

Shanghai's Emerging Profile

BY MICHEL ST. PIERRE AND JOHN PARMAN

On the eve of its 2010 Expo, Shanghai has reason to be optimistic that it will put the right ingredients in place to be a 21st-century global financial center.

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Xintiandi incorporates Puxi's historic lane houses as an amenity that helps integrate urban-scale development.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Shanghai was East Asia's most important trade and financial center, but the outbreak of war effectively ended the city's role as China's international gateway. The postwar emphasis on internal development through the 1980s stunted Shanghai's recovery as a global business and trading center. Hong Kong quickly assumed this role for Greater China and, as a consequence, experienced massive growth. Like Singapore, Hong Kong invested in public infrastructure—mass transit, affordable housing, and civic amenities—and also established a supportive climate for business, becoming not just the main business and trading center for east Asia, but a global city.

Physically, Shanghai is more like Tokyo or Los Angeles than Hong Kong or Singapore, which are much more constrained in land area. Although Tokyo was largely destroyed in the final years of World War II, its urban fabric was well established. As prosperity returned, it was rebuilt rapidly. Shanghai's central core survived the war intact, but its modernization was delayed. When it began in earnest following the economic reforms of 1989, new urban-scale development was concentrated in Pudong, on former agricultural land across the Huangpu River from Puxi, Shanghai's historic downtown core. This strategy was similar to that pursued in London at Canary Wharf—and earlier in Paris at La Défense. It allowed new construction to occur at an unprecedented pace and scale without disrupting the existing urban fabric.

Global Ranking

How does Shanghai, which has been modernizing for 20 years, compare with other global financial centers today? The Global Power City Index¹ ranks New York and London in the top three in economy, research and development, and interaction and

culture. From the standpoint of managers, Shanghai ranks below Singapore (number 3), Hong Kong (number 4), and Tokyo (number 14). Its biggest draw is its perceived business growth potential. The competing Global Financial Center Index² categorizes Shanghai as an emerging global financial center. It has all of the ingredients, but is not yet at the level of London or New York. London benefits from the density of its main financial district; the scale, diversity, and affordability of its public transit system; and the quality, variety, and extent of its cultural facilities. New York has comparable advantages. Shanghai lags behind London, New York, and Tokyo in its cultural offerings. This is a problem that Tokyo faced during the late 1980s.

New Yorkers' consistent choice of public transit over private cars for commuting makes their city one of the most energy-efficient in the United States. This preference encourages walking, which makes New Yorkers healthier and supports the wealth of amenities that make their city so livable. London is similar in this respect. Compared to them, Shanghai's business and financial centers are insufficiently dense and do not yet have in place the public transit access that people in Hong Kong and Tokyo, for example, take for granted. This is especially true in Pudong. As a result, too many people commute to work in their own cars or in taxis. In the last ten years, private car ownership for the emerging middle class in Shanghai has drastically increased. The city has responded by widening the main roads, requiring new development to provide large amounts of structured parking, and banning bicycles from major streets. Not surprisingly, this has led to traffic congestion and pollution—problems that, left unchecked, will make it harder for the city to achieve the walkable urbanity that contributes to the sustainability and livability of the higher-ranking global financial centers.

Shanghai is committed to moving into the top tier, as its consistently high level of investment in modernization attests. The city is pursuing different paths to this goal. One is focused on Pudong's Lujiazui district, Shanghai's new international business center. That path began soon after 1989. Another centers on the older Puxi district—a mix of commercial streets and dense residential neighborhoods that predates World War II. Development in these districts is a good indication of where the city is headed.

Shanghai Tower

The development of a new high-rise business and financial district in Pudong's Lujiazui Finance and Trade Zone is one of the main accomplishments of Shanghai's modernization program. Characterized by tall buildings on large plazas



Shanghai Tower forms a transit-served super-high-rise precinct that will anchor the Lujiazui area of Pudong, Shanghai's new international business and financial center.

adjoined by wide arterial streets, the district lacks a sense of cohesion. Dependence on cars has contributed to growing traffic congestion; the streets themselves have been a barrier to easy pedestrian movement, increasing the sense of each tower's isolation.

