

Lilong: A Way of Understanding Liminal Space in Shanghai

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INTRODUCTION

Google "what is liminal space" and you'll find images of shopping malls at four in the morning, schools during the summer holidays, and empty hospital corridors at midnight, which seem to have nothing to do with liminal space in the context of architecture and urban planning.



Fig.1: Liminal spaces that causes eeriness, nostalgia, anxiety, Wikipedia, 2023

However, when the group dig into the concept of "liminal space" from anthropology, psychology and architecture, the correlation and similarity among them are found. First and foremost, time. It takes time for a space to change function and spatial experience—after decades, the Rose Kennedy Greenway in Boston and Cheong Gye Cheon in Seoul have transformed from a traffic artery to a leisure and entertainment venue. However, at a special time when the past and future overlap, it's at a liminal stage. Secondly, space. Instead of a destination in where you can rest for a long time, "liminal space" emphasizes being transitory and between two defined spaces—the waterfront recreational areas can be seen as connections and transitions between cities and water bodies, and the exquisitely and beautifully decorated trails that become landmarks are still essentially spaces that help people travel between different destinations. Finally, psychology. Similar to the liminality proposed by Arnold van Gennep¹ in the early 20th century, people in the liminal space are also undergoing changes at the psychological level, as the uncertainty of the function and nature of the liminal space has caused the mental instability and ambiguity of the users to a certain extent.

So liminality involves time, space and psychology. Liminal space occurs when people engage in particular activities at a liminal time and psychological stage. It is defined by people's activities, not by a powerful structure, and often breaks the powerful structure, so when we see liminal space we usually see a blurring and uncertainty of public and private.

This is why we chose Lilong as a representative type of liminal space in Shanghai to record. 100 years ago, Lilong is a decent place to live. After almost 100 years since its construction, it has experienced serious physical decay. With the development of urban society, Lilong's spatial and socio-psychological structure has become even more complicated. And at the be-

¹ The concept of liminality was first developed in the early 20th century by folklorist Arnold van Gennep, indicating the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of a rite of passage, when participants no longer hold their preritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the rite is complete.[2] During a rite's liminal stage, participants "stand at the threshold" between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a new way (which completing the rite establishes). (source: Wikipedia)

ginning of the urban renewal era, it faces an uncertain future. All this makes Lilong a liminal space where many spontaneous activities take place, regardless of the structure and boundaries of public and private set 100 years ago.

This file aims to document the activities and the liminal space they have created in Lilong.



Fig.2: Similarity between the 2 kinds of liminal spaces in the aspects of time, space and psychology, Zhuoxin Li, 2023

Fig.3: Three selected liminal spaces in Shanghai, Zhuoxin Li, 2023

BACKGROUND OF URBAN SPACE

Shanghai is one of the municipalities under direct administration of China and the core of the world class city cluster in the Yangtze River Delta area, which is planned as an excellent global city and a modern socialist international metropolis with world influence.

The modernization of Shanghai began in the concession, which had been expanded to the north and west at the end of the 19th century because of economic development. Decades later, *the Great Shanghai Plan* laid the urban pattern of modern Shanghai, which was later changed by the Republic of China's acceptance of concession, into an important industrial base and financial pillar of China. In the following years, Shanghai went through marked changes from the aspects of development goals, reform and opening up. Currently, Shanghai is an international center of economy, finance, trade, shipping, scientific and technologic innovation and a cultural metropolis as well as a national historical city, with its GDP reaching over 430 billion yuan, ranking first in China.

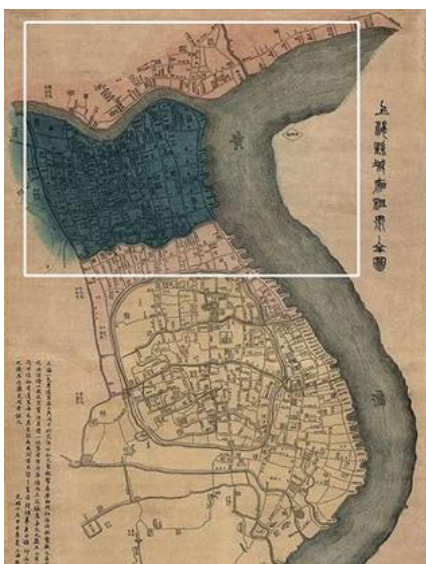


Fig.4: The concession division in Shanghai in the 19th century, Weibo, 2023

Fig.5: The drawing of the Greater Shanghai Plan, Google, 2023

Fig.6: Changes of Shanghai between 1945 and 2016, Google, 2023

Constrained by ecological baselines, Shanghai is drawing on key transportation corridors as the framework, apply the town clusters to promote overall urban and rural development, apply life circles to build the life network, optimize urban and rural

