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Stories of Shanghai architecture – revealing culture through historical buildings

Region	Asia and the Pacific
Award Scheme	Shanghai Manual
Themes	Others
Sustainable Development Goals	Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
New Urban Agenda Commitments	Planning and Managing Urban Spatial Development

Summary

Through emphasis on historic buildings, Shanghai's use of architectural 'storytelling' has helped to drive urban development whilst promote the city's historic culture through distinctive architectural form. The process of distinguishing and promoting local historic structures has helped to restore a greater sense of connection between inhabitants and the city, whilst drive cultural tourism.

Background and Objective

The uniqueness of Shanghai is its intense collision of multiple cultures that have been skillfully transformed into the driving force of urban development forming the highly distinctive 'Shanghai culture'. Shanghai culture is multi-mixed, superimposed and eclectic providing Shanghai with a complex and diverse architectural form. The protection of architectural and cultural heritage in the city has been slow and a number of old buildings have already been demolished. Following rapid, large-scale urban construction in the 1980s and 1990s, the city council began to think more carefully about the protection of architectural and cultural heritage. However, due to the differences in cultural traditions, management mechanisms, building regulations, building materials and the particularity of Shanghai's architectural culture, it is difficult to fully apply international standards of urban cultural heritage protection. This has consequently made it an incredibly urgent matter to find an appropriate local cultural heritage protection mechanism. After nearly 30 years of exploration, Shanghai has now developed a cultural heritage protection method that conforms to the characteristics and reality of local historical buildings. However, along with the depth of conservation actions, the city is also facing another pressing issue of how to help residents living in traditional blocks realize the importance of maintaining architectural and cultural heritage, and how to encourage them to participate in maintaining the vitality of historic neighbourhoods. Compared to more modern areas in the city, traditional neighbourhoods are bound to face housing challenges such as mismatched infrastructure, aging buildings, and functional and structural deterioration over time. In this regard, residents are generally presented with two choices; to actively voice their poor living conditions and question the action of preserving and protecting old neighbourhoods; or to relocate to a new urban area. In this scenario, even if the old neighbourhoods are adequately maintained and repaired, the unique regional folk culture and collective memory carried by them will tend to dilute or even disappear due to the loss of the indigenous people. To sustainably manage these challenges fundamentally requires improvements to be made to the realistic function of historic neighbourhoods and buildings based on the notion of 'restoring the old as the old'. Concurrently, Shanghai municipal council must also build an emotional connection between local people and the historical and cultural heritage, firstly to enhance public understanding as to the significance of the old buildings, and secondly to encourage a greater willingness among local people to participate in the renewal of the vitality of old buildings. It is important to note that these regulations are not within the capacity of urban planning programmes and therefore the council leveraged culture as a means to solve the issue of historical lineage continuation and proposed the Stories of Shanghai Architecture project.

Actions and Implementation

Prior to the official launch of the project, Shanghai council designated 44 historical landscape preservation areas and committed to the protection of 64 roads. Protection measures will ensure the roads maintain their original width and scale, and strictly control the building height, volume, style and spacing of development plots along the routes. The initiative sparked the enthusiasm of local writers who consulted a wealth of historical material and traced back memories and stories from these neighbourhoods in a mix of reality and fictional words. Residents and visitors have subsequently followed these guides when visiting the streets, adding new personal memories to the old stories. The Shanghai-based writer Chen Danyan wrote in his book *The Streets Never*



