Public Space in a Chinese City; the Case of Shanghai

Yvonne J Rydin

00:00 Welcome to the Bartlett Planning Podcast. My name’s Yvonne Rydin and I'm Professor of Planning Environment and Public Policy at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London. This is a series of talks that you can download and listen to at your leisure.

00:12 In each podcast, I will be presenting a current research project being undertaken by the Bartlett School of Planning and interviewing the researcher. You’ll find a link to further information about the project, including publications, on the BSP website.

00:29 We've taken a little break in January and February 2021, but I’m delighted to be back again and today I’m joined by another of our very talented research student community, Jingyi Zhu.

00:41 Welcome to the BSP podcast, Jingyi. Perhaps you could introduce yourself?

Jingyi Zhu

00:44 Thank you Yvonne, for having me. I joined BSP in September 2017 and prior to that, I studied in Tongji University in Shanghai and Polytechnic University of Milan for my bachelor and master degrees.

01:02 I was trained as an architect and urban designer, but over the years, I really developed interest in the process of public space design and management, so this PhD is really about pursuing that passion.

Yvonne J Rydin

01:17 Excellent. Your research looks at Shanghai and particularly the role of public space within the transformation of the city. For those of us who are not familiar with the city, perhaps you could tell us a little bit about Shanghai and how it’s changing.

Jingyi Zhu

01:32 Right, absolutely. I think most people know Shanghai as where the west meets east, at least in the past and it is, arguably, one of the most developed or advanced cities in mainland China, but I’d like to think of it, also, as one of the earliest to experience the problems associated with massive organisations, so it is, also, a sort of a pioneer of experiments in terms of development and urban governance.

02:08 I arrived in Shanghai back in 2010, at the time of the Shanghai World Expo in 2010 and in the decade before that, there had been massive inner city renewal and the city has expanded greatly. There has been massive infrastructural development, but it was, also, around the time of the Expo, whose slogan was ‘Better City Better Life’ that people started to reflect on this massive demolition and reconstruction renewal approach because it has wiped out a lot of the traditional urban fabrics and along the way, created some social issues, especially in housing demolition and resident relocation etc.

Yvonne J Rydin

02:56 When you go into Shanghai, my imagination of it is a massive amount of skyscrapers and new buildings. Is that what Shanghai’s like? What is it like when you walk through it or take a car through it or a bus through it?

Jingyi Zhu

03:11 Well, Shanghai is, in terms of landscape, I think, is quite a mix. There is the central area where there used to be the French Concession and the old city, so you can see the villas with French flavour and the modern apartment buildings, but at the other side of the river, at the Pudong side, there are massive skyscrapers, not everywhere, but it’s a really dominant landscape and that place and I think, across the city, you can find the more ordinary urban landscapes and the residential neighbourhoods that dates back to 1970s and ‘80s and the new commercial housing compounds in the 21st century, etc., so it’s a really mixed city and I really can't summarise that within one sentence.

Yvonne J Rydin

04:13 So the actual height of the buildings there is quite a lot across Shanghai, does it?

Jingyi Zhu

04:20 Yeah, I would say.

Yvonne J Rydin

04:22 Why is public space important in Shanghai and particularly in the way it’s changing now?

Jingyi Zhu

04:27 I think Shanghai is a historically crowded city and as most traditional Chinese cities, open space for public use was not part of the traditional landscape, so despite public space projects of different kinds throughout the decades, there is simply just not enough public space around the city, very simply, but the public space development in recent years have also been sort of marginalised in the face of entrepreneurial urban development – I think this is quite similar in London and elsewhere – so there is a general lack of public space, but I think why it is becoming more important is because there is a general policy or policy guidance from the national level that cities need to pay more attention to the so called City Betterment which means that cities need to improve the quality of urban life by amending both facilities and improving urban characteristics and vibrancy and so on.

05:37 So there is a general turn of focus from the top level, we should pay more attention to the quality of the development, rather than the velocity of development, so specifically, in Shanghai which aspires to be an excellent global city, on the one hand, it has to face the problems such as the constrained urban land supply, it can't just keep expanding and there are problems within the city, but on the other hand because of this emphasis on quality and people oriented development, public space really becomes an embodiment of this idea, so it has more social ideals within it, not only a physical container or people’s every day activities.