system, cultivate a multicenter public activity system, and form a “networked spatial system characterized by multi-centers, clusters, and compactness”, a “main city – new city – new town – village” municipality-wide urban and rural system, and a central system comprising of “city center (central activities zone) - city sub-center - local center - community center”.

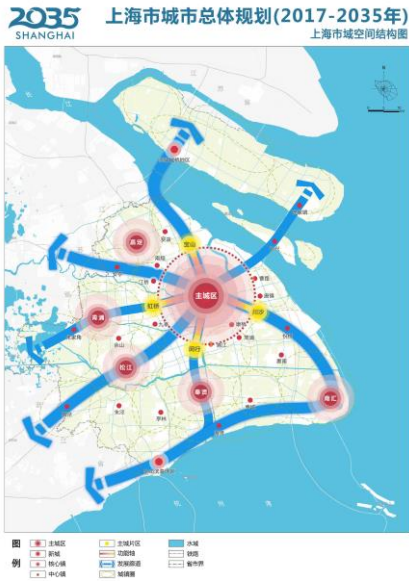


Fig.7: Spatial structure map of Shanghai, Shanghai Master Plan 2017-2035, 2018

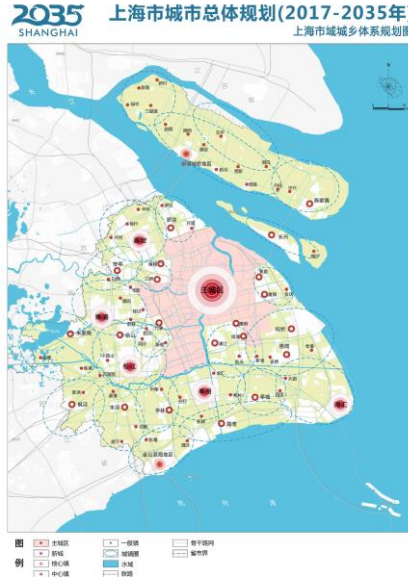


Fig.8: Urban and rural system planning map of Shanghai, Shanghai Master Plan 2017-2035, 2018



Fig.9: Network planning map of public activity centers in Shanghai, Shanghai Master Plan 2017-2035, 2018

LIST OF URBAN LIMINAL SPACES IN SHANGHAI

[Liminal Space_1: Chunyang Lane]

Location / Type

Chunyang Lane, Dongyuhang Rd, Hongkou District, Shanghai/ Linear & point

Context

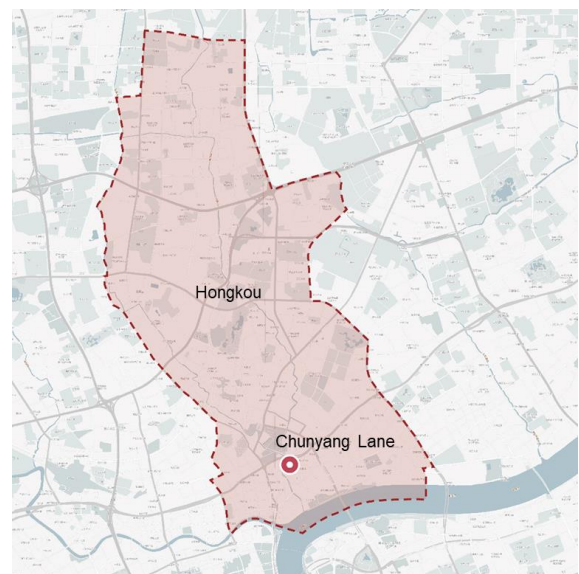


Fig.10: The location of Chunyang Lane in the downtown area of Shanghai and Hongkou District, Zhuoxin Li, 2023

Chunyang Lane is located at the southern end of Hongkou District in the downtown area of Shanghai, and is one of the typical Lilong communities built in the early 20th century. The location condition here is good, with the south side being close to the Huangpu River, which is the most important river in Shanghai, the southwest being about 3.1 kilometers away from the People's Square in the center of Shanghai, and the northeast side being about 1.8 kilometers away from the Hongkou District People's Government.

