

## RETHINKING PUBLICNESS: MAKING PUBLIC SPACE IN AN «EXCELLENT GLOBAL CITY» AND THE RHETORIC AND REALITY OF PEOPLE-ORIENTEDNESS

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## REPENSAR LO PÚBLICO: LA CREACIÓN DEL ESPACIO PÚBLICO EN UNA «CIUDAD GLOBAL EXCELENTE» Y LA RETÓRICA Y LA REALIDAD DE LA ORIENTACIÓN HACIA LAS PERSONAS

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**ABSTRACT:** Central to the debates on the demise and revival of public space is the concept of publicness, which is often used to untangle the most desirable qualities a public space should embody in a normative and prescriptive manner. This paper argues for the de-normalisation of publicness and approaches publicness as a status of the space being public in a particular way in a given context, rather than an abstract and normative ideal that is universally applicable. To demonstrate the multiple possible layers of publicness, the paper uses the regeneration of Huangpu River waterfront public space in Shanghai as a case study. By examining the transformation of the waterfront in the past two decades and focusing on the recent public space connection project, the paper showcases the different ways the design and development of public space are intertwined with the *people-oriented* ideal, promoted as the key to Shanghai's ambitious vision to become an «excellent global city». Based on the analysis of the rhetoric and reality of the *people-orientedness* of the waterfront public space development in Shanghai, the paper summarises three different layers of publicness, namely localised publicness, procedural publicness, and symbolic publicness, that concern not only the material quality but also the processes of delivering and discursively constructing public space. This discussion of the multiple possible faces of publicness will serve as a starting point to further investigate how to approach publicness beyond the confinement of spatial boundaries as embedded in the broader complex power dynamics of contemporary cities.

**KEYWORDS:** Public space, publicness, Shanghai, waterfront, *people-oriented*.

**RESUMEN:** En el centro de los debates sobre la desaparición y el resurgimiento del espacio público se encuentra el concepto de lo público, que a menudo se utiliza para definir las cualidades más deseables que desde el punto de vista normativo y prescriptivo debe poseer un espacio público. Este artículo, en lugar de proponer un ideal abstracto y normativo universalmente aplicable a lo público, aboga por su desnormalización, abordando este concepto como un estado del espacio que es público de una determinada manera y en un contexto determinado. Para ilustrar las múltiples capas posibles de lo público, el artículo utiliza como estudio de caso la regeneración del espacio público de la ribera del río Huangpu en Shanghai. Examinando la transformación de esta ribera en las dos últimas décadas y centrados en el reciente proyecto de conexión del espacio público, el artículo muestra las diferentes formas en las que el diseño y el desarrollo del espacio público se entrelazan con el ideal de metrópolis *orientada a las personas*, propuesto como la clave de la pretensión ambiciosa de que Shanghai se convierta en una «excellent global city» (ciudad global excelente). A partir del análisis de la retórica y de la realidad del desarrollo del espacio público en la ribera en Shanghai *orientado a las personas*, este artículo muestra tres capas diferentes de lo público: lo público localizado, lo público procedimental y lo público simbólico, que se refieren no solo a la calidad material sino también a los procesos de distribución y construcción discursiva del espacio público. Este debate sobre las múltiples caras posibles de lo público servirá de punto de partida para seguir investigando cómo abordar lo público más allá del confinamiento de los límites espaciales como parte de la amplia y compleja dinámica de poder de las ciudades contemporáneas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Espacio público, lo público, Shanghai, ribera del río Huangpu, metrópolis *orientada a las personas*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It has been widely acknowledged that public space could provide various values and benefits including but not limited to improving people's physical and mental health, reducing crime and the fear of crime, improving mobility, and preserving biodiversity and nature (Woolley *et al.*, 2004; Carmona, De Magalhães, and Hammond, 2008; Shaftoe, 2008). It encourages «awareness of the self and others» (Madanipour, 2016: 52), acts as «a site for power and resistance» (Neal, 2010: 5), and provides «an arena for public life» (Mehta, 2014: 55). In addition, public space also has an instrumental value and plays «a mediating and facilitating role in these economic transformations in the form of attraction and interaction that would stimulate innovation, investment and consumption» (Madanipour, 2019: 41), which makes it an important ingredient in the transformation of post-industrial cities. Although Rianne Van Melik and Philip Lawton (2011) observed that public space is not conventionally a central part of urban regeneration efforts, others note that public space could play a more prominent role in urban transformation and help revive historic city centres by creating a renewed image and attracting global tourists and social elites (Hutchison and Lopes, 2016), as well as shape strategic urban transformation spatially and rhetorically, locally and regionally (Madanipour, Knierbein, and Degros, 2014).

For Shanghai, an untypical post-industrial city that has never really been declining but rather experienced rounds of industrial restructuring and high-velocity development, public space development not only interweaves with globalisation and neoliberalism but is also never absent in this ideologically socialist metropolis' agenda to serve citizens' welfare. This attention to people becomes more pronounced as the city undergoes a paradigm shift from *massive demolition and reconstruction* to a more organic and quality-oriented urban regeneration approach, aspiring to become an «excellent global city»<sup>1</sup>, that is more innovative, humanist and sustainable. In order to «enhance international competitiveness, sustainable development, and urban charm»<sup>2</sup>, Shanghai, in its quest for global excellence, would turn from traditional economic-centred development to people-oriented scientific development, focusing on endogenous growth rather than «expansionary development» (Zhang *et al.*, 2018: 37).