Yvonne J Rydin

06:28 One question occurs to me. Does public space play a different role in Chinese cities? Is it used differently? I mean, you’ve lived in London a long time as well, is there a difference in the way public space is used, historically or currently?

Jingyi Zhu

06:44 Well, historically, like I said, there wasn’t the same type of public space you would find in western civilisations, so the open space mainly associated were city temples or the wharf etc., they’re used for public, social uses, but I don’t think they have the strong, civil idea or this political implication in that and I think that’s pretty much the key difference between the so called Chinese public space and the public space in London or elsewhere.

07:22 Other than that, the everyday, social uses are pretty much the same and I don’t think it has that sort of particular role in terms of Chinese urban development although, at one point, I would say the parks in the early colonial period played a part in promoting this new civic ideas from the west, but I don’t think my starting point is that Chinese public space is inherently different from elsewhere, I’m just interested in the role it plays in the specific urban transformation era.

Yvonne J Rydin

08:01 Absolutely, it’s just that some people might be thinking about that. Perhaps, at this stage, it would be helpful if you could clarify what you understand by public space. This might seem obvious, but I guess it can be interpreted in different ways.

Jingyi Zhu

08:18 Yes. I think my standing point is that, in my research, I don’t pre-define what public space is, I pretty much take the use of public space in different contexts and just follow it and see what that really means to that specific culture, but yes, like you said, there are different ways to understand public space and people, obviously, have very different perceptions on a daily basis and I think academics tend to approach public space, either from the ownership and management responsibility perspective or the accessibility perspective or a combination of both.

08:59 So from the ownership perspective, public space are, obviously, owned and managed by the public sector and from the accessibility point of view, it’s open to all members of society, so it’s not only about physical openness, but is also openness of meaning and decision making, but I’m sure people would agree that the real life situations are more complicated than this.

09:26 For example, the cafés and the markets we see as public, social places are not necessarily owned or managed by public sector and the government buildings, obviously, are not the public space that people would go to on a daily basis and there is really no such kind of ideal public spaces that always welcome all people and increasingly, there are different mixture of public and private spaces that create the so called public private space or private public space, they really challenge the distinction between public space and other types of hybrid space.

10:11 So I think this reflects the problem with the predefined idea of publicness which it means an ideal status of public which is, obviously, valuable, but my standing point in this is that, well different people and different urban stakeholders have very different perceptions of public space, so although we all use the term similarly, we don’t necessarily always mean the same thing, so coming back to my research, this one pillar, one theoretical pillar of my research which is the critique on the publicness of public practice.

Yvonne J Rydin

10:53 That kind of open approach is also quite important in times of rapid, urban change, like indeed, we’re having now, whereas, I've noticed small spaces which, to be honest, were just ignored spaces, have now become public space here, people seek to sit outside and gather in small numbers, so I think this openness seems very appropriate to times of rapid change. Can you just take me through the details of the actual research that you’ve undertook?

Jingyi Zhu

11:27 Yes, so as I said, the first pillar of my research is this critique of the normative publicness idea, so on this basis, one part of the analytical framework of this research is devising a non-normative publics model which I call it an order sociality model, so by order, I mean the nature of decision making and power exertion in public spaces, so there is a continuum from the defined order to emergent order.

12:03 And the second aspect is the sociality, by which I mean the values represented in these spaces or more simply, who decides the meaning of public spaces, so it’s also a continuum from the individualist sociality to the collective sociality, so based on this model, I want it to be used as a typology of public space that can be applied to analyse the meanings of public spaces in Shanghai up to now and I add some contextual considerations to this publicness model which includes like the resistant collective culture, the dominance and enclosed urban forms, the economic reform, the planning system etc., these are just some of the traits from the eastern Asian cities or Chinese cities, more specifically, so this is one business of the research.

