



Shanghai

Bringing a Human Scale to Hyperurbanisation





A small lane away from the main street reveals a different side of Shanghai.

China's economic reform since 1978 has propelled its growth on an unparalleled scale. Shanghai—a focal point of this growth—has become one of the most populous cities in the world. The city tries to put people at the centre of its hyperurbanisation through the remaking of its public spaces.

Shanghai is a city that is metamorphosing so quickly that its urban area has more than doubled the 1,500 square kilometre target set for 2020 in its master plan approved as recently as 2001. This port city at the mouth of the Yangtze River Delta has over 24 million people, of which two in five are immigrants from a predominantly rural China drawn to opportunities that Shanghai presents. To improve liveability, the city turns increasingly towards shared spaces for its community.

Nanjing Road: A Fully Pedestrianised Downtown

Up till the 1990s, Nanjing Road was a congested thoroughfare with overpasses that obscured street views, and railings that blocked pedestrians' access to the street. In 1995, when the Shanghai Municipal Government decided to

create a downtown to house the capital industry and also cater to the increasingly consumerist culture of its people, they experimented with car-free weekends on Nanjing Road to test the effect of road closure to the area.

The trial was a roaring success—visitors increased by 30% over the weekends, with retail turnover increasing by 90%. The government decided to fully pedestrianise the 1,030-metre-long by 28-metre-wide zone. Telegraph wires were buried underground and tram wires removed. The street was paved with a 4.2-metre-wide “Golden Line” of red granite and new street furniture to welcome people to linger and interact, while grey paths that ran parallel allowed uninterrupted flow of moving groups. Since its opening in September 1999, the vibrant downtown never sleeps—groups of people exercise in the mornings, while street performers entertain at night.



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Nanjing Road.



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The Bund: Its People-Oriented Evolution

At the eastern end of Nanjing Road lies the Bund, a historic area characterised by colonial buildings and a scenic waterfront overlooking the modern skyscrapers of the Lujiazui financial district across the Huangpu River.

The Bund was once described as “an exceptionally scenic, open and well-planted stretch of public space”. But as the city modernised, a portion of it was turned into Zhongshan Road, an important north-south trunk road. In the 1990s, the government further widened the road to create a massive 10-lane expressway. Visitors had to use an underground walkway to reach the Bund.

“People had no chance to enjoy the waterfront view because there was so much traffic on the road and the lane was so close to the buildings,” said Dr Wang Lin, Professor at the Shanghai Jiao Tong University and former Director of the Shanghai Urban Planning Bureau. In 1998, Dr Wang led a big-scale construction project to make the Bund people-friendly again.

In 2010, a six-lane underground tunnel was completed. It diverted six lanes from Zhongshan Road and freed up a 50-metre-wide open space for a landscaped waterfront promenade.

01 Morning exercises are common along the Bund.

02 Aerial view of the expanded waterfront space.

M50: A Community-Led Revitalisation of an Industrial Landscape

As part of its economic and industrial reform, manufacturing industries were relocated while many factories and warehouses within prime areas of Shanghai were demolished during the 1990s. The old Xinxhe Spinning Mill on No. 50 Moganshan Road was slated for demolition too until artists moved in during the early 2000s. Rent was cheap, and they had ample open spaces for the creation, storage and display of their artworks. The old mill became an established art hub known as M50, and attracted supporting enterprises like galleries, design companies and cafes to form a creative cluster that revitalised the industrial landscape.

In 2003, just a few years after M50's establishment, the government wanted to supplant the area with high-rise residential blocks. Artists and scholars convinced the Mayor's office otherwise, allowing the M50 art district to flourish as the city's largest and most influential creative hub within a riverfront open space. Today, art factories are thriving all over Shanghai with government support, leading to projects such as the Shanghai Sculpture Space, 2577 Creative Park and 1933 Old Millfun.



01 The M50 art district welcomes creative self-expression via graffiti.

02 & 03 Street dancing and card games are common public activities that bring communities together.

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Humans of Shanghai: Public Space, Public Life

Beyond art districts, street performances seem to permeate every public space. In the mornings and evenings, on main streets or parks, people gather in groups for foxtrot or rock and roll dancing, with music blasting from portable players and speakers. Choral groups come together to sing songs of patriotism and the Chinese culture. Women dressed in silk dance with large ribbons or fans. In large parks, opera singers and ground calligraphy masters armed with large water-dipped brushes draw crowds in the hundreds.



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Away from the main streets and tourist areas, the city reveals more layers of its intimate public life. Up till the 1950s, most people lived in crammed, cabined rooms that naturally meant that daily activities such as meals, hobbies and handcraft work had to be conducted outside. This local street life is still kept intact today in the streets and alleyways of the traditional neighbourhoods of Shanghai. It is at the human scale that the metropolis truly comes alive.

And this human scale seems to be Shanghai's focus for the future. One of the highlights of its new master plan, which will guide Shanghai's development from now till 2040, is the notion of "15-minute communities" as basic units of the city. These low-carbon communities will contain amenities such as offices, schools and recreational venues accessible within a 15-minute walk. Good public spaces in these mixed-use residential areas will be critical to facilitate such trips, and to promote social gatherings and community building among residents. ●