It is in this context of quality and people-oriented urban (re)development that the paper, using the public space development at the Huangpu River waterfront as a case study, examines the role of public space development in the city's aspired transformation into an «excellent global city». Using empirical materials collected for a larger project on public space development in contemporary Shanghai, the specific research question addressed in this paper is: In what way public space development is interwoven with the people-oriented ideal desired by Shanghai's «excellent global city» vision and what are the implications on the publicness of space? The starting point is a de-normalised understanding of publicness, meaning seeing publicness as a status of the space being public in a particular way, with the meaning of public here subject to multiple interpretations. The case study, the Huangpu River waterfront regeneration, has spanned almost two decades. Its recent milestone, the connection of 45 kilometres of public space along both riverbanks, was completed in 2018, and there are now plans to further extend the public space network and upgrade the completed projects. It is, therefore, an appropriate moment to reflect on the entire process of public space development and, more importantly, the different ways it has been intertwined with the people-oriented narrative that, though always accompanying the redevelopment of the waterfront, has gained greater significance as a pillar of the city's «excellent global city» vision.

## 2. DE-NORMALISING PUBLICNESS

As Michael Sorkin decried three decades ago, contemporary cities, obsessed with security and surveillance, are losing «all stable relations to local physical and cultural geography» (Sorkin, 1992: xiii). Since then, literature on contemporary public space has lamented the loss of public space (Sennett, 2002; Kohn, 2004; Akkar, 2005a), condemning problems such as privatisation (Cybriwsky, 1999; Banerjee, 2001), fortification, securitisation and sanitisation (Madanipour, 1999; Turner, 2002; Hunt, 2009; Németh and Hollander, 2010; Mehta 2014), as well as

1 This expression appeared in *Shanghai Shi Chengshi Zongti Guihua (2017-2035) (Baoga) [Shanghai Master Plan 2017-2035 (Report)]*. Shanghai Municipal People's Government, 2018. Available at: <https://ghzyj.sh.gov.cn/ghjh/20200110/0032-811864.html>

2 See *Guanyu Bianzhi Shanghai Xin Yi Lun Chengshi Zongti Guihua de Zhidao Yijian [Guidance on the Preparation of a New Round of Urban Master Plan for Shanghai]*. Shanghai Municipal People's Government, 2014. Available at: <https://www.supdri.com/2035/index.php?c=channel&molds=oper&id=6>

the illusionary image-making and «eventification» (Smith, 2019: 173; also Kern, 2007). These critiques could be further summarised as either under-management or over-management of public space (Carmona, 2010). On the one hand, public space is often neglected by both the public and private sectors as a liability because it does not yield immediate economic or political returns (Madanipour, 2010). On the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, because of its multiple perceived values outlined earlier, public space is often exploited as an asset to boost cities' performances under global neoliberalism, leading to its privatisation, sanitisation, and tight access control.

These critiques highlight a perceived deviation of the reality of contemporary public space from an ideal public space that embodies those desirable qualities such as accessibility, inclusiveness, and freedom of expression. This ideal status for public space is often captured with the concept of publicness, variously defined as a «dynamic balance between public and private activities» (Carr *et al.*, 1992: 23), «the relationships established between property and the people who inhabit, use and create property» (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008: 116), and a state of «“thrown-togetherness” of multiple actors, groups and identities that catalyses «acknowledgement, collaboration, as well as conflicts and dominations» (Qian, 2014: 835). In empirical studies, several models have been proposed to untangle the publicness of space. For example, George Varna and Steve Tiesdell (2010) use ownership, control, civility, physical configuration and animation as five meta dimensions to measure publicness. Similar publicness models also consider uses/users (Németh and Schmidt, 2011), management and inclusiveness (Langstraat and van Melik, 2013; Mehta, 2014), and so on as dimensions of publicness. The different publicness models have been variously applied to evaluate and compare public spaces' *status quo* (Varna and Tiesdell, 2010; Németh and Schmidt, 2011; Langstraat and van Melik, 2013; Mehta, 2014; Ekdi and Çıracı, 2015; Karaçor, 2016; Lopes, Santos Cruz, and Pinho, 2020), measure the change of publicness before and after a given development project (Akkar, 2003, 2005a, 2005b), and evaluate how different stakeholders contribute to the increase or decrease of publicness (Németh and Schmidt, 2011; Ho, Lai, and Wang, 2020).

This is not an exhaustive summary of existing approaches to interpreting publicness, but it shows that most of these models, built on a singular ideal publicness that is «“out-there” and external to people» (Varna and Tiesdell, 2010: 578), are preoccupied with determining «what mix of conditions might lead to a highly public and democratic public space» (Tornaghi, 2015: 25). However, in the increasingly plural and contested urban world, there are more complications in reading public space. First, what public means is contentious in the first place, since, depending on the specific perspective, it could embody different connotations such as an aggregation of real individuals, an aggregation of abstracted, disembodied subjects, or a normative vision without a necessary material or physical form (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008: 122). Relatedly, a singular *perfect public space* against which contemporary spaces are measured has never existed. The «false romanisation of historic public space» (Madanipour, 2010: 7) tends to exaggerate the degree of democracy and participation associated with prototypical public spaces such as the Greek agora or the Roman forum even though oppression and exclusion have always been part of the story (Listerborn, 2005). Second, the existence of multiple publics challenges the taken-for-granted ideals for public space such as accessibility and inclusion. For this reason, what various models present as absolute and measurable dimensions of publicness are not necessarily so but interact with each other in complex ways, challenging the straightforward interpretation of concepts such as control and exclusion (Tyndall, 2010). Third, and more fundamentally, publicness is not an external and unchangeable entity *out there* but a relational quality continuously made and remade, and therefore context-specific and evolving with the changing society.