At present, there are various types of land around Chunyang Lane. On the basis of residential land, there are large-scale municipal hospitals, various commercial facilities and office buildings. It is worth noting that the north side of Chunyang Lane is adjacent to Shanghai Music Valley, which also mainly consists of several Lilong communities and is currently a key cultural and creative industry gathering area in Shanghai, as well as the only historical and cultural area preserving a complete water system pattern. The surrounding transportation facilities in Chunyang Lane are also abundant. Although it is not close to the subway line, there are more than ten bus stops within 500 meters of the surrounding area, making travel more convenient for residents.

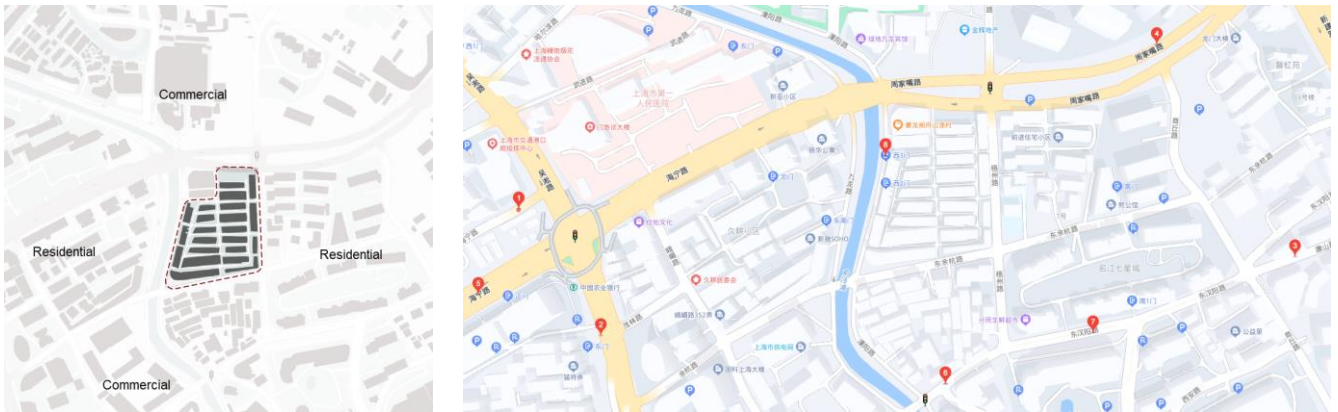


Fig.11: Types of land use around Chunyang Lane and the layout of public transportation facilities, Zhuoxin Li, 2023

According to the upper-level plan, the place where Chunyang Lane is in is located in the new era urban development benchmark area of Hongkou District and the central activity area of the North Bund. Therefore, a large-scale improvement of the quality of residential areas and the addition of high-end commercial facilities are currently being carried out in the surrounding area. In addition, Chunyang Lane is also listed as a culturally protected neighbourhood, so for a long period of time in the future, there is basically no possibility of demolition, but only renovation.