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Broadened published in 2008: “In this way, the memory and history of the city becomes a tangible part of city life, rather than disappearing without a trace.” The Shanghai Master Plan 2017–2035 launched in May 2017, firmly articulates the vision in Shanghai to build a city where buildings are enlightening, streets are stroll-friendly and communities are endowed with tenderness. The Master Plan gives great respect to the history of the city, and captured the interest and resonance of local people. A large number of books and online articles on Shanghai’s historical buildings and monuments have since been published and in 2018, the Shanghai Municipal Government officially launched the Stories of Architecture in Shanghai project led by the city’s Cultural and Tourism Bureau, recently upgraded from a pilot project into a more comprehensive undertaking. The Stories of Architecture in Shanghai project covers a multitude of buildings across different historical periods with three core building typologies: 1) buildings at all levels of heritage protection units; 2) excellent historical buildings and preserved buildings; and 3) landmark buildings built in modern times such as private garden houses, Lilong folk houses and classic buildings on the waterfront. The Stories of Architecture in Shanghai project was gradually expanded from 6 downtown urban areas to all 16 districts across the city. More old buildings have been opened to the public freely, with quick response (QR) codes presenting visitors with bilingual introductions to enhance their understanding of the building’s history in addition to video playback and virtual reality interaction. By early 2022, the number of open buildings increased from almost 100 to 1,056, and the use of QR codes from approximately 400 to 2,957. The Stories of Architecture in Shanghai project has led more citizens and enterprises to participate through five public activities: 1) via public comments by cooperating with Meituan, an e-commerce platform engaged in local retail and life services, citizens can make suggestions online. Nearly 10,000 people participated and the cumulative reads for the topic reached 88.6 million; 2) public storytelling was initiated whereby through cooperation with Dragonfly FM, an online audio platform, participants from 4 to 80 years old were invited to tell stories about old houses in Shanghai thereby gradually establishing an architectural story database; 3) in cooperation with Tencent, citizens were able to submit photos through the WeChat platform exploring stories around the architecture and gradually establishing an image database. The activity page had nearly 700,000 views with over 10,000 participants; 4) public tours were established in cooperation with RED, an online shopping and social platform, making offline buildings a hot topic online and a popular photo spot for citizens attracting over 43,470,000 reads, and more than 2,000 participants; and 5) public innovations were used whereby in cooperation with the local physical bookstore Dayin Book Co., Ltd., a culture and creative products design competition was held and the best 10 products selected. The activity attracted 321 units and/or individuals to participate and received more than 1,000 entries. Within the Shanghai Tourism Festival 2021, under the theme Stories of Architecture in Shanghai – Tour within the City, completed a 24-hour live broadcast jointly planned and launched by over 20 local audio-visual platforms, news media and social media outlets was completed. The live broadcast covered 24 hours from dawn to dark as the timeline, with footsteps travelling around the city introducing more than 150 outstanding buildings in Shanghai to audiences and listeners online. The live broadcast interviewed several famous architects from China and other countries who spoke about their unique insights into the Stories of Architecture in Shanghai project. Designers included Benjamin Wood, the American designer of Xintiandi opened in 2003 as a pedestrianized zone of bars, restaurants and boutiques in the heart of the city; Kengo Kuma, a Japanese designer of Shipyard 1862 Renovation on the southern shore of Huangpu River in the financial district of Pudong in Shanghai where an old shipyard built in 1972 was transformed into a mixed-use complex with shops, a theatre and an exhibition space; and Yichun Liu, a Shanghai based designer of Long Museum West Bund, an art museum located on the bank of Huangpu River in Shanghai, the site of which was originally used as a wharf for coal transportation. Tour buses, temporarily serving as festival exclusive shuttle lines, were equipped with professional guides, travelling along the Huangpu River, passing by classic city landmarks. Stories of Architecture in Shanghai is becoming an important new cultural intellectual property (IP) and therefore the city is attempting to fully utilize the creative value it offers in two ways. Firstly through holding the Stories of Architecture in Shanghai cultural and creative market annually in which almost 1,000 related cultural and creative products have been launched in the past two years; and secondly through the selection of classic buildings for piloting, which aims to promote the sales of unique gifts and souvenirs related to that building. The Wukang Mansion exemplifies this, where various products such as pocket books, ice cream, coffee, biscuits, aromatherapy and a themed post office have been developed. To strengthen resource integration and improve the capacity of service management, Shanghai municipal government developed a service system for the project which included the establishment of a one-stop platform for public access to all relevant information in a WeChat mini programme. In addition, an alliance was established to connect more than 60 organizations and jointly promote the innovative development of the project including owners of the buildings; construction enterprises; cultural, business and tourism-related enterprises; scientific research institutions; cultural institutions and museums; social organizations; and new media platforms. The city also released an official logo for the project as well as unified service standards for the building opening process along with QR codes settings. Moving forward, management measures at municipal level will be instilled as well as a voluntary story-telling team comprising experts, citizens and guides from cultural heritage, architecture, tourism and media fields. The Stories of Architecture in Shanghai practice is gradually being introduced into broader urban public space governance. It is important to highlight that the key project Huangpu River & Suzhou Creek has been promoted by the government for many years. This project aims to optimize the waterfront space environment around the river and creek, the main rivers of Shanghai. The river is the best vehicle for people to relive nostalgia and feel the sentiment and charm of the city. Enlightened by Stories of Architecture in Shanghai, the Huangpu River & Suzhou Creek project explored historical heritage along the river and signified the importance in harmonizing historical architecture and modern lifestyles by embedding new cultural and artistic functions into the city’s heritage. Riverside in the Xuhui District exemplifies this where by following the ‘culture first’ principle, old factories were transformed and revitalized into galleries, art and design organizations; and abandoned docks transformed into public green spaces. The former site of the Shanghai cement factory and the workshop of an aircraft manufacturing plant were redeveloped to hold a series of cultural activities such as the Shanghai West Bund Music Festival and West Bund Art and Design. The Pudong New Area District strived to build a cultural cluster on the east bank of the Huangpu River, whilst the original coal silo and its corridor were transformed into the Modern Art Museum Shanghai. In addition, the Shanghai Shipyard locomotive building workshop is now a fashion art centre and the 80,000 ton silo at the Minsheng Terminal was opened to the public serving as the main exhibition hall of the 2017 Shanghai Urban Space Art Season. Yangpu District has a long industrial culture of over a century,