These complications with public space and publicness necessitate a more nuanced understanding of public space that acknowledges but is not constraint by the normative ideals of public space as unproblematically encouraging civic awareness, expressions and participation and supporting unfettered social engagement (Qian, 2013). To de-normalise publicness, it should not be seen as «an established quality conveniently observable and measurable» (Qian, 2020: 83) nor «a predetermined practice fostered under exclusive preconditions» (Tyndall, 2010: 134), but «rather a (varying and relational) way of being “space”» (Tornaghi, 2015: 25) as the result of *publicising* space to various ends. Considering a supposedly public space is shaped by urban actors with specific ideas of publicness in mind that may very likely contradict other ideas of how space could and should be public, a de-normalised approach to public space that does not predetermine dimensions of publicness could produce more relational and context-specific insights. Putting this de-normalised conceptualisation of publicness in the context of Shanghai pursuing the «excellent global city» vision, it is necessary to discern the many possible layers

of publicness in the supposedly people-oriented public space development that appears to be unproblematic public, and a closer look at the rhetoric and reality of this people-oriented value orientation could reveal more nuanced ways that space is made public.

### 3. MAKING PEOPLE-ORIENTED PUBLIC SPACE: THE CASE OF THE HUANGPU RIVER WATERFRONT, SHANGHAI

#### 3.1. Note on methodology

The paper presents partial findings from a larger PhD research project that discusses the role public space development plays in mediating between Shanghai's visionary development narratives and citizens' everyday use of space in the context of the city's envisaged transformation into an «excellent global city». The regeneration of Huangpu River waterfront public space is used as one of the case studies because it has been one of the city's most important spatial transformation projects in the past two decades, and the recent creation of continuous public space along both riverbanks is perceived as an important step to build a world-class waterfront and contribute to the city's «excellent global city» vision. Therefore, this case is suitable for exploring the interconnectedness of public space development, the publicness of space, and the city's visionary narratives. The project did not follow the conventional paradigms of public space studies that are «either behavioural, describing the numbers and kinds of people who use the space, or architectural, describing the physical characteristics and architectural history of the built environment» (Low, 2000: 38), but instead adopted a process-oriented approach (van Melik and Spierings, 2020) that focuses on the complex rationales, mechanisms and practical processes that shape public spaces.

Empirical fieldwork was conducted between March and September 2019. Qualitative data were produced from the review of official policies, planning documents and media reports that help set the overall urban context for the case study and provide insights into the discourses around the recent waterfront public space development; from semi-structured walk-by observation (Carmona and Sakai, 2014) and mini-tour observation (Spradley, 1980: 79) that reveal the local context, spatial features, and primary user activities of public spaces in questions; and from semi-structured interviews with design and planning practitioners, developers and academics. The data were then coded and analysed with the social production/social construction of space framework (Low, 2000, 2017). The social production of space seeks to untangle how the material settings of public spaces come into being through a series of socio-economic, cultural, and political processes, whereas the social construction of space explores «the transformation of space through language, social interaction, memory, representation, behaviour and use into scenes and actions that convey meaning» (Low, 2017: 7). This paper uses the media discourse on the projects to understand the social construction of the waterfront public spaces, more specifically what issues are problematised and what actions are framed with special meanings in the urban transformation context.

#### 3.2. From comprehensive development to making public space

Merely two decades ago, the Huangpu River waterfront was almost completely inaccessible to the general public. Historically, the river, hailed as Shanghai's mother river, not only gave the city easy access to the vast hinterland region but also became «the "gateway" to Shanghai, through which the world began to know Shanghai and Shanghai began to head to the world» (Chen and Zhao, 2003). Despite the river's central location in Shanghai and its prominence as the city's economic lifeline, the riverfront, occupied by factories and warehouses and thus heavily polluted and segregated from the rest of the city, had never been public or attractive. By the end of the 20th century, the waterfront was still almost completely industrial (Figure 1), with a few exceptional public spaces such as the historic Bund and the Lujiazui Riverside Avenue built across the river to commemorate the Pudong Development.

The late 1990s saw significant changes in the global economic structure and Shanghai's development aspirations. Against the global backdrop of de-industrialisation and rise of the modern service sector, Shanghai started to relocate textile, manufacturing and shipping industries out of the central city so that these traditional industries could have ample space to upgrade, thus enabling Shanghai to «go beyond itself and keep up with the world» (Shanghai Municipal Leading Group for Huangpu River Development, 2007: 10). Following the gradual industrial relocation, the land could then be released for higher-value uses, making the waterfront one of the last prime

locations which, through good renewal efforts, could turn into «one of the biggest highlights of Shanghai's central city construction and the finishing touch in the transformation of the old city» (Shanghai Municipal Leading Group for Huangpu River Development, 2010: 24).



**Figure 1.** Factories and wharves at the waterfront. Source: Jakob Montrasio (2007). Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/yakobusan/2122601416>

In January 2002, to give the river back to people, the Shanghai municipality announced the commencement of the Huangpu River Comprehensive Development and subsequently published the *2002 Optimisation Plan for Both Banks of the Huangpu River*. The objective was to change the land uses of the waterfront from primarily industrial to a mix of residential, commercial, cultural, and recreational uses. The 2002 Optimisation Plan also designated several core areas to be developed as the immediate focus of the comprehensive development and envisioned a series of improvements regarding open space, flood protection, historic preservation and transport system reorganisation (Yu, 2002a, 2002b).

