

Losing community

A look into the *Lilong*: the Shanghainese interstices that challenge the progress.

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Abstract:

In the dense and vertical urban texture of Shanghai, whose neurotic rhythms influence the everyday life of its inhabitants, still exist interstice realities that challenge the “progress at any cost” and what it involves. These in-between spaces are mostly made up of Lilongs (里 lǐ: internal, inside; 弄 lòng: alley, lane), typical Shanghainese low-rise high-density housing neighbourhood. Here, slowness is still beating people’s time; togetherness, sharing and closeness come back to justify the sense of hosting society in such close spaces and, by extension, the sense of the city itself.

The contribute, which is a result of an analysis made by the authors during their stay in Shanghai and of a thesis work of one of them, aims to give an analytic photogram of some in-between portions of Shanghai city. *Resistance* oasis to the XXI century city, custodian of history, traditions and habits, more and more stifled and reduced by the constant urban development, Lilongs offer interesting insights on the community, closeness and cooperation values.

In these districts the time seems to have stopped a few decades ago, when people lived and worked in “communes”, where they constantly shared time and spaces. Nowadays, residents of Shikumen (nineteenth-century typical Chinese accommodations that modulate Lilong units, articulated on two or three levels) use the space inside their house less than the external ones that they share with neighbourhoods; on the street they practise gymnastics, Tai Chi, wash vegetables, cook and eat, wash hair and clothes, spend free time.

In these precious realities is acting a developing and gentrification process which follows marketing logics and could cause the end of those social practises typical of Chinese culture which offer significant themes for reflection. After the start of the “Second Revolution” in 1978, the way of thinking cities, indeed, changed drastically: centrally controlled planning has given way to a market-led urbanization. Shanghai was experimentation territory: due to the enormous income of people from the rural places into the city and the resulting lack of accommodations, the heights took rapidly place into the city skyline and some Lilong districts were shot down, others were renovated and made tourist attractors (as Xintiandi or Tianzifang). Following this practice, a large amount of Shikumen is razed to the ground to give way to a more capacious neighbourhood in which, following modern urbanistic rules, the enlargement of the streets cancels the community sense which since ever characterized narrow alleys of Lilong. Distances dilate and activities that took place in these in-between spaces most likely will not exist anymore.

The presentation will analyse facts and data about the gentrification process underway, will show the actual Lilong life through pictures taken during numerous and deep surveys and will highlight the danger of losing such good community habits in these peculiar interstice spaces.

Bibliography:

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- *Escape from the City*, Chiara Bocchino, 2019, Libriothea Edizioni

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Chiara Bocchino, architect and PhD student in Environment, Design and Innovation at the *Università della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli*. She spent a year in Shanghai at the *East China Normal University School of Design*, following courses and working on her thesis which focuses on architectural and social issues and is entitled "Escape from the city". Today, she is developing researches about the future of the cities in an architectural, social and environmental framing.

Domenico De Rosa, architect and PhD student in Environment, Design and Innovation at the *Università della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli*. After an academic experience at the *East China Normal University School of Design* in Shanghai and a working experience in the same city, today he carries out research work focusing on the recovery of unused spaces in cities.