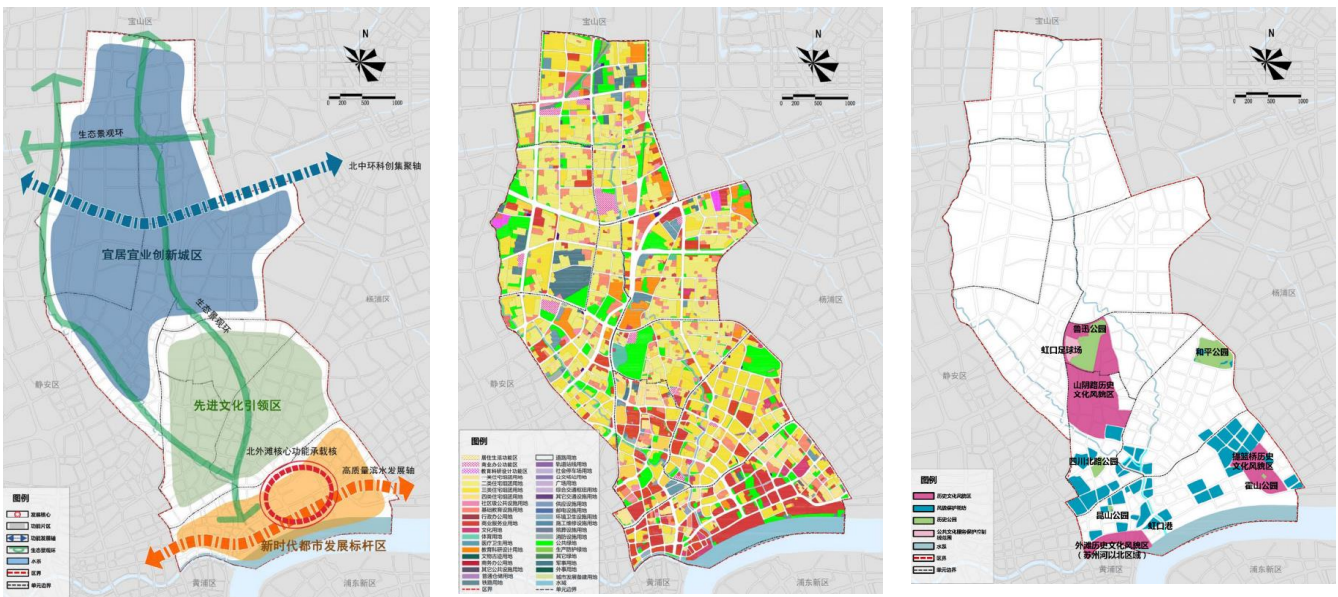


Fig.12: Maps of Spatial structure, Use of land, and Cultural Preservation Control in Hongkou, Hongkou District Unit Planning, 2022

[1-1: Narrow alleyway in Chunyang Lane]

Activity

Due to the small living area, the residents of Lilong occupy the streets and alleys originally used as public space as private space. Residents dry clothes in the streets and alleys, park their bicycles and electric vehicles on both sides of the road, pile up sundries, and many residents wash clothes in the streets and alleys, and build structures privately in public space.

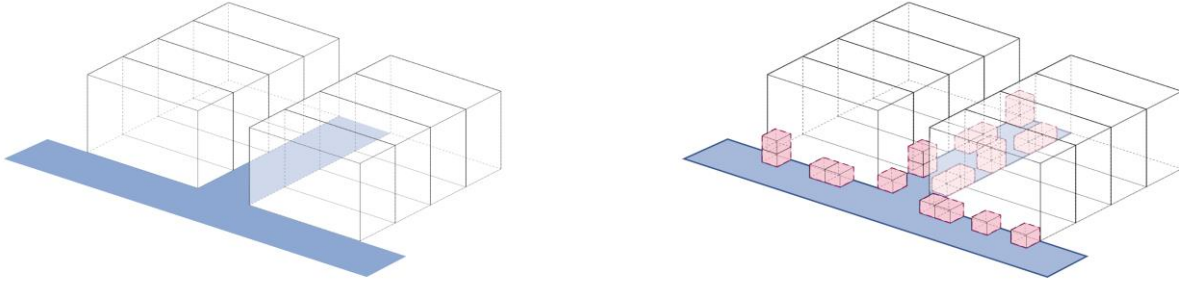


Fig.13: The original state of the streets and the occupied state of the streets., Zhuoxin Li, 2023

Spatial Characteristics

The outer space of Shanghai Lane is formed by the combination of the street and the building facades on both sides, forming a long street. These streets and alleys are usually narrow and long, and residential entrances and exits are distributed on both sides of the streets and alleys. The demand promotes the residents of Lilong to occupy the public space. The spontaneous behavior of these residents changes the nature of the streets and alleys, making the original public space into private space or shared space. However, the occupation of public space makes the originally narrow alleys become more congested and chaotic, which affects the original traffic nature of the alleys, disturbs the public order, affects the appearance of the city, and creates security risks.