The comprehensive development did not progress smoothly in the initial years. As the 2002 Optimisation Plan was a citywide strategic land use plan devised at the municipal level, the actual (re)development of each waterfront land parcel, especially regarding its functions and design details, was conducted at the local level. Each local district would make its own detailed plans for the waterfront that solidified its agreements with the private developers but didn't always safeguard the public interest (Xiong, 2005). Many new developments did contribute pieces of public space, but collectively they were disconnected, inaccessible, and poorly managed to different extents. In addition, land transfer from existing landowners and users to the local governments was



an onerous task and progressed variously in different local districts. In this regard, the preparation for the 2010 Shanghai World Expo played an important role in smoothing administrative procedures, striking compensation deals, and thus accelerating the land reclamation process. However, it only put off problems to a later day rather than effectively solving them (Chen, Tu, and Su, 2014), and the de-industrialisation of the waterfront would take a few more years to complete.

By late 2014 and early 2015, the reclamation of waterfront land parcels was considered basically completed. At that time, there was a growing recognition of the need to improve the quality (rather than the quantity or velocity) of urban regeneration against the national call to «build harmonious, liveable, energetic and diverse modern cities» (Huang, 2016). Locally, the Shanghai 2035 Masterplan that was to provide the guiding principles for the city's development in the next two decades was being drafted. Although the master plan was not officially published until 2018, its «excellent global city» vision had already been widely circulated in the years leading up to its publication and guided relevant urban regeneration projects at that time. Following this vision, the municipal *Three-Year Action Plan for the Construction of Public Space Along Both Banks of the Huangpu River (2015-2017)*<sup>3</sup> published in 2014 considered making high-quality waterfront public spaces a prerequisite for making a world-class waterfront, which would, in turn, contribute to Shanghai's «excellent global city» vision. Hence the cited Plan specified that, by the end of 2017, all the public spaces along both riverbanks, altogether 45 kilometres in length, should be basically completed and, more importantly, connected in order to «build a relatively complete waterfront public system and create high-quality spaces that are pleasant, full of culture and ecologically sensitive»<sup>4</sup>. To meet the project deadline, public space construction would precede other profit-oriented property developments as the basis for the future regeneration of the wider waterfront area.

### 3.3. Connecting the waterfront with three paths

The connection of public spaces along the east and the west banks of the river underwent slightly different processes, one of the major reasons being the different administrative settings. The east side of the river, often called the East Bund in the connection project, was under the jurisdiction of a single Pudong New Area District, so the development of waterfront public space was achieved in a relatively holistic way with a single planning blueprint. In contrast, four district governments were responsible for improving the public spaces on the west bank of the river (the Puxi waterfront), and there was limited coordination between districts and no comprehensive plan comparable to that made for the East Bund (Figure 2).

