

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Anke Haarmann. *Shanghai (Urban Public) Space*. Berlin: Jovis, 2009. 192 pp. \$29.80 (paper), ISBN 978-3-86859-026-5.

Reviewed by Milica Muminovic (Keio University)

Published on H-Urban (June, 2015)

Commissioned by Heide Imai



The rapid development of China in recent years is having dramatic, transforming consequences on both the social and physical features of its cities. Existing metropolises are growing and new cities are emerging. Among developing Chinese cities, Shanghai has taken a preeminent position.

The book *Shanghai (Urban Public) Space* represents both an artistic and academic approach to understanding the processes of transformation that are happening in the cityscape. The content of the book derives from the exhibition and conference of the same name and touches on some important topics: concepts of public and private, migration, displacement, separation, and neighborhoods as part of the changing cityscape. The book is divided in two parts: the first is a collection of essays on various topics that address the current state of the city, and is followed by visual material in second part of the book.

The exhibition “Shanghai (Urban Public) Space” took place in Germany in HafenCity, Hamburg. The book does not compare Hamburg and Shanghai, but the fact that there are some processes of transformation recognizable in both cities reveals the deeper nature of the transformation and the way we relate to, or better, oppose it. The book seeks to understand the changes by looking at the city as both form and language; beyond describing the most obvious changes of density and the loss of traditional dwelling spaces, it analyzes the meaning behind those processes.

The second important topic presented in the book is related to the division of public and private spaces and the notions of those spaces that are largely imported and defined by the ambiguous term, “Western.” The struc-

ture of the city of Shanghai reflects the structure of society, and takes the form of honeycombs within traditional neighborhoods (*lilongs*). The separation of spaces follows a unique, indigenous logic: “The inner-most areas of the neighborhoods, surrounded by fences and inhabited by large number of people, are not private, just like the areas outside the honeycombs—the *lilongs*—are not public, but rather anonymous” (p. 13). The fact that there are no public spaces as part of the political sphere is explained with reference to the structure of Confucian-communistic traditional society, which does not have the same notion of the individual. Here the individual is a relational being, always part of a larger community. These traditional spaces are lost within the transformation in order to give way to a neoliberal, market-driven global typology of spaces, creating “income-based capitalistic clusters” (p. 13) rather than neighborhoods. Despite all that, the authors recognize the need for public spaces, which can be seen in parks that serve as gathering spaces outside of the neighborhood.

The book is composed of six essays that explore various aspects of urban public space in Shanghai. The first essay, by Anke Haarmann, gives an overview of the transformations and basic characteristics of the built environment in Shanghai and thus sets the context for the book. The second essay, written by Dieter Hassenpflug, uses notions of urban semiology to interrogate the meanings behind different elements of the built environment. It explores spatial manifestations of the transformation of rural, traditional, and communist Chinese society driven by the forces of the capitalist market economy. The essay analyzes the ways in which the concepts of New Urbanism and the Garden City have been introduced and

transformed, using two examples of new satellite towns, Anting New Town and Taiwushi New Town, which were designed to introduce a German and European flavor. Hassenpflug argues that these cities are “real-time experiments” that can reveal more about “China’s urban code” (p. 43). In third essay, Pu Jie explores, through self-reflection, the meaning of the concept of the city. In almost poetical writing the essay starts with the description of the act of design and reflects on the tangible aspects of the city, its built form. The essay explores problems that appear as a result of longing for a better life, such as migrations, terrorist attacks, unemployment, crime, and pollution, questioning the concepts on which the design of the cities is based.

In the fourth essay Sonia Schoon explores the term “ecdynamics,” first introduced by Rem Koolhaas, within the context of the rapidly transforming built environment of Shanghai. This term, which refers to the biological processes through which some species (like snakes) deal with growth and change, is used to elaborate on the outgrowing of existing structures in city that are then replaced by the new ones. The essay explores social, economic, and urban aspects of change that are not necessarily perceived as negative. One of the interesting aspects of social ecdynamic spaces is related to the perception of change as progress, which resonates with “hope for personal advancement” (p. 89). Gentrification, usually considered a negative outcome of change, is here described as a natural ecdynamic process, as a result of market forces and the accumulation of wealth. However, the essay concludes with the implication that living in ecdynamic space is, on the individual level, bringing forward the “culture of nervousness” (p. 91).

In her essay “A Day in Shanghai—Thoughts of a Hutong Road Dweller,” Julia Dautel captures part of the lived experience of the changing city through portraits of some of its inhabitants. The essay gives detailed descriptions of those who have benefited from the new economy and those who live at the margin, struggling to find their place in the ever-changing city. Rufina Wu and Stefan Canham, in their essay “Portraits from Above—Hong Kong’s Informal Rooftop Communities,” describe spatial and social aspects of the problem of housing in the Hong Kong. This issue finds its parallel in Shanghai, where increasing numbers of migrants are moving in search of a better life.

The book *Shanghai (Urban Public) Space* is primarily concerned with the concrete issues that have appeared in Shanghai as a result of the fast development and transformation of the city. That transformation is explored through both tangible and intangible features of the city. The authors position their observations not only at the level of the built environment but also reveal the social, cultural, political, and economic processes hidden behind the visible material changes. The book will be helpful for discussions in contemporary urban design, especially in relation to neoliberal capitalism and transformations of the city caused by the free market. It is important to note that the book does not take a nostalgic view of traditional spaces, but explores the problems that appear as part of the process of growth. Although essayistic in nature, the book offers some fine-grained descriptions of the processes happening in the rapidly developing city, giving the reader unique perspectives from the inside.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Milica Muminovic. Review of Haarmann, Anke, *Shanghai (Urban Public) Space*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. June, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39796>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.