

## CitySpace



Though some would argue that Shanghai's architectural environment is hopelessly contaminated by Western influences, the quintessential Chinese combination of wall and the gate is still in evidence. While many of the best and most historic examples have disappeared, there are still abundant manifestations – plenty enough for a treasure hunt.

### The Middle Gate

Consider for a moment the Chinese word for China, *Zhongguo*, the “Middle Kingdom”. The character for “middle” (中) is the essence of Chinese urbanism – a walled enclosure, pierced by gates along a central axis. Nothing could be simpler or more essential. In addition, the words “city”, “city wall”, and even “Great Wall” all share the same ideographic character, *cheng* (城). So every time you practice your *guoyu*, you can imagine the plan of the grandest imperial palace – an entire Forbidden City in miniature on a language flashcard.

### The City Gate

Though not as magnificent as the Tang Dynasty's Chang'an (the site of contemporary Xian), Shanghai had its own walled city long before Westerners appeared. Built in 1554 by the local magistrate

after his constituents petitioned him to do something about the river-borne marauders, in modern times the old city wall was torn down to make way for bus lanes. However you can plainly see the outline of the old city wall on any Shanghai map (look for Renmin Lu and Zhonghua Lu). You can visit the ghosts of the 11 original gates by tracing the paths of the Old City's outer streets. And then there is a bit of the real thing, a physical remnant of the original wall and gate at Dajing Lu.

### The Memorial Gate

In the old days, memorial gates, known as *pailou*, commemorated important people and places. Only a few still remain (the one at the intersection of Lishui Lu and Renmin Lu, for example, commemorates the time I ate three huge bowls of Old City soup dumplings after lining up for hours this past winter). Nowadays, most *pailou* memorial gates have transfigured into architectural motifs. Look at the Huangpu District Government headquarters (hard to miss even when traveling at 100 kph on the elevated highway.) Or the City Treasury Bureau Headquarters near Xujiahui. Or for that matter, just about any super-sized residential development around town. Think of them as memorials of the memorials.

## The Neighborhood Gate

Shanghai's traditional neighborhoods are quintessential urban forms. With their rigorously ordered buildings and quiet lanes, the typical *long tang* provide serene respites from the honking and agitation that surround them. Entire lane neighborhoods are hidden from view, buried within the cores of Shanghai's typically large blocks. That serenity is best appreciated when entering the *long tang* gates from the retail shops that form the neighborhoods' fortified exterior walls. As you cross the threshold, you plunge from public chaos into a scrutinized, private world; it is a magical feeling. And you can always buy some fruit or a drink while in transit.

## The Street Gate

On a hot summer's day every bit of shade is welcome and Shanghai's leafy green arches offer protection for the length of an entire street. A legacy of the French, who planted them throughout their original extra-territorial concession, the plane trees are pruned to allow buses and high-tension wires to pass below. Over time, these trees have grown into an exquisite series of natural gates. Ruijin Er Lu is one of the best natural examples, while the repeating lightweight metal versions that span nearby Huaihai Lu aren't quite the same. Nor are the gigantic trestles underneath the *Gaojia* elevated highways (as much as we want to like them).

## The Corporate Gate

Following the U.S. stock-market crash of 1929, remedial regulations required a zone of non-contact between distinct sections of a business in order to prevent possible conflicts of interest. These regulations became known as 'Chinese Walls' because they were meant to create barriers as effective as the Great Wall of China. Investment and

brokerage firms, for example, were to be separated by distinct partitions, or even relocated to different floors.

In Shanghai, there often exist unholy alliances within businesses and between partners. Take a look at any lobby directory, where the various offspring of company families are ranked distinctly. When you get to the related floors, however, the walls between the supposedly independent entities are often notional at best.

Still, you can imagine those robust walls and impenetrable gates put up to prevent grievous derelictions of fiduciary duties. That is until you walk straight from your buddy in the consultant department to your next appointment in the investment section.

## The Maglev Gate

Poor Maglev. Although at 430 km per hour it's the fastest commercial train on the planet and a technologic tour-de-force, it pretty much offers a single-seat ride to nowhere. Sadly, the USD 1.2 billion dollar investment gets you from an isolated terminus on Longyang Lu to a long walk past the Pudong airport parking lot.

But the journey is far from over. There's a super ambitious Maglev link planned between Beijing and Shanghai, which is estimated to cost around USD 30 billion, or almost as much as China intends to invest in all rail infrastructure nationwide in its current five-year plan.

On the other hand, wouldn't it be nice if the existing airport line could extend just a little further to Puxi? Well, actually, there are plans to connect to the Shanghai Expo site ("by 2010") and then on to Hongqiao Airport. In the meantime, we can admire the ultra sleek, tubular form of the Pudong Maglev station for what it is, a futuristic memorial to the traditional *pailou* gate. Its gaping open end, with its cantilevered magnetic track ending, seems both irrationally optimistic and pragmatically cautious. While just opposite, a new, massive residential development blocks its way, staring back impassively.