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CITYSPACE by Christopher Choa

# in the mood for lilongs

the intimacy of lane life

“Li” means neighborhoods, “Long” means lanes. And together they spell “infatuation.” We can imagine ourselves living in these tree-shaded lanes in a fine brick home with a private garden, so we’re attracted to Lilongs in spite of the grime, neglect, and misconceived alterations. The image appeals to our need for order and security, for life lived on a human scale. We long for a neighborhood, one far removed from mass housing and the randomness of towers.

And why shouldn’t we? The Lilong is an attractive alternative to high-rise living. Surprisingly, an average-sized Lilong can support 15,000 sqm of housing per hectare, close to the density of many modern

housing developments but without the overwhelming scale of the towers or the arbitrary leftover spaces on the ground.

In contrast, the Lilong is encircled by small shops, which fortify the neighborhood’s perimeter; general access is limited to a few supervised gates. Shanghai’s Lilong are the conceptual offspring of imperial cities, the ultimate defensible spaces, with public lanes that feel almost like extensions of private areas. As such, they are easy to love.

But like many love affairs, much remains hidden. For starters, many of these traditional old lane neighborhoods were never intended to last. Stylistically, most of the lane structures still standing in

Shanghai may have been inspired by monumental European townhouses, but they were built quickly and cheaply, as speculative tenement structures put up by rapacious developers.

Their foundations, walls and beams were lightly built, and were usually only designed to last for around 50 years. Most have slipped passed their prime. Incrementally, especially since 1949, families have doubled up in these Lilong buildings, and then doubled again and again; today, many house six to eight times the number of occupants originally intended. Extra floors and half-levels are shoehorned into already tight spaces. Bricks are crumbling, and mortar is literally turning to sand.

Most Lilongs have little or no service infrastructure; power, plumbing, and sewage facilities are absent or inadequate. Complicating the matter, over the years the streets surrounding the Lilong blocks have been repeatedly resurfaced. As a result, many Lilongs are lower than the sidewalks and streets that were originally designed to handle the neighborhood’s stormwater runoff – when it pours, water has a tough time getting out of the way. Fixing all of this retroactively, and on a large scale, is extraordinarily invasive and expensive.

Paradoxically, saving a Lilong might mean tearing it down. Occasionally, when a Lilong district is successfully adapted (note: for planners and developers “Xintiandi” has become a verb), the value of the surrounding land and corresponding relocation costs increase to a level where renovation becomes too expensive and demolition ensues.

Even if renovation is pursued, then there’s the problem of new residential zoning and building codes. Many Lilongs can no longer be legally classified as residential homes, rather they must be categorized as commercial units, with a shorter lease period and more restrictive property transfer conditions, which further dampens incentives for architectural romance.

One solution is for district officials to release land in smaller increments instead of all at once, which would allow for reduced development risk and more organic growth. True, this would slow the pace - development might take a decade instead of 24 months - but time lost would be offset by humanistic gain. Districts could also reduce financial barriers (and further their own objectives) by introducing tax incentives for individuals or small developers willing to take on the risk of renovation projects. It’s a little like a matchmaker encouraging promising couples to meet – sounds less romantic, but there’s less chance of heartbreak. ■