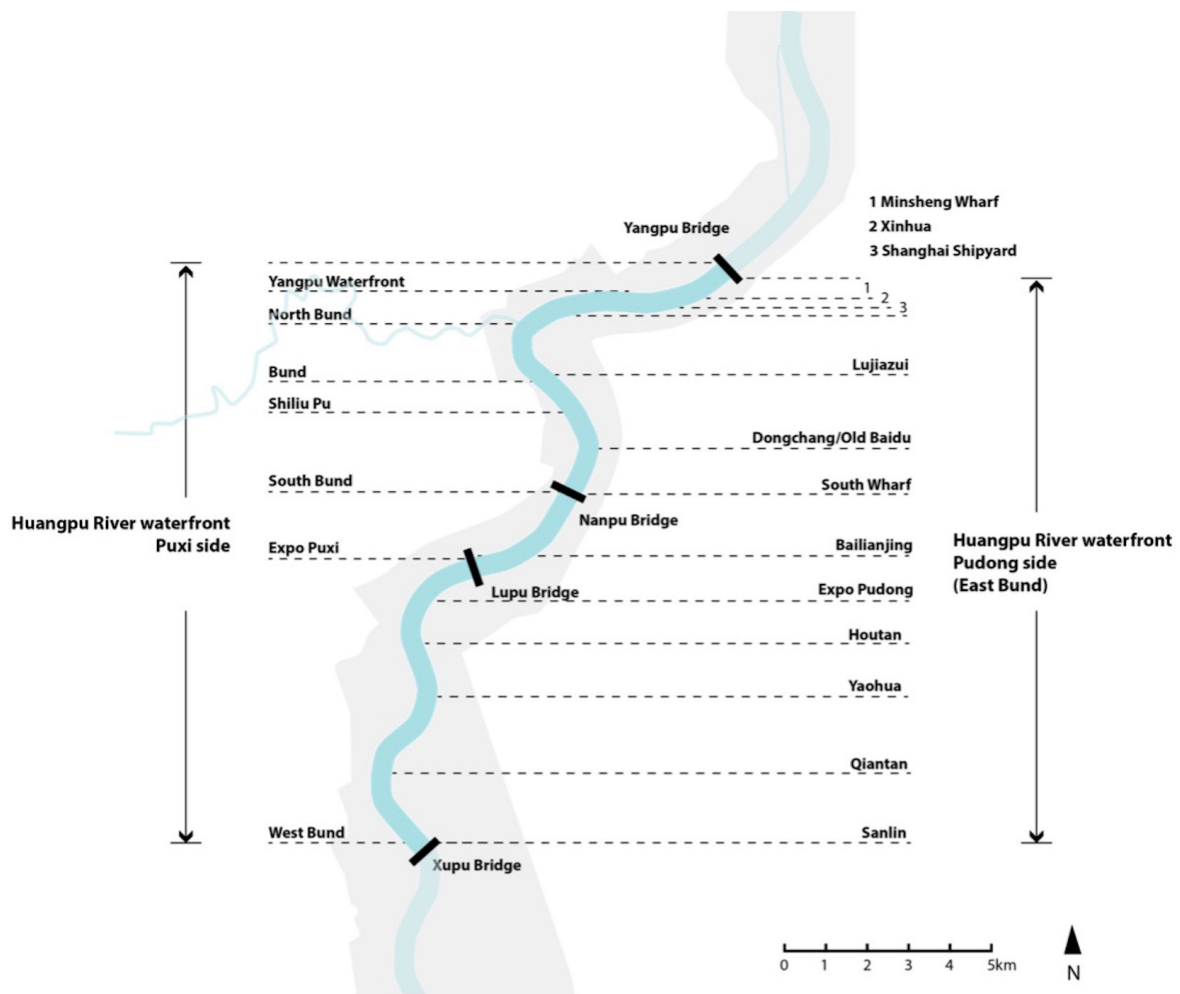
The East Bund connection started in early 2016 with a so-called three-in-one participatory call for design proposals (Shanghai Municipal Leading Group for Huangpu River Development, Shanghai Urban Planning and Design Research Institute, and Shanghai East Bund Investment Group, 2017). First, an international conceptual design competition was open to design teams around the world to «seek experiences and guidance from prior works of other countries on standards, principles and concepts»<sup>5</sup>. Second, a young designer competition combined with public consultation, primarily in the form of questionnaire interview, was open to students and young professionals around the world and Shanghai residents to showcase the wide scope of the participation, to publicise the event, and to «strike a chord with everyone» and «demonstrate collective wisdom»<sup>6</sup>. Finally, drawing on inspirations from the aforementioned design competitions and public events, the *Shanghai Urban Planning and Design Research Institute* made the so-called «parallel design» as the final conceptual blueprint of the connection project, which was then made into the *East Bund Open Space Plan*, essentially a land use adjustment plan that amended the land use along the river to ensure the continuity of public space.

3 *Huangpu Jiang Liang'an Diqu Gonggong Kongjian Jianshe Sannian Jihua (2015-2017) [Three-Year Action Plan for the Construction of Public Space on Both Banks of the Huangpu River (2015-2017)]*. Shanghai Municipal Leading Group for Huangpu River Development, 2014. Available at: [zjw.sh.gov.cn/zjw/xwfb/20180911/17519.html](http://zjw.sh.gov.cn/zjw/xwfb/20180911/17519.html)

4 Ibidem.

5 *International Design Competition for Open Space Leading down the East Bund of the Huangpu River 2016*. Shanghai Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau, and People's Government of Pudong New Area District of Shanghai. Available at: <https://www.supdri.com/2035/index.php?c=article&id=244>

6 Ibidem



**Figure 2.** Different sections of the Huangpu River waterfront. Author's own elaboration based on data from Shanghai Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau (2020)

The most representative image of the East Bund public space connection is the so-called *three-paths system* which includes a strolling path, a jogging path and a cycling path that are standardised and supposedly run uninterrupted for the entire 21-kilometre waterfront (Figure 3). The *three-paths system* strategy was employed to bridge the many so-called bottlenecks along the waterfront, i.e., those areas that, for various reasons, existing public spaces were not connected or new public spaces were needed to open up the waterfront. The design idea originated from the international conceptual design competition for the East Bund. In the competition brief, the focus of the project was generally and vaguely outlined, among other things, as «opening segmented space» and «linking up bottlenecks with surrounding area»<sup>7</sup>. The winning team of the international competition who came up with the concepts of three paths drew inspiration from the early public consultation and designed the paths as a carrier of new functions and activities to connect the waterfront public spaces.

<sup>7</sup> *International Design Competition for Open Space Leading down the East Bund of the Huangpu River 2016*. Shanghai Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau, and People's Government of Pudong New Area District of Shanghai. Available at: <https://www.supdri.com/2035/index.php?c=article&id=244>



**Figure 3.** Three paths at the East Bund (Pudong). Photographs taken by the author between March and August 2019

At the Puxi waterfront, a similar system was implemented on top of the renovation of the existing public spaces, but the uninterruptedness of the three paths was difficult to achieve here given the lack of an overall plan or compulsory guidelines to coordinate design details such as the paths' location, width, and material (Figure 4). Another difficulty lies in the complexity of stakeholders and unresolved land issues. The Puxi waterfront was historically more developed than the Pudong side with more complex existing stakeholders and project conditions. After the 2010 World Expo, some land transfer issues were only partially resolved, and by the time of the public space connection project, these problems resurfaced to hinder the connection progress and contributed to a different picture of waterfront public space.