Yvonne J Rydin

13:03 If I could clarify, you said you wanted a typology, so did this emerge from the research that you did, the interviews, observations, those kind of things? Was it emergent?

Jingyi Zhu

13:16 No, I think this part of the research is, primarily, built on theoretical understanding, but I did do empirical research, some observation, to sort of implement and sort of… not necessarily testify, but to modify this model, as opposed to fully elaborate its meaning, so is does pretty much a theoretical baseline for me.

Yvonne J Rydin

13:45 Got it. So let’s go through the different bits of this typology, so I think the first one is symbolic public space. What do you mean by that?

Jingyi Zhu

13:55 By symbolic public space I mean the spaces that manifest a dominant social ideals and spaces that assume corresponding spatial features, so they feature more defined order, rather than emergent order, in the sense that they do not allow much spontaneity and they represent more collective meaning making.

14:19 So I used the image of the square, I think that pretty much sums up what I mean by symbolic public space, but obviously, in Shanghai, there are different symbol public space, like the grand squares, obviously, but also the more historical spaces where they not only represent nostalgic feelings to the past, but also represents looking forward, into the future, based on this glorious past, so there are multiple ways to see this as symbolic public space.

Yvonne J Rydin

14:53 How is that different from one of your other categories, entrepreneurial public space?

Jingyi Zhu

14:57 Yes, I think these two are actually quite difficult to untangle in my research and I think I, specifically, emphasised that entrepreneurial public space serve the city’s entrepreneurial development ambitions, so although I use the corporate plaza to represent this type of place, they are not necessarily all created by the private property development, but they can also be created by public private coalitions or just simply as public sector in pursuing the entrepreneurial development agenda.

Yvonne J Rydin

15:37 In the case of London, I can see pictures of Granary Square, in King’s Cross as, perhaps, more entrepreneurial than perhaps Trafalgar Square or some of the more heritage spaces in London as more symbolic. Would that be the right kind of distinction?

Jingyi Zhu

15:56 Yes, I think that’s very similar to what I have in mind for Shanghai as well. In my thesis, I used Xintiandi as an example of entrepreneurial public space because it has a historic backdrop, so it’s sort of symbolic of the city’s past and present and so on, but also, it serves not only the private sectors profit oriented goals, but also serves the public sectors’ inner city renewal agenda, so it’s a mix of public and private ambitions.

Yvonne J Rydin

16:32 So a third category, as I’m going through them in your typology, is community public space. Is this our local parks, is that that kind of space?

Jingyi Zhu

16:40 Well, I specifically mean community public space in the sense that the neighbourhood scale and especially in the Chinese gated communities… well, this is another complication in this part, I mean, the spaces in and around neighbourhoods that mainly serve the local purposes, rather than as destinations for visitors, so yes, what you said, like local parks is definitely a community public space, but I think, in my research, the more important community public spaces are… I call them the alleyway, like the spaces within the neighbourhoods which are… I think the gated community is actually a myth because although those communities in neighbourhoods in China are not actually gated, so they are accessible, but the spaces within are not used by the urban population, so to speak, they are more local and used by the people within this neighbourhood.

Yvonne J Rydin

17:48 Does this relate to what seems to be, from the outside, the traditional urban morphology of cities, of Chinese cities, would these small, little alleyways between residential buildings with internal courtyards, does that affect how your understanding community public space?

Jingyi Zhu

18:06 I think it is one type of community public space, but obviously, there are multiple, different types of residential neighbourhoods that are more gated and less gated, workers’ village, so to speak, so there are different types of community public spaces, but I think they all, more or less, originate from this alleyway prototype.

Yvonne J Rydin

18:25 The last category you’ve got is spontaneous public space. What was that?

Jingyi Zhu

18:32 Yes, I got inspiration from the field visits because I see a lot of people bring their chairs at the alleyways, all the urban roads, to create this sort of almost amorphous, but very active, social spaces, so in my conceptualisation, the spontaneous public space are those created through use, rather than intentional design. I think they’re relatively difficult to locate, but they are, obviously, everywhere.

Yvonne J Rydin

19:02 That’s really interesting and that really paints a picture of public space in a Chinese city, so what do you see the value of a typology like this?

