced attitude to its own past. Under the Pearl television tower you find the Mayor’s call to his citizens to “Persist without wavering until it is done”.

At the regional level, Shanghai is developing a policy for its position at the centre of the Yangtze delta, of national leverage, competing with Hong Kong and Tokyo. It is moving beyond manufacturing to advanced service industries, as much a part of the city’s identity as its famous skyscraper line. But Shanghai is its best model is New York, London or Tokyo, or perhaps California, as it attempts to create a balance between its suburban industrial estates, and its high rise city centre. It is still working to reduce cycling, the city is moving so fast that it is possible to see the impact of theory on practice like nowhere else in the world.

Deyan Sudjic, The Architectural Critic of the Observer Newspaper and co-chair of the Urban Age Advisory Board
SHANGHAI TRANSFORMATIONS
Zheng Shiling

The history of Shanghai goes back over 5,500 years. As a city, it is a heterogeneous condensation of Chinese history, reflected in its urban form and architecture, and revealed by its traditional gardens, temples, churches and residential typologies. Because of its unique location as a major port on the east coast of mainland China, Shanghai has been an effective link between the port cities of North and South China, and also in the wider Asian sub-region, encompassing Japan and Korea. This is why over time it has become a compact container of different periods and styles of international architecture and urbanism, integrating classical models of European urbanism with traditional Chinese ideology. Shanghai became an important economic and cultural metropolis in the 19th and 20th centuries, establishing itself as a centre of modern Chinese culture and architecture.

In perspective one could say that there are three great periods in Shanghai’s history: the founding period in the early Middle Ages; the prosperous mercantile era of the early 20th century, and, most recently the sustained growth of the 1990s. Throughout, Shanghai as a city has always enjoyed the culture of tolerance and coexistence. Founded in the 13th century as an administrative centre, a traditional circular city with canals and narrow streets, it grew into a modern metropolis in the 1920s and 1930s with the addition of traditional “European” urban areas to accommodate the new economic activities and residential needs of this early 20th century period of growth. The city was divided into four international sectors or “concessions”, each with their own administrative systems. During the 1930s, a master plan was developed – based on modern principles of urban planning but with traditional architecture forms – with a new centre in the northern fringe of the city, away from the influences of the International Settlements and French Concession areas.

Due to political circumstances associated with the policies of the Communist regime, Shanghai lost its role as an international centre of growth and development for over 40 years, from the early 1950s to the 1990s. Very little construction occurred in this former world city. Following the USSR’s model of urban growth, satellite cities, heavy industrial zones and residential quarters were designed and built under the policy of national industrialisation throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Some buildings, especially the public institutions, were designed using traditional Chinese architectural forms of monumentality and dignity. As part of a sustained nation-wide plan many new industrial buildings were constructed in the city, especially in the M-in-Hang Heavy Industry Zone in south-west and Wujing Chemical Industry Zone in the south-east fringes of Shanghai.

During the 1950s, the Soviet inspired style of social realism was introduced to many buildings in Shanghai. Over the next two decades, China experienced a severe winter in the realm of architecture and urban development. Public life and public buildings retreated into the shadow of politics, responding in part to economic realities but more to the prevailing political and ideological culture. The only constructions of note were a petroleum chemical plant in Jinshan in the south-west area of the city and a major steel industrial area to the north.

The national government’s decision to embrace a more open policy in the early 1990s gave the city a much needed opportunity to modernise and redevelop. Shanghai’s ambition is to once again become a world class centre of finance, commerce, trade and shipping. As a result, since the late 1990s, it has developed a series of master plans for different zones of the city, covering over 800 square kilometres, to accommodate this growth. About 20 million square metres of buildings are expected to be built every year with new housing, offices and other activities. The transformation of the waterfront is the key driver of the choice of location of the vast World Expo 2010 site, closer to the city centre along the river banks.

Shanghai has always been an open city, ready to seize opportunities and allow its citizens to display their talent and creativity. This competitive tradition underlies its dynamic and progressive nature, an entrepreneurial spirit that sets it apart from other Chinese cities. But, as with any city that occupies a strategic global position, its future lies not only in the hands of its architects and policy-makers, but in the national policy for growth and development.

Zheng Shiling is Professor of Architecture at Tongji University in Shanghai and former Dean of its Architecture and Urban Planning Department.
Living conditions have steadily improved in Shanghai. Since 1990, housing space per capita has more than doubled to reach almost 15 square meters in 2003. Some improvements are also noticeable in the quality of the urban environment, with the area of urban parks and woods multiplying almost sevenfold, covering over 35% of the urbanised area of Shanghai. Despite these improvements in living conditions however, nearly half of households experience overcrowding, and a further 16% suffer from severe overcrowding.