**Figure 4.** Three paths at Puxi. Photographs taken by the author between March and August 2019



The transformation of the waterfront does not stop at the completion of the continuous paths. First, similar connection strategies are being applied to the banks of Suzhou Creek, another important river in the city, to revitalise the riverfront, and work is underway to further open up and connect the public spaces beyond the original 45-kilometre scope. Second, a new Three-Year Action Plan (2018-2020) highlights the need to not only connect but to enrich the waterfront by turning the paths into places and creating a public space network that stretches from the waterfront to the urban hinterland<sup>8</sup>. Finally, the waterfront public space transformation has been established as a model to promote the *people's city* ideal. In early November 2019, during his inspection of the Yangpu waterfront, a section of the Puxi waterfront, President Xi emphasised that the people should be placed in the centre of urban development and that public space should be expanded to serve the people's needs for relaxation, exercise and recreation. Since then, the motto «a people's city is built by the people; a people's city for the people» began to widely circulate and subsequently becomes the ideological guiding principle for all kinds of ongoing urban transformation projects to demonstrate their *people-orientedness* (XinhuaNet, 2019).

#### 4. DISCUSSION: THE MULTIPLE FACES OF PUBLICNESS VS. RHETORIC AND REALITY OF PEOPLE-ORIENTEDNESS

Ever since the commencement of the 2002 comprehensive development, the discourse of making a people's river has accompanied the waterfront transformation, and as the city seeks to become an «excellent global city», the people-oriented nature of the waterfront public space is all the more highlighted. Examined closely, the connotations of making a people-oriented waterfront have taken some subtle turns, which manifests different yet interrelated layers of publicness or rather, different ways of publicising space. In the context of this research, I term these layers localised publicness, procedural publicness, and symbolic publicness, and I will further explain their meanings in the following sections while summarising the different ways the waterfront public space development manifests the people-oriented ideal.

##### 4.1. Localised publicness

Ideally, public spaces, as places where people's daily life unfold, should embody qualities such as being physically open and accessible, and inclusive for different social groups. These qualities are captured with various publicness models discussed earlier, and I term the aggregate of these features localised publicness because it is often used for describing to what extent a geographically defined site is public or not. But localised publicness is not necessarily site-specific and could be used to more broadly denote the processes through which space becomes available for a variety of sometimes conflictual uses by heterogeneous groups of users. Seen in this way, localised publicness does not automatically lead to unhindered accessibility or universal inclusiveness desired by advocates for public space. Indeed, as have been elaborated by many previous studies, physically open and publicly accessible places are not necessarily public, and it is necessary to investigate what is underpinning a specific notion of public.

Here in the case study, localised publicness could not be achieved at the Huangpu River waterfront without first opening up industrial lands that have been previously inaccessible or unattractive for public use. As discussed earlier, the necessary first step of the waterfront transformation was to transfer the land use rights of the industrial lands to the government. The purpose was to better utilise the land resources and ensure subsequent developments suit the visions of the local governments and the municipal government. For the general public, this meant more physically and functionally open space. In the recent waterfront public space connection, not only were new public spaces created with the implementation of the three paths, but existing open spaces were also renovated to satisfy citizens' needs for high-quality landscape and service facilities. In this sense, the waterfront public space transformation in the past two decades has indeed increased the localised publicness and showcased the people-oriented quality.

8 See *Huangpu Jiang Liang'an Diqu Gonggong Kongjian Jianshe Sannian Jihua [Three-Year Action Plan for the Construction of Public Space on Both Banks of the Huangpu River (2018-2020)]*. Shanghai Municipal Leading Group for Huangpu River Development, 2018. Available at: <http://jsjtw.sh.gov.cn/zjw/xwfb/20181121/38865.html>

Despite these achievements, it should be noted that what public means here is always ambiguous. In the initial stage of the comprehensive development, the 'public' uses envisaged for the waterfront were not limited to public space but broadly included a variety of non-industrial uses such as residential, commercial, and cultural developments. There was no explicit emphasis on the quality or connectivity of waterfront public space, and the potential spatial consequences of the new developments were not addressed. Consequently, many new residential and commercial properties developed at that time privatised the waterfront to different extents. The subsequent explicit emphasis on public space further opens up the closed space and enables more citizens to access the waterfront. However, empirical evidence from fieldwork has shown that not only have the design elements of these spaces define certain desirable use patterns and suppress other more spontaneous uses, but the management practices, at the moment still evolving and ambiguous, also limit the potential changes and disruptions to maintain the intended order and image of the spaces (Figure 5). It is therefore debatable whether the public uses really made the waterfront more public or simply replaced the closed waterfront with alternative forms of closure, and whether the localised publicness analysed here has, to some extent, transformed the previously closed space into a closed space that is more ordered, regulated and tuned to specific visions for use and image-making.



**Figure 5.** A red song choir performance, joined by hundreds of spectators at the waterfront, right next to a warning sign which reads *Loud noises disturbing the public is prohibited*. Photographs taken by the author in August 2019

## 4.2. Procedural publicness

Here, procedural publicness simply means opening up the decision-making process of making public spaces so that deciding the physical forms and meanings of the space becomes possible for more stakeholders especially those who are traditionally excluded from such processes. The value and importance of public participation have been widely discussed since decades ago, and recent studies are increasingly questioning whether the ideal of participation should be unproblematically accepted. Even so, the idea that space could be made public with public participation, or in other words given procedural publicness, is still worth discussing especially in the non-western contexts where civic participation cannot be taken for granted. While it is not the aim of this paper to discuss participatory practices in making public space in depth, it is also worth reflecting on whether the participation ideal primarily coming from the west could and indeed should be uncritically transferred to a different context.