Fig.14: Public alleyway filled with personal belongings, Haiyan Wang, 2023

[1-2: Shared kitchen in Chunyang Lane]

Activity

Cheng Naishan, a Shanghai-based writer, once wrote in the book *"The Book of Daughters"* that *"at the beginning of the night, the sound of frying pans, cutting chopping boards, chatting, and quarrels are heard from the back door of every house, and it is very lively."*

The public kitchen on the ground floor of the residence in the alley is called "Zao Phi Jian" in Shanghai dialect. This is the most typical portrayal of the life of Shanghai citizens, and it is the space with the strongest atmosphere of fireworks in the market. The kitchen is a public space inside the house in the alley, shared by several households, and dozens of different water meters can often be seen in it, leading to different households. Three times a day, morning, noon, and night, people live together in this small space, preparing food and talking at the same time. In addition, the stove is generally located on the north side of the whole house and connected to the entrance and exit, so people will inevitably meet here when they go out or go home. Therefore, this space is not only a space for neighbors to socialize and enhance their relationship, but also a place for conflicts and quarrels.



Fig.15: More than a dozen water meters belonging to several families in the same stove, Haiyan Wang, 2023



Fig.16: Public kitchen with dirty environment and outdated facilities Yi Xu, 2022

Spatial Characteristics

The traditional alley houses represented by Chunyang Lane are generally 2-3 storeys high. When they are first built, they are usually owned and lived by only one family. The area is ample and sufficient, and the space on the ground floor is used as a private kitchen. Later, with the increase of the population, the houses in the alleys were split up and shared by several families, sometimes as many as a dozen. Excessive population density leads to a small and poor living environment. People cannot have private kitchens, but can only share them with neighbors.

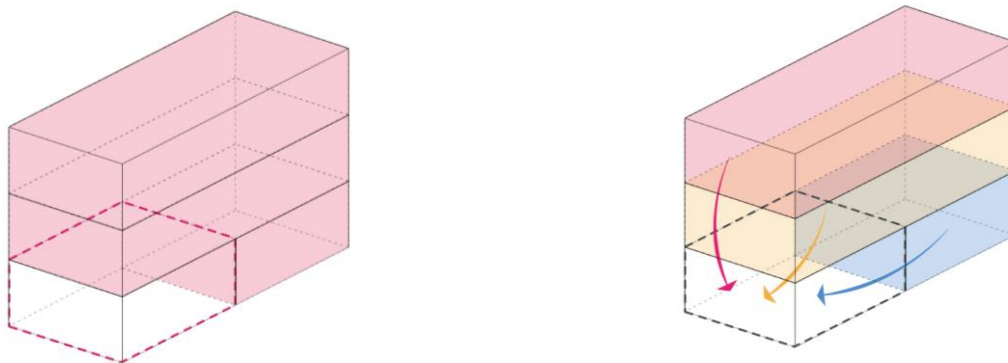


Fig.17: Different ways of using the Lilong residences at the beginning of construction and now, Zhuoxin Li, 2023

The interior of the public stove is often relatively simple, mainly including large appliances such as stoves and refrigerators; the sink for cleaning is often set outside the house, resulting in the above-mentioned problem of roadway being occupied. In terms of property rights, the ownership of the alleys is actually owned by the national government, and residents only enjoy the right to use them. As a result, no one is willing to use their private property to maintain the public space, so the quality of the public kitchen on the ground floor is getting worse. worse.