As metropolitan growth continues, high-rise buildings fill the dense city centre and new towns are constructed along peripheral ring roads. Yet, in a pattern where concentration predominates over dispersal, close to half of Shanghai’s population lives in an area smaller than 5% of its total land surface. Urban densities average slightly over 40,000 residents per square kilometre in the city’s four core districts and reach a peak of 760 persons per hectare in Huangpu’s central neighbourhood of Old West Gate, just south of the People’s Square. It is interesting to note, however, that the structural densification of the city centre is occurring at the same time that population densities have decreased in this area, following development imperatives towards increasing the quantity of living space per resident.

Household size has been decreasing over time and small households now comprise a considerable proportion of the population. The massive changes to Shanghai’s housing conditions have not been without social friction. Speculation in the housing market in both development and resale, mostly at the luxury end of market (symptomatic of increasing inequality in terms of housing consumption) has prompted government actions to increase interest rates and discourage non-occupant ownership. Conflicts over development rights have flared at the city’s periphery, where farmers seek to convert agricultural land into profitable housing for both migrant workers and the wealthy. In central neighbourhoods, policies of slum clearance and the accompanying displacement of residents to more suburban areas have been met by some community protest.

At the same time, new social structures, such as residents’ management committees in high-riser towers, are evolving to address the particular conditions of new housing typologies. The quality of life in Shanghai’s high density neighbourhoods is now an issue to address, as are the impacts of densification and massive vertical growth on the physical tissue of the urban core. What factors lead residents to remain in the congested city centre rather than moving to modern suburban housing complexes? How does the provision of housing relate to Shanghai’s employment sectors? While the creation of peripheral new towns may be the most efficient model of metropolitan growth, what alternatives might be considered, such as the expansion of the core by generating a high density belt around it?
Shanghai is a city in flux where all that is solid seems to melt into air, or rather into concrete, steel, glass, and ever more high-rise towers which add attention-demanding verticality to an already overloaded skyline. The towers, globally understood symbols of the city’s ambitions, coexist uneasily with a certain nostalgia for the built forms of the city’s colonial past. Tabula rasa developments on a huge scale transform entire sections of the city into new business districts at the same time that they make a point in preserving or recreating pockets of historic spaces. At the street level, the Shanghainese understand that their city is changing rapidly and many express unease about the disorientating pace of restructuring and the surreal spatial juxtapositions that it produces. In contrast to the apparent cohesion of the Mao years, the recent social transformation of Shanghai has resulted in a more diverse urban society where inequalities are as deep and the possibility for conflict as present as they were during the period of the international settlement. Expatriates from the Asia Pacific region and the West, highly educated overseas Chinese and a surfacing immigrant population engaged in some niches of the city’s service economy, all contribute to an increasingly complex and disjointed social landscape. No other group challenges the social order of Shanghai as much as Chinese internal migrants from rural areas, a “floating population” approaching 5 million with limited rights and vulnerable livelihoods. Poverty, low educational levels and the stigma of crime hinder the possibilities of incorporating this population into the social fabric of Shanghai. Developing a harmonious society in the city has become an official local public policy goal, one perhaps made more urgent by recent disturbances amongst disaffected migrant populations, and on the other hand, the central Chinese government’s policy directing the city to continue absorbing rural migrants and turning them into urban citizens. Sharing responsibility for security in public spaces with the support of both institutions and local communities is nothing new for urban Chinese, schooled in a culture that emphasizes a collective sense of responsibility and with the experience of decades of a tightly controlled social order. Nevertheless, these objectives may necessitate the broader cultivation of conditions and perceptions of “security” capable of engaging a wide range of the city’s residents and a more profound understanding both of the nature of public spaces in a city in the midst of tidal change and of how these public spaces can contribute to a shared sense of community within the city.
Transport is one of the most striking indicators of Shanghai’s rapid pace of change. Borne out by the impressive statistics, it is the actual experience of movement in the public spaces of the city that makes one feel the enormity of the transformation. Walking among thousands of commuters at Shanghai’s largest underground interchange under People’s Square or attempting to cross a six-lane highway across the Bund to snatch a view of the esplanade, emphasises the sense of stress of a burgeoning city. In the ten years to 2000, the length of roads increased by 40 per cent, and the number of cars quadrupled to just over one million. Official predictions state that by 2020 Shanghai will have 2.5 million private cars, and that daily motor vehicle trips will increase to seven million compared to just over three million in 2000. Public transport provision is to focus on improving the capacity of its rail system, which the city is planning to expand to 540 km in 2020. The metro system’s current daily capacity of 1.4 million is predicted to reach 10 million in 2020.