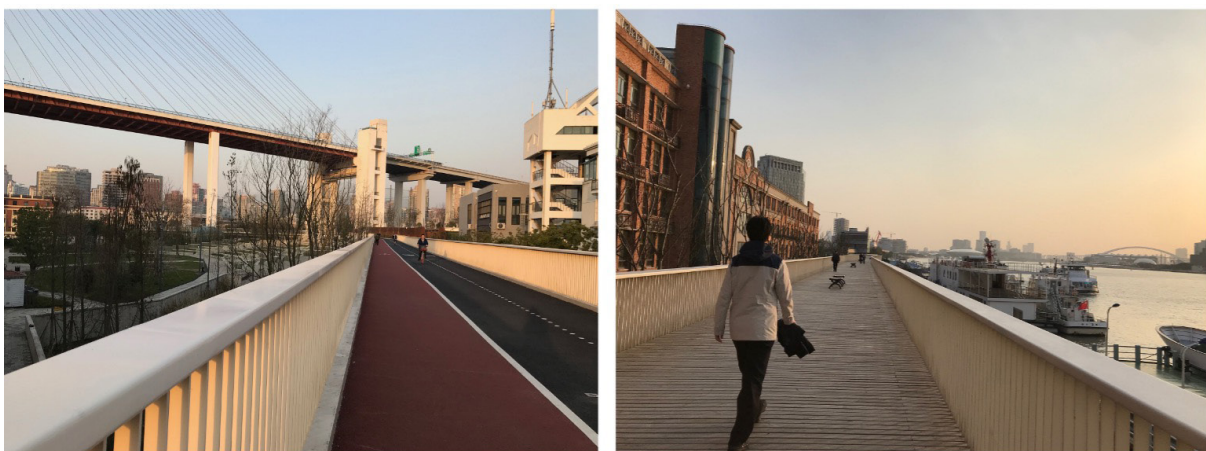
In the case study, the primary methods for engaging the public include design competitions that arguably have greater relevance and appeal to professionals than the general public and questionnaire survey that is limited to particular projects, and could only reach a small sample. These events exemplify the people-oriented nature of the new public space connection project by partially publicising the previously closed planning process and highlighting the public procedure of creating public space, engaging the general public, and demonstrating citizens' contribution to the design of the waterfront public spaces. Even so, it is debatable whether the potential of this procedural publicness is fully realised since, at the moment, the process is hardly participatory enough

and the participation and inclusion in this case, as in similar development processes in the Chinese context, «refer to consultation rather than any real decision-making» (Samara, 2015: 2914) and «the actual rights and responsibilities among major stakeholders remain unchanged» (Xu and Lin, 2018: 1). On the one hand, in the particular case of the East Bund connection, while the international conceptual design competition to some extent informed the forthcoming statutory planning blueprint, the young designer competition was more a publicity event to showcase the public's symbolic involvement in the project than a real case of participatory planning and design. On the other hand, despite participatory events such as the questionnaire survey, the overall planning concept for the waterfront has been largely pre-defined first by design briefs and then by professional expertise, and public inputs justified and partly influenced the design choices rather than determined the direction of action. In the subsequent detailed design phase for individual spaces, there was hardly any public participation or consultation. As a result, participation of such nature has simply been a case of consultation and placation where «citizens are enabled to partially re-arrange the deckchairs on a ship's deck, but not to determine how the ship is run or its general course» (Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019: 8).

### 4.3. Symbolic publicness

A particular layer of publicness to be highlighted in this paper is what I term symbolic publicness. Public space is, in addition to its desired spatial qualities, often seen as the embodiment of social values such as equality, welfare, civic responsibility, and so on. Consequently, and especially pertinent to the case study presented here, publicness goes beyond the localised spatial openness and procedures of participation. A more symbolic connotation which, on the one hand, highlights key decision makers' commitment to safeguard these qualities of public space and serve the public and, on the other hand, promotes social values needed to steer the narratives on urban development and urban governance towards a specific direction, is assumed. This publicness is described as symbolic because the emphasis is put on the role of public space, with its materiality and associated discourses, in acting as the symbol of and communicating certain social values. The danger of this type of publicness is the seemingly unproblematic public value orientation, and it is necessary to discern who is promoting what social values to whom.

In the present case, the materiality of waterfront public space is given symbolic publicness, on top of localised and procedural publicness, when different aspects of this material transformation, irrespective of their actual impacts on people's use of space, are framed with the people-oriented rhetoric beyond the utilitarian value of space. The overall transformation of the waterfront from industrial to public uses, despite the resultant problematic realities described earlier, has always been employed symbolically to demonstrate the people-oriented nature of this process. More recently, in connecting the waterfront public spaces, the uninterruptedness of the three paths and the visibility of the river from the paths were particularly emphasised by the decision-makers in the planning and construction processes because they considered that the uninterruptedness itself symbolised and materialised a commitment to the *people-orientedness*



**Figure 6.** The elevated paths. Photographs taken by the author in March 2019

ideal. This insistence sometimes meant some extreme design measures. For example, at particular sections of the East Bund, the paths needed to be elevated and curved to bypass the unmovable existing buildings and to guarantee the visibility of the river (Figure 6). Even though in the end, there are still areas at the East Bund where the view of the river is blocked, and at the Puxi side, the implementation of the three paths varied significantly at different locations, the three paths effectively act as the embodiment of the public and open quality of the new public spaces and symbolise the people-oriented quality of the recent progress of the waterfront development under the «excellent global city» vision.