Jingyi Zhu

19:13 I think, well, from my own research, this typology really is, like I said, a baseline to orient my research to an existing contextual specifities, so it’s not a comprehensive survey to cover all public space in the city, nor a very neat characterisation, but I want to show, through this typology, that there are different layers of meanings that could be reflected in the spaces and regarding the logic, so production of public spaces.

Yvonne J Rydin

19:44 So it tells you the way the city is created, in a sense, you get the handle on that. One term that I found very interesting in your research, I know it’s only one strand in your research, it’s this idea of micro generation or micro regeneration of public space. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Jingyi Zhu

20:07 So there isn’t a very strict or technical definition of micro regeneration, so I get this definition, mainly, from interviews with designers and planners. Obviously, from the word itself, it’s quite self-explanatory, it means regeneration on a micro, very small scale, specifically on community scale, but for planners and designers, this also means that these sort of regeneration activities are more detailed and touch on the residents’ most urgent concerns, so there is a great emphasis on the practicality of aesthetic values, so it’s very problem oriented and designers generally don’t pursue creating a certain sort of image and just want to help residents solve their really intimate problems.

21:10 So examples of micro regeneration could include the upgrade of a central square within the community or renovation of a street corner space, adding some seating or exercise equipment to the community central square, etc., etc., so there isn’t really a standard template for micro regeneration, they’re kind of bottom up, but they’re also, primarily, initiated by the government at this point of urban transformation.

Yvonne J Rydin

21:42 I find this very interesting because this very much fits within a strand, I see it happening in planning towards sometimes, called tactical urbanism or experimentation or informal urbanism. This idea that planning isn’t, necessarily, about the grandmaster plan or the big, public/private partnership, but it’s also about these lots of little, small initiatives.

Jingyi Zhu

22:05 Yes, exactly. I think one, interesting thing about micro regeneration is, like I said, it’s not as informal or bottom up as you said in terms of tactical urbanism etc., it’s very much initiated by the planning authority representing the government, but the idea of it is they wanted to experiment with the short term urban regeneration because in the sort of traditional urban regeneration projects, the mega projects, it takes years and years to elaborate on the design and to change the formal planning accordingly, so go through all these procedures is really taking a lot of time and they don’t really see the short term effects.

22:54 So the planning authority really wanted to experiment with this short term action that could quickly be promoted as exemplary projects throughout the city.

Yvonne J Rydin

23:06 Very interesting. You’re taking your research together, how would you summarise the quality implications of your work?

Jingyi Zhu

23:15 I think, in my research, I talk a lot about participation and co-creation from the designers and planners perspective, so it might not be policy implementation, but about practice, like how design professionals play a role in co-creating environment with people and I think it is time for us to reflect on what we can do not only solve the spatial problems on the surface, but help uncover the social dynamics underneath the different problems and on that basis, approach the spatial problems.

23:56 Another aspect is I talk a lot about the coordination of different levels of government or administrations in these different case studies and so there is a tension between the traditional type of top down agenda setting and the more experimental approaches to regeneration and community building etc., so as a main facilitator in this process, the planning authority is still very much the technical department, it doesn’t have a strong power in negotiating with the administrations on the same level and it doesn’t really have power to oversee the limitation of different types of projects, so I think there is also space to reflect on the coordination of different departments and administrations in terms of making planning policies and also rethink the possibility to change the institutional arrangements of the decision making in regeneration.

Yvonne J Rydin

25:08 It’s very interesting. Thank you very much indeed. Many thanks, Jingyi, for sharing your research with us.

Jingyi Zhu

25:15 Thank you Yvonne, it’s been a pleasure.

Yvonne J Rydin

25:16 And that brings us to the end of this podcast. Please do visit the BSP website at [www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/planning](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/planning) for a link to the other podcasts that we have been recording and posting for over two years now. They cover a range of research associated with the Bartlett School of Planning and are posted monthly during term time. You can also search for the Bartlett Planning Podcast wherever you usually find your podcasts.

25:43 Thank you for listening and until next time.