A Soul of Shanghai: the Variety of Urban Housing’s Innovative Types

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Abstract
Firstly, two incontrovertible facts about the development and construction of Shanghai urban housing since 1978 are discussed. Then, the model of a typical Shanghai residential community is found out and its six keys are stated in detail. Except for the huge quantities of “models”, fortunately in the same period a few urban housing of truly innovative types have also come into appearance. An-ting new town (2004), Chuang-zhi-fang housing (2006), Lin-gang new town price-limited housing (2015) and Long-nan-jia-yuan public rental housing (2016) are the four typical examples. Secondly, comparing these four innovative types with the much greater amount of common and similar “models” mentioned above, some ways of current Shanghai urban housing’s innovation can be summerized and concluded. Moreover, this article attempts to talk about the meaning of variety from its outer appearance to its inner things. And the interaction between the variety of Shanghai and its soul can be proved and consolidated. Finally, this article tries to give some advice on the responsilities of an architect in such a complicated environment like Shanghai. Thankfully, this paper is subsidized by the NSFC project named as ‘Research on Technical System of “Downtown Factory” Community-oriented Regeneration in Yangtze River Delta Region’ (No. 51678412).

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1. Two facts about Shanghai urban housing

There are two incontrovertible facts about Shanghai urban housing in the past 3~4 decades. The first fact is surely about the rapid housing development. It is really rare in the mankind history that such a great quantity of housing has been completed in such a comparatively short period. Still this great construction work is going on all around here. Meanwhile, the second fact has come after the first one as soon as possible and it seems not so welcoming as the first one. We are truly regrettable to find that a general pattern for the development and construction of urban housing has been set up in Shanghai some years ago. Even more shockingly, this pattern seems to be more and more popular and it is extending wider and wider.

(1) There is no doubt that Shanghai has already become one of the most rapid-developing cities all over...
the world. With the famous “reform and open” policy since 1978, we have witnessed a more and more prosperous Shanghai in the past years. The image of Shanghai has been always changing so quickly year by year that our dear former leader Deng Xiaoping made a well-known comment at that time which is “one small change by every other year and one big change by every three years.” The urban housing development in Shanghai has accomplished at least 3 great miracles. The first miracle is that the average living area for every Shanghai citizen has been raised from only several square meters to nearly 30-40 square meters. The second miracle is that the living physical conditions have been raised significantly since 1978. For example, at that time which is just only 30 years ago, huge quantity of people lived in two main kinds of housing. One is the so called as “old public rental housing” or “workers’ new village” and the other is the famous Li-long residence. People at that time had to tolerate the inconvenience of non-toilet, the lack of lifts, the noise between neighbours and the dirty environment… The third miracle is the transformation of housing’s ownership from the country to the individual. This miracle in fact comes from the national policy’s change from planning economy to marketing economy. Therefore real estate can be valued in currency and people can freely select and buy their affordable housing. And it is reasonable and comprehensive that people have become more and more critical on their housing conditions year by year. Since then Shanghai urban housing has been into a very rapid period of developing and constructing.

(2) Meanwhile as one of the most important components of Shanghai, its urban housing has been taking decisive effect on Shanghai’s space and image. However, when all the following 6 words which are “Gated community, Row-by-row’s housing layout, Low building coverage, High green coverage, South-faced housings and Evenly 2-4 families on every floor plan” have become 6 keys for urban housing’s commercial and social success, all the following 5 subjects including the government, the real estate developer, the planner and the architect, the constructor and the property saler, even the consumer and the real estate owner are all accustomed to using these keys again and again. Benefiting from the continuous hot real estate market during these recent years in China, it is seemed that these keys have proved themselves to be useful somehow. Therefore, when nearly all the urban housing are being developed and constructed in an essentially similar way, Shanghai is synchronously getting monotonous in its space and image. Moreover, this kind of lack in the types of urban housing will definitely take bad effect on Shanghai’s variety in the future. However, currently a city’s variety is somehow considered to be closely related with a city’s soul.

![Fig.1. Five subjects and six keys.](image)