Another way to give space symbolic publicness is storytelling, with narratives that turn material space into social realities for public discussion, highlight the *zeitgeist*, and promote desirable civic values and qualities. More specifically, two distinct stories —the story of from quantity to quality and the story of consensus— highlight how the recent public space connection along both riverbanks has been people-oriented and how stakeholders should play a part in public space projects and ongoing urban transformation as a whole. The story from quantity to quality establishes that the creation of public space is an advancement from the functional transformation in the past decades to a higher level comprehensive improvement that gives citizens more satisfaction and enjoyment. In other words, this story frames the de-industrialisation of the waterfront and the creation of public space as prioritising citizens' everyday enjoyment over material development, thus accentuating the people-oriented nature of the waterfront development. At the same time, the story of consensus focuses on how different stakeholders have overcome various difficulties and contributed to greater public benefits during the waterfront public space connection. Around the time of the public space connection project, media reports were replete with stories of hard work and sacrifice of relocated enterprises, engineers and construction workers, and development companies and designers. On the surface, these are stories of difficulties and struggles, but ultimately, they convey the message of consensus and emphasise the public value of the transformation projects. In other words, the story of consensus demonstrates a collective recognition of the value of the public space transformations and emphasises the waterfront transformation as a true public effort accomplished by the people and for the people of the city, thus once again accentuating its people-oriented nature.

## 5. CONCLUSION

By adopting a de-normalised view of public space as the point of departure, the paper describes, with a case study of the Huangpu River public space development, how public space and its development processes could simultaneously present localised space for citizens' daily use, emerging albeit limited procedural space for collective decision-making, and symbolic space where desirable social ideals are promoted. The three layers of publicness discussed here —namely localised publicness, procedural publicness, and symbolic publicness— illustrate the different ways that space exists as public in the context of Shanghai's striving to become an «excellent global city» and that the *people-orientedness* ideal is materially and discursively manifested with specific design strategies, participatory processes, and media stories. To conclude the paper, two further points could be discussed regarding the multifaceted nature and the production of publicness.

In its everyday usage, the Huangpu River waterfront in Shanghai is not restricted to the band of public spaces along the river (which is the focus of the paper) but also denotes the entire waterfront hinterland with emerging new industries and services, property developments, and open space network. This ambiguity in defining the waterfront is where lies the tension between the urban visions, essentially rooted in a global neoliberal context of urban competitiveness, and the everyday dimension of public space uses, or in other words, the tension between different layers of publicness. In August 2016, during his inspection of the work progress, the then-mayor of Shanghai stated, «The development of both banks of the Huangpu River is not massive real estate development but is massive open-up of the space. It is going to open up public spaces where people can exercise, relax, go sightseeing and enjoy the view, creating a living shoreline for citizens» (Pengpai News, 2016). This statement, subsequently adopted as a doctrine for the waterfront development at that time, blurs the meaning of the waterfront and frames the entire waterfront area as public spaces for citizens' everyday enjoyment, whereas ongoing developments show alternative pictures of the waterfront as a whole, pictures in which several new financial hubs filled with luxury houses, office blocks and cultural venues are being built (Figure 7). In the shadow



of mushrooming towers, relatively impoverished neighbourhoods are reclaimed and demolished to make way for new developments, the local residents are relocated and replaced by new home-buyers and white-collar workers that work in the art and culture, finance and R&D sectors that different districts, «vying to become the new face of Shanghai» (Jacobson, 2014), are keen to attract. These dynamics reveal the fundamental tension between the waterfront as a lived space for people's daily use, a resource for development with particular requirements regarding image-making and maintenance, and an abstract ideal of openness and *people-orientedness*. This also further illustrates the multifaceted nature of publicness, in that the spatial design strategies and development processes that supposedly make the waterfront more open and attractive don't necessarily lead to the kind of publicness people could enjoy in everyday scenarios, which further confirms the importance of looking beyond publicness as the aggregate of various, often site-specific, normative qualities and seeing it in a more process-oriented and relational way.



**Figure 7.** The rendering pictures of the future of the waterfront, shown on billboards outside the project construction site. Photographs taken by the author between March and August 2019

This then leads to another important point of who are producing these different layers of publicness. Space production in general and public space development in particular, in Shanghai as elsewhere, are embedded in existing power relations and the publicness of space, especially the symbolic publicness that is dependent on the power to produce and circulate narratives, is deliberately constructed and dominated by the needs, ambitions, and associated narratives of the existing powerful urban actors. This reality renders the people-oriented ideal ambivalent and subject to multiple, sometimes contradictory, interpretations. In the current context, because of the multiple practices promoted as people-oriented, the meaning of this ideal frequently alternates between an emphasis on the diverse needs of individuals, the collective consensus of an abstract public, or what has been determined behind closed doors that the dominant urban actors think serves people's interests the best. In other words, even if guided by the people-oriented principles, the specific ways in which spaces are delivered and managed are inherently consistent with the dominant urban actors' visions, and those more spontaneous and unruly actions that don't conform to these visions are frequently suppressed. Existing and developing participatory practices are admittedly inviting more voices that were conventionally unheard, but they do not fundamentally change the existing power dynamics essentially led or *guided* by the public authority and the associated professionals. In this regard, in addition to discussing the technicalities of producing public space wider civic engagement, a fundamental issue is to further interrogate the different faces of publicness in relation to their context and associated processes to understand 'how they were created, and with whose interests and what terms of engagement (Gaventa, 2006: 26).

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