With the completion of the Shanghai Tower in 2014, the Lujiazui district will be anchored by a transit-served super-high-rise precinct that signals a new emphasis on walkable urbanism. Designed by Gensler, the tower rises from a pavilion that is open and accessible rather than walled off from its surroundings, and which faces and extends the district's largest park. Although it is linked to adjacent towers and the Metro station via below-grade connections, the intent of the urban design is to encourage walking and biking at grade level, both within the precinct and to and from neighboring areas.

Shanghai Tower borrows the strategy of the city's older residential neighborhoods, which organize dwelling units around communal open space. The mixed-use structure rises in 15-story increments, each of which are separated by a sky garden. Filled with amenities, these atrium spaces lend identity to the functions they support—whether office or hospitality—and provide occupants with a naturally ventilated thermal buffer.

Xintiandi

Located on the west bank of the Huangpu River, the Puxi district is one of Shanghai's most important commercial, cultural, and residential centers. Unlike Lujiazui, it is relatively dense and

walkable—a mix of commercial streets, with both new and older buildings, and tightly packed residential neighborhoods of great charm.

A former French concession, Puxi already includes one of Shanghai’s most successful recent infill projects, Xintiandi, which earned a ULI Awards for Excellence in 2003. Shui On Development Limited assembled the large site and worked with municipal officials to arrive at an overall redevelopment plan. What makes Xintiandi stand out is the degree to which historic preservation, community-serving open space, and an array of uses and activities, including shops, cafés, bars, restaurants, housing, and office space, were integrated. The result is a destination that has proven popular with city residents and visitors. Xintiandi was a breakthrough project for Shanghai because it proved the value of preserving the past as an element in the evolving cityscape. While the commercial value of that strategy is what attracted the notice of other developers, the greater value of Xintiandi may lie in what it suggests for the city’s future: greater urbanity and social equity, which are major issues for Shanghai as it moves to raise its profile as a global financial center.

Challenges of a Modern Metropolis

Developing greater urbanity and reinforcing social equity are closely related. They reflect the Chinese government’s stated interest in making “harmony” a guiding theme for the country’s

modernization. These issues are not unique to Shanghai. In fact, they are shared with many other modern cities. In his book, *Incomplete Cities*, urban planner Yosuke Hirayama describes the redevelopment areas of cities like Berlin and Kobe as the “space of competition.” As long as a city is incomplete, he wrote, “all persons ought to have the right be heard in the ‘space of competition.’ Tolerance of myriad views is indeed the distinguishing characteristic of the city.”³

Architect and planner Fumihiko Maki includes this quote in an essay in his recent book, *Nurturing Dreams*, noting that cities were traditionally made up of “residents who share certain commonalities,” that “naturally tended to create distinct communities” as they clustered together. “This is increasingly rare in contemporary society,” Maki writes. The result is a “vague and abstract overall image of the metropolis.” At the same time, “everyone in a metropolis constructs and possesses his or her own image of it”—a context in which “the physical formation and maintenance of community” becomes much harder. “The city remains stable as long as balance is maintained among the different territories and friction at boundaries is minimal,” Maki asserts, and the modern metropolis tends to rule this out.⁴

In embracing the national goal of harmony, Shanghai has begun to emphasize the idea of social equity. This can be seen as a conscious effort to reestablish a context and conditions in



The traditional Puxi streetscape proved ideal to activate Xintiandi as a 24/7 setting.

which sound planning concepts, supportive of a high quality of urban life, can be consistently realized as the city continues to modernize. As a result, there is a much greater interest today in development strategies that will allow Shanghai to thrive in the future—culturally, economically, environmentally, and socially. Shanghai’s 2010 Expo, with its theme of “Better City, Better Life,” will reinforce this interest. For example, 80 percent of the Expo is demountable and will be removed and reused or recycled when the Expo closes. The riverfront park developed for it will remain for the public’s use (and help activate the Puxi side of the river—a former shipyard, elements of which will be preserved and reused). Permanent Expo facilities will remain to provide additional convention and conference space for Shanghai, which has only about two-thirds of what it needs at present. Performance venues also will remain, providing an important new use to anchor this part of the riverfront.