2. Model of a typical Shanghai residential community

Therefore, what does a typical Shanghai residential community look like today? To answer this question, there is necessity to make some explanations for the six keys one by one. (1) **Gated community.** Actually at the very beginning of our country’s foundation in 1949 there was actually no gated residential community.
There was a urban housing construction climax around 1950s, and at that time all people were living in the so called social public housing which means the house didn’t belong to any person but to the country. And the community was open to the city where there was no “walls”. Nowadays commodity housing has been on the history stage for a long time, therefore gated community has found itself “useful and even effective”. (2) **Row-by-row’s housing layout.** This kind of layout has already proved its applicability and efficiency. In Shanghai we can find row-by-row housing layout almost everywhere and enclosed housing layout is really rare compared with row-by-row. At the beginning, row-by-row layout were mostly used in multiple-layers housing community and later on when high-layers housing came into appearance this kind of layout somehow adjusted itself to be applicable for the height’s change. It is no doubt that row-by-row housing layout “contributes” the most to the monotony problems in Shanghai’s space and image. (3) **Low building coverage.** Since architectural design codes came into use, building coverage as an important indicator has been emphasized by the government again and again. The “legal” building coverage for a new residential community is between 20%-25%. So it is now not difficult to understand why so many residential communities are looking like the same. (4) **High green coverage.** This indicator is very closely related to the building coverage. Lower the building coverage and higher the green coverage is what contemporary Shanghai urban housing is all about. In the old times, the green area for every Shanghai citizen is about 3-4 square meters. But recently this figure has been going up year by year. Now it comes the moment to reconsider our strategy for raising the green ratio and figure out some encouraging policy on the typological innovation of our urban housing. (5) **South-faced housings.** This is really a very local phenomenon which is also called “the sunflowers”. No matter where the residential community is located and no matter what the shape of the residential community is, nearly all the housings are standing to the south like the sunflowers. Given the irregular and free-form streets system in Shanghai, the relationship between the housing and the street is irrelevant and even contradictory. Therefore, there are large quantities of places in Shanghai where the space and image of a city is broken. (6) **Evenly 2-4 families on every floor plan.** It means that 2-4 families live together with one vertical transportation system which can be composed of one or two stairs and one or two lifts depending on the height of the building. Normally, we call the 2-4 families and the vertical transportation system together as “Unit-plan”, and recently the developers and the architects are accustomed to using the same or nearly the same “Unit-plan” everywhere. Under these backgrounds, “Unit-plan” becomes really a newly-born popular word since the rapid development of Shanghai urban housing.

As above 6 keys are all discussed, it then comes the model of a typical Shanghai residential community. This model was designed by Yijia Dong in her doctoral thesis and it can describe very clearly about what a typical current Shanghai residential community is. Though we can not say all or 100%, nearly most of the residential communities in Shanghai have been developed and constructed in this similar way no matter
whether it is a commercial housing project by the real estate developer or an affordable housing project by the government. According to the model above, we can see that there is always an area about several hectares big and closed with a continuous wall outside. Normally, there are only 2 entrances on two sides of this closed area, so people, bicycles and vehicles all use these 2 entrances. Inside the community, all the housings are in row-by-row’s layout and every one of them is facing to south just like “sunflowers”. These “sunflowers phenomena” are very common among Shanghai residential communities in the past 3-4 decades and even more worrying this trend seems to be continued… Today people seems to be accustomed to the living mode with low building coverage and high green coverage. Buildings are becoming higher and higher while green areas are getting bigger and bigger. Almost all the residential communities are competing with each other in the same ways for years and since then Shanghai urban housing’s typological innovation has surely been harmed more or less.

3. Against the model: four innovative examples of Shanghai’s urban housing

Although the model of a typical Shanghai residential community has been widely and in large quantities used during the past years, there have always been some other kinds of examples co-existing with the tremendous “models”. The examples will do everything that the “models” do not do, in short. They are introduced in detail as following: (1) An-ting New Town German style housing. It was one part of a huge plan called as “One city and nine towns” at the beginning of the new century in Shanghai. An-ting New Town was assigned German style at that time, so it was developed and constructed into an enclosed housing community just like a German town. All the streets around the enclosed blocks were designed open to the public, so people could easily approach to every building and use the public functions arranged on the building’s first floor facing to the streets such as shops, public services, restaurants and supermarkets. We can say that An-ting New Town is an open community which is totally the opposite of the tremendous gated communities currently. (2) Chuang-zhi-fang commodity housing. This project is located in one the vice city centers of Shanghai which is called as Wu-jiao-chang. Chuang-zhi-fang commodity housing was a part of Chuang-zhi-tian-di which is much bigger than the former. It is something like An-ting New Town in that both of them are open to the public and the streets’ façades in the two projects are both lively and friendly. However, due to the different locations Chuang-zhi-fang commodity housing is much more multi-functional than An-ting New Town. Hundreds of people are living, working and passing by here, so there are residences, offices, commercial services and public services gathering together in Chuang-zhi-fang commodity housing. One more different thing from An-ting, the inner courtyard of every block in Chuang-zhi-fang is only for the real estate owners. (3) Lingang New Town Price-limited housing. This affordable housing project is under the leadership of Shanghai government. In 2012 this project was planned by Tongji University Urban Planning Institute and then the whole area were divided into eight pieces everyone of which was assigned to one architectural design company. These eight companies did their respective architectural design job under the guide of the established planning rules. Therefore, another large enclosed housing community was set up and the architectural design styles were totally different. This “one planning + eight architectural design” cooperative mode itself was innovative and it achieved at least two goals: one dominant urban design which can ensure the integrity and eight different-styled architectural design which can also ensure the variety. (4) Long-nan-jia-yuan public rental housing. This project was completed in 2016. To everyone’s surprise, the architect Jiajing Zhang innovatively created several “U-shaped” enclosed blocks in this project. It truly has nothing in common with any other public rental housings before. For example, there are corridors in the air to connect buildings together in order to let the people walk more safely and easily. And the roofs on several different heights are designed open to the residents so that they can use and enjoy more public space besides their private space. In a word, Long-nan-jia-yuan public rental housing is full of innovations and it possibly can be an excellent example for us to learn something from.