Fig.18: Simple furnishings in the public kitchen and the sink outside the house, Haiyan Wang, 2023

[Liminal Space_02: West Guizhou Lane]

Location / Type

West Guizhou Lane, East Beijing Rd, Huangpu District, Shanghai/ Linear & point

Context

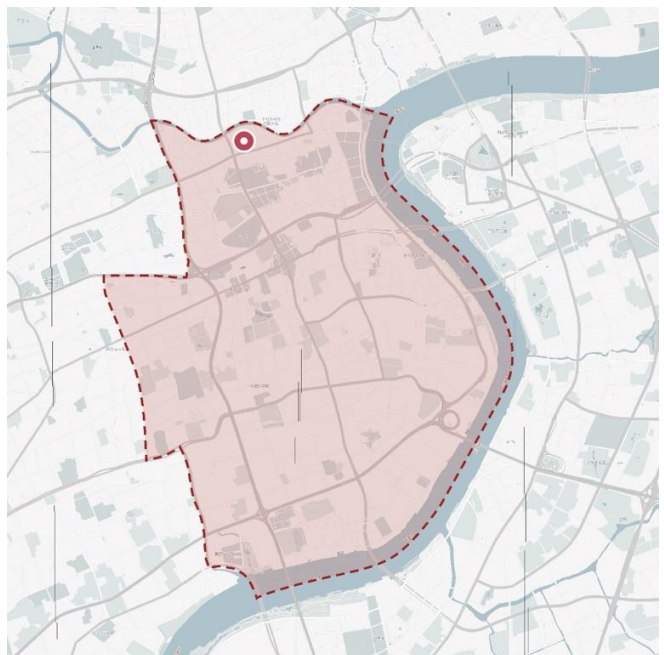


Fig.19: The location of West Guizhou Lane in the downtown area of Shanghai and Huangpu District, Zhuoxin Li, 2023

West Guizhou Lane at the northern end of Huangpu District in the downtown area of Shanghai, near the Suzhou Rivert. It is also one of the typical Lilong communities built in the early 20th century. The location is at the centre of Shanghai, near East Nanjing Road, the most prosperous commercial road in China, and not far from it is Shanghai’s government.

At present, there types of land around West Guizhou Lane are relatively simple. Majority of its surrounding is residential land, and then is mainly commercial and office. At its north is Suzhou river, another important water system in Shanghai,with more intimate relationship with surroundings. And not so far in the east is the Bund, which means there will be a lot of tourists. The surrounding transportation facilities in West Guizhou Lane are also abundant. And for traffic is quite convenient to take subway here with three to four subway line around.

In 2017, a Shanghai design group called TM studio carried out a micro-regeneration in West Guizhou Lane, but unlike many other regenerations that lead to gentrification, this micro-regeneration learns from the original liminal space and uses

design as a tool to sustain the activities that created the liminal space and make it better for all residents. The aim of micro-regeneration is to activate public involvement and participation and to promote a sustainable and urban regeneration approach, which requires not only an institutional innovation but also a positive intervention in the urban structure.

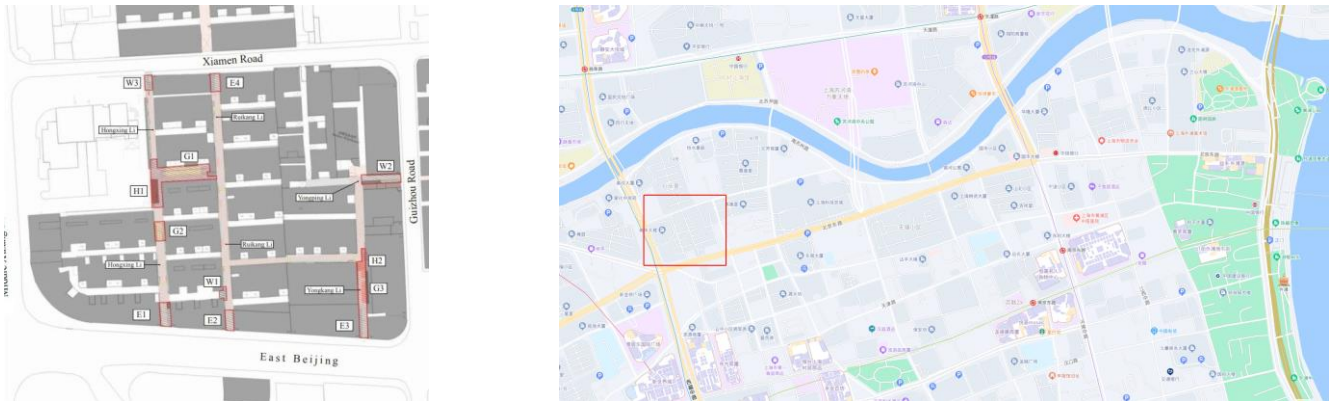


Fig.20: Land use around West Guizhou Lane and the layout of public transportation facilities, TM studio & Ruiyang Gao, 2023