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expanded by the restoration and renovation of historical buildings, compounding the functions of tourism, culture, sports and exposition. These remodelled industrial heritage sites, which integrate into the historical landscape organically along the riverside, not only serve a recreational function but also instil the community's sense of pride and belonging to Shanghai. Excellent examples include: 1) the YONG AN textile warehouse completed in 1922 which witnessed the rise and fall of China's cotton textile and logistics industries over the past century, and the rapid development of Shanghai as an international city; 2) the MAO MA textile warehouse, which has stood for more than 100 years, designed by the Palmer & Turner Group, a British-owned architectural and engineering firm with a long history in the far east; 3) the Tabaco Warehouse built in 1920 which is now restored as an inclusive urban complex with a transportation hub, park and public services; and 4) the Ming Hua Sugar Factory built in 1924 covering an area of approximately 51,159 m², originally designed by a Japanese architectural firm in which restoration and utilization of historical buildings have compounded tourism, culture, sports and exposition functions.

Conclusion

Through the Stories of Architecture in Shanghai, local writers, artists, professional scholars, citizens and enterprises have all participated in the collection, compilation, writing and dissemination of architectural historical materials to varying degrees. Professional groups used literature research, field research and oral history as methods to record the design and historical background of local buildings. Non-professionals incorporated their memories of architecture into historical material, enriching the emotional link to the past, and many resident volunteers shared their personal stories related to architecture to visitors. This has highlighted how extensive community participation helps residents to recognize and respect the value of their local heritage. Reading and sharing their own personal stories, a sense of belonging or a deeper connection to their home may resonate with them and can enhance emotional connections to old buildings when walking along roads and telling relevant stories. Citizens gradually become guardians and storytellers of the architecture, rather than visitors and readers, helping to revitalize and replenish the historical neighbourhoods. The trust established from their participation represents an effective resource for urban governance. Shanghai itself is a city with a strong reading culture. The 2021 Citizen Reading Status Survey showed that 92.63 per cent of the city's residents read physical books, and 91.90 per cent read digital books. Across 76.54 per cent of respondents, it was indicated that reading enhanced their happiness. In recent years, the concept of 'greater reading' has become increasingly popular with reading expanding from that of solely physical books to a more comprehensive, multi-dimensional experience. Following this trend, the Shanghai municipal government chose to expand reading to cover buildings which greatly aroused the interest of the public and earned their support. Through multi-dimensional reading methods such as architecture-related book reading, audiobooks and online interactions with architecture, the council further deepened the reading experience and made it available to all. Thanks to the participation of local writers, artists, architectural designers and historians, the citizens' understanding of the historical context and architectural aesthetics of the city deepened and has helped to improve the quality of Shanghai's civilization, aesthetic cultivation and humanistic sentiment among the urban population. The Stories of Architecture in Shanghai project, in combination with the development of the tourism and creative industry, gradually formed a new cultural IP that had spillover effects and contributed to the city's economic development. The Shanghai municipal government used IP to establish unique tourism routes and develop cultural and creative products. The COVID-19 pandemic drastically impacted the tourism industry and local historic architecture became a supplementary resource that benefited citizens. The official logo of Stories of Architecture in Shanghai represents a visual symbol of Shanghai, reflecting the city's unique connotation. Critically, it built a new cultural brand and provided a new way to enhance storytelling in the city, broadening new possibilities for Shanghai's global visibility. Shanghai's historical buildings should be 'read' and appreciated in the context of the overall neighbourhood, in the context of the daily life of its citizens and the framework of the city's development moving forward. In this sense, to promote and publicize Shanghai's architecture is to enhance the visibility of the city and promote the origins, spirit and character of Shanghai globally.