One of Expo’s main themes is how to create a more eco-friendly society. One way the Expo is promoting this is to convene a series of national forums around this theme on related topics such as preservation of culturally important historic towns, improving water quality, and promoting more sustainable urban development. Precedents like Lujiazui’s evolving super-high-rise precinct and Puxi’s sensitive infill project Xintiandi exemplify Shanghai’s progress toward this goal.

The Puxi Plan

Meanwhile, developer Shanghai CRED Real Estate Stock Co., Ltd., is sponsoring a new plan for Puxi, prepared by Gensler and Tongji University, aimed at reviving its role as a downtown business and commercial center. The plan suggests a new model for how to redevelop Shanghai’s historic central core at an urban scale while preserving its character and reinforcing its sustainability.

The Puxi Plan responds equally to the city’s undiminished need for high-density development and its desire to preserve the past as an integral part of any future. To accomplish this, the plan takes the Puxi district itself as its armature. Puxi has excellent mass transit access, with well-located subway stations across the district. It also has an established street grid with a pedestrian-friendly hierarchy of primary, secondary, and tertiary streets and alleys.

The Puxi Plan locates higher-density uses along major streets and clusters them around transit nodes to encourage people to use mass transit instead of cars and cabs to commute. The plan also limits the extent and impact of high-density development on adjoining neighborhoods, especially the traditional alley housing that gives Puxi much of its charm and identity. Those



The Gensler/Tongji University plan (above) for Puxi preserves older neighborhoods for mixed-use residential and commercial development, weaves in community-serving open space, and creates a major waterfront cultural area along the Bund. Building on Puxi’s transit access and historic neighborhoods, the plan allows for new higher-density development (below) while reinforcing Puxi as a walkable urban district.



neighborhoods are preserved and incorporated as a valued part of Puxi’s urban fabric. Instead of attempting to dictate Puxi’s immediate reuse, the plan anticipates its evolution over time, reflecting the broader changes that will occur around it. Adjoining neighborhoods will benefit from similar protections as New York’s Soho, for example—not precluding new development, but limiting its extent and scale.

The Puxi plan treats the frontage along the Huangpu River as a second armature on which medium-scale development can introduce a range of cultural facilities—including smaller, locally focused museums, art galleries, live performance venues, as well as a potential major new international museum—into Shanghai. Cultural uses have also proven to be potent generators of revitalization, so a spillover effect can be expected, triggering a mix of uses that will help enliven Puxi

as a walkable urban center that will, in turn, augment Pudong's Lujiazui as a desirable place for global companies—Chinese among them—to locate.

As London and New York have both discovered, a top-tier global financial center needs a midtown as well as downtown. Shanghai achieved this during the 1920s and 1930s. The Puxi plan suggests the path it could take in the next ten to 20 years to do so again.

Notes:

¹ *Global Power City Index*, Mori Memorial Foundation, Tokyo, Japan, October 2008

² *Global Financial Center Index*, City of London Corporation, London, UK, 2007

³ Yosuke Hirayama: *Incomplete Cities: Kobe, New York, Berlin*, Gakugei Shuppansha, Tokyo, Japan, 2003 (Japanese title: *Fukanzen toshi: Kobe, New York Berlin*; the English translation is by Fumihiko Maki)

⁴ Fumihiko Maki: *Nurturing Dreams: Collected Essays on Architecture and the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, USA, 2008, pages 141, 144–145

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