According to the top-level plan, the place where West Guizhou Lane is located is in the block of historic scene preservation, and will try to merge the history with modern commercial. Therefore, in this area, most of the historical residential area, including West Guizhou Lane, is undergoing a housing acquisition by the government. So what West Guizhou Lane will be in the future after the acquisition is still a mystery. The liminal space in West Guizhou Lane needs to be recorded in case of gentrification, which will destroy the current social relationship.

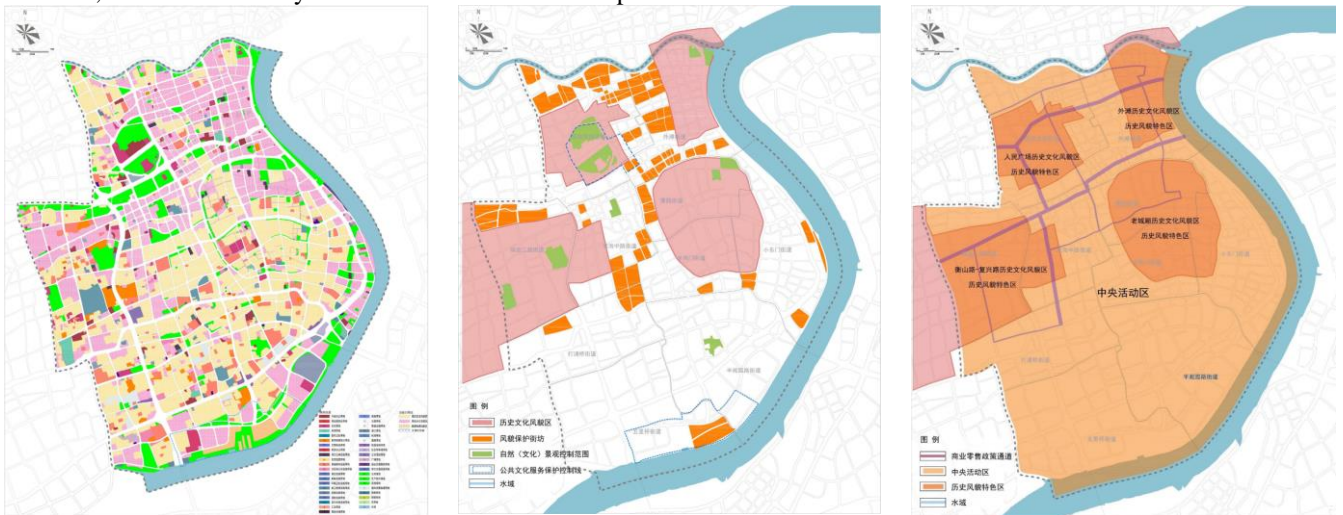


Fig.21: Maps of Spatial structure, Use of land, and Cultural Preservation Control in Huangpu District Unit Planning, 2022

[2-1: Narrow alleyway in West Guizhou Lane]

Activity

Rapid social and political changes since the community was built have complicated property rights and blurred the boundaries between private and public space. The original housing units have also been divided into smaller units to meet the needs of the growing number of households living in the neighbourhood, further exacerbating the poor living conditions.

So the same activities as in Chunyang Lane are taking place in West Guizhou Lane, such as planting, drying clothes, illegal construction, etc. But the micro-regeneration tries to maintain these various personal activities happening in the public lane, and use design as a tool to promote the beneficial side of these activities. Original activities don't disappear and new community activities happen as a result of micro-regeneration, such as chatting, reading, resting. The designer doesn't provide a mandatory and strong structure, he uses light steel to allow residents to find and expand its function by themselves.