Above all, we can easily find out the difference between the four innovative examples and the countless
“models”. When the “models” think that the gated community is better, the examples think that the open block is better. When the “models” emphasize the low building coverage and the high green coverage, the examples emphasize just the opposite: the high building coverage and the low green coverage. When the “models” use the row-by-row’s layout repeatedly, the examples try other possibilities innovatively such as the enclosed layout…

Fig.3. Four innovative types of housing. (Photos by Bin Lu.)

4. A Soul of Shanghai: the Variety of Urban Housing’s Innovative Types

What is variety? Firstly, variety is one of the principal attributions to a city. The forming and developing of a city is a continuous process of agglomeration, mixture, division and re-mixture. In a city people from different social classes and buildings with different kinds of functions are all gathering, mixing and co-existing together. Secondly, variety is an important source for the vitality of a city and it is made from the inner part of a city. From appearance, variety is composed of buildings, streets and their countless combinations which are from different times and different types. But behind the appearance, it is exactly the need of human, the benefit and the value that decide the variety. Therefore, these important inner things together make the soul of a city.

Shanghai is the biggest city in China and it has a 700 years’ urban development in its history. In the year of 2040, there expectably will be 25 million population of permanent residents and 10 million floating population. Since the “reform and open” policy in 1978, nearly all people come from everywhere in this country into Shanghai and since then it has transformed from a native city into a national city quickly. Nowadays, people from different countries and districts are getting more and more interested in Shanghai. It is predicted that Shanghai possibly will become another melting pot for the world people in the future. Therefore, the need of human, the benefit and the value are all becoming more and more complicated with this unstoppable immigration trend. And the outer appearance is everything relevant with the inner things. The meaning of Shanghai’s soul has finally come out and it is “all rivers run into one sea” (In chinese it is said: “海纳百川”).

However, obviously the lack of innovative types of Shanghai urban housing is somehow harming its variety. Sometimes nearly all of us are maybe going on an extreme way. For example some huge urban housing projects, which are several hundred thousand square meters, are planned and designed by only one or two architects in a rather short period. So how can we accomplish this large quantities of work with limited resources? There seems to be only one way out. The government, the real estate developers, the planners, the architects and the constructors they are all doing work as fast as they can. So the results can be predicted: model, copy, quick work, no deep thinking and non-innovations. As mentioned above, countless similar residential communities which are call as “models” have been coming into appearance in the past few decades. Examples like the four typologically innovative practices are in a much weaker position compared with the “models”. If this trend continues, we have enough reasons to worry about the variety of Shanghai urban housing’s innovative types in the near future. As a currently famous international city, the variety of Shanghai comes from its different human, benefit and value. Therefore when its variety is possibly ignored or even damaged, maybe we can say that Shanghai’s soul will be lost. Obviously, we can not let this
As a responsible and smart architect in Shanghai, we think that he should at least accomplish the following 3 things. (1) He should train himself into an international architect for as many kinds of housing types as possible all around the world. In other words, he is supposed to be not only a local architect but a global one as well. With the continuous opening policy in the future, Shanghai is definitely turning itself into another great melting pot for the whole world. Therefore, it will be not enough if one architect only knows what native people needs but he is expected to have a much wider field of vision internationally. (2) He also should be acute in observing different kinds of living habits, in understanding different kinds of traditional customs, in communicating with different kinds of human and etc. Only when an architect is successful to be an observer, listener and communicator, he is well-prepared to be a good architect. (3) He finally should always try his best to explore and create new types of urban housing to meet the ever-changing need from the human. What they want is what the architect gives. In most times, architects are not just passive givers but active creators, and they should stand in the very front of the whole human species and lead them to a higher and higher state of life. These above 3 things are possibly what a great city like Shanghai demands its architects to do.

“Fig.4. Shanghai city-air reading” comes from a new book of my supervisor Professor Zhenyu Li, who is also the dean of College of Urban Planning and Architecture of Tongji University. He always says that architects are very great because they are always changing the image and the space of cities. Especially when you are observing a city in the air through the window of a plane, this kind of proud feeling comes very strongly. Shanghai soul lies in all kinds of aspects and variety is surely one of them. Architects are responsible for keeping the variety always.

References