Increasing levels of car ownership and the expanding car industry in Shanghai – regarded by China’s economic planners as a key growth sector – will increasingly challenge the very essence of the city. Prosperity associated with employment in car manufacturing and its associated industries is a key driver of Shanghai’s economic welfare. So are the improvements to the standard of living promised by quiet, comfortable homes away from the overcrowded and polluted central city. In comparison to other cities like London and Paris, Shanghai has an extremely low percentage of road space – literally, the amount of tarmac – making it structurally incompatible for a city with a projected exponential growth in car traffic. Furthermore, rising levels of car use would exacerbate increasing energy consumption, worsen pollution and add to traffic congestion. Hence, the heated debate in policy circles of whether precious farmland surrounding the city should be sacrificed to new roads and urban sprawl.

There is a risk that Shanghai’s communities, already challenged by a widening income gap, could be faced with a lasting physical imprint of separation that will inhibit social cohesion. The city is also facing a familiar yet difficult choice in funding priorities, needing to decide between investing in more and more road and parking projects, or increasing spending on public transport. The newly rich and empowered car lobby is proactive in making its voice heard, arguing against car restrictions and taxes, that make it more difficult to manage urban mobility and the use of cars. For the central area, where the growing number of vehicles is particularly problematic, two strategies are being followed. The first is to increase road density levels, mainly by constructing elevated highways. The second is to focus on improving the capacity of the existing network, mainly by separating different transport modes. Cycling, although banned on most main roads, is still vital. Today some nine million bicycles are owned by the Shanghai residents, and are used for 30% of all trips. However, cycling is now viewed as a competitor to public transport, slowing down traffic and causing accidents. The city aims to reduce its share by 25% within the next five years. Walking is regarded as an integral part of Shanghai’s transport system not only for short journeys but also as a feeder for public and private transport, and there are plans to expand the network of pedestrian streets.
After over a decade of double-digit economic growth, Shanghai’s concerns about its future prosperity now relate to the city’s capacity to innovate. Important challenges have resulted from the city’s many successes in terms of economic development, attracting foreign investment, international trade, transformation of its built environment and upgrading of its urban infrastructure. These challenges require more complex planning processes and policy interventions than the formulas deployed so far. Shanghai now needs to assume a more defined economic identity and adopt a set of strategic priorities to guide its metropolitan development path. As the density of economic interactions has increased at multiple scales, making decisions about Shanghai’s economic future also implies shaping its role in the Yangtze River region, the People’s Republic of China, the Asia Pacific and the wider world economy.

Strengthening its centrality at one level may pose negative consequences to the city’s other roles – becoming a consolidated global city that is attractive to international investors and leading economic sectors may require different types of public investments and interventions than growing as China’s industrial powerhouse and job generator for a rapidly urbanising population. A number of different questions arise from this dilemma.

To what degree should policy makers attempt to strengthen the city’s advanced services sector? How much effort should be put in to upgrading, modernising and expanding its manufacturing base? Are post-industrial New York and London the models to learn from, or will Shanghai be better off following broader base high-tech development strategies such as those of Tokyo and the city-regions of California. In broader terms, can Shanghai learn from established urban models of economic growth and what lessons can it teach the urban world in terms of development expediency and urban restructuring at a breathtaking pace? What synergies can be fostered between the leading economic sectors of car production, semiconductors, petrochemicals, trade, finance and real estate and construction? How can planning steer property development – roughly half of all fixed capital investment in Shanghai – so that it supports rather than crowds out the city’s manufacturing base?

Further questions arise about the relationship between urban development and physical planning in the unique context of Shanghai’s urban form and pressure for growth. What is the right territorial balance between Shanghai’s suburban industrial parks and development zones, its premium business and commercial districts and the increasingly visible creative industries in the revitalised inner core? What considerations need to be taken in the design of the differentiated workplaces that these industries require? How will these workplaces be integrated to the living spaces of the workforce and the everyday lives of people in Shanghai? What is the social life of Shanghai’s multiplying high-rise office towers? What investment, design, planning and tenancy regulations, decisions, agreements and negotiations have shaped their existence? In what symbolic and functional ways does this most ubiquitous workplace of contemporary Shanghai shape and confer meaning to the businesses and livelihoods that it hosts?
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