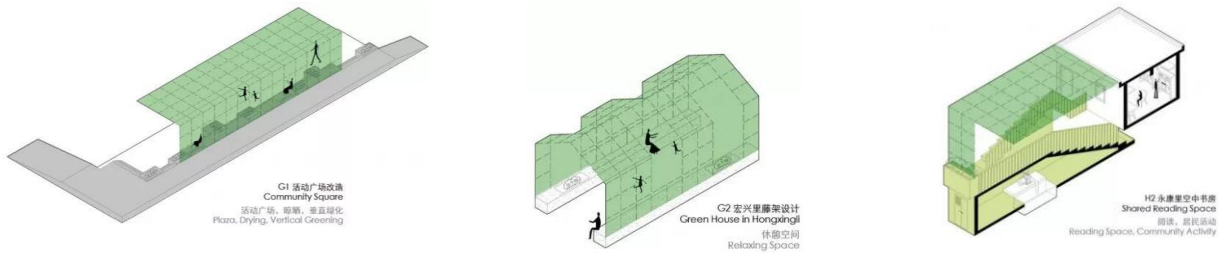


Fig.22: Axonometric Drawing of Square, Pergola and Attic, TM studio, 2017

Spatial Characteristics

The square is a metal mesh structure with a concrete flower sitting underneath, which could not only be used for sitting and chatting, but also for the activity that residents have to dry their clothes in the alleyway. So when people come here to dry their clothes, they can meet their neighbours.

The pergola is the most popular space on the site. There were grapes and rose bushes on both sides. The existing elements were used to construct a greenhouse structure made of metal mesh that could not only grow plants, but also serve as a decorative shelter for the residents. This would create a sense of place for interaction and reconcile the conflict between traffic and the gathered crowd.

In the air of the alleyway, there is a small attic suspended between buildings on two sides. This space was connected by a steep, almost rotten steel staircase. The idea of this design is to transform the pump house below into a solid staircase, providing a more comfortable and safer route to the study. On the east side there is a roof terrace where local residents would like to grow greenery and vegetables. This space would be unified and potentially become a nice pathway to this previously hidden garden for the neighbourhood.



Fig.23: Photo of Square, Pergola and Attic, TM studio, 2017

[2-2: Shared kitchen in West Guizhou Lane]

Activity

As mentioned in Chunyang Lane, the communal kitchen is not only a place for neighbours to socialise and improve their relationships, but also a place for conflict and quarrels. And to date, there are still 60% of residents who do not have their own toilet and have to share kitchens with others. If there's enough space for each family, no one will want to share a kitchen.

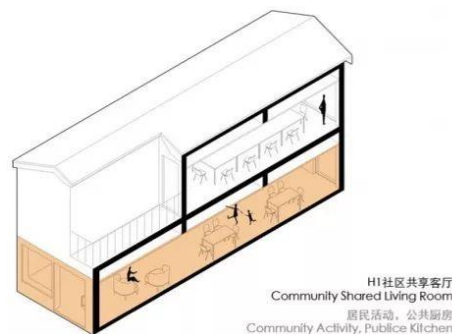


Fig.24: Axonometric Drawing of Shared kitchen, TM studio, 2017

Spatial Characteristics

The design team transformed the inefficient community room into a shared kitchen and living room, and the neighbourhood committee developed a system of shared space rental and volunteer services, which makes "eating" and "meeting" a link between residents' daily lives. This makes "eating" and "meeting" a link to the daily life of the residents.

Moreover, through the combination of the clothes-drying planters and the activity square, residents not only have a small open square for sunbathing and clothes-drying in the narrow alley, but also have a place for planting enthusiasts to show their skills.



Fig.25: Photos of Shared Kitchen, TM studio, 2023

DISCUSSION

1 Liminal Space and Design: Due to the limitation of space, the liminal space in Lilong is produced by the daily behaviour of the residents, such as planting, hanging clothes, cooking, forming a special public and private relationship. And in Lilong, the relationship presents itself with material form, so once we designers observe the form of liminal space, we can use it in our design.

2 Liminal space and power system: When I know that the Guizhou West Lilong is under acquisition, we realise that only a space with down-up power structure can be called "liminal space". Imagine in a space with centralised power, the activity shown in Lilong will be forbidden.

Reference

- [1] 童明, 黄潇颖, and 任广. "旧里新厅——南京东路街道贵州西里弄微更新, 上海, 中国." *世界建筑*. 01(2019):86-89.