

CitySpace



The Next Big Thing

By Christopher Choa

One infallible measure of a great city is that dinner conversation revolves around “real estate”. In Shanghai, of course, this topic comes second after “food”, but even at number

two our place is secure in the pantheon of super-hyped, lifestyle-obsessed societies.

Shanghai’s developer tribes, zoomy entrepreneurs, and just plain old city lovers are continually discussing the latest, most promising locations, property trends and sensibilities. Any one of these topics can (and will) be the subject of my in-depth analysis in future columns. But for my introductory offering, I’d like to share a summary of the top five favorite topics at my own dinner table.

Adaptive Reuse

Traditional environments will become the most valuable, sought after (and high priced) locations, if they aren’t knocked down first.

As the city continues to grow, developers, officials, residents, and visitors alike will seek out projects where older structures and entire neighborhoods have been adapted to new uses. The Waitan Yuan area around the former British Consulate at the northern tip of the Bund is one of the next frontiers; look out for a more organic version of Xiantiandi. Much of Hongkou will be ploughed under, alas, but Tilanqiao will develop into a fascinating area, anchored by the history of the former Jewish Settlement and the old prison. In the meantime, go visit some delicious old buildings.

Waterfront

Many great cities are fortunate enough to have one riverside environment. Shanghai has three in its inner core. The width of the Huangpu River and its obstacle-strewn shores cleaves the city in two, creating binary urban civilizations that seem culturally alien to each other. But there are plans to extend and improve the waterfront promenades way beyond the current Bund

embankments. Lujiazui in Pudong is developing some pretty nice waterfront parks that most people don’t know about. Suzhou and Hongkou Creeks are noteworthy. Until recently, they have served principally as marine corridors for garbage barges, but in the next few years these creeks will be cleaned up and improved with landscaped waterside walkways. Unlike the vast Huangpu expanse, the creeks’ more intimate character will help define and unite the communities on either side of their banks.

Transportation

All world-class cities have world-class mass-transit systems. Shanghai, doesn’t really – yet (compare Shanghai’s four 4 metro lines to London’s 12, Tokyo’s 13, or New York’s 25 lines). By 2010, the local government promises eight more lines; watch what happens when the metro network expands; desirable areas will spring up along the new and extended lines, with the most valuable areas located within an eight-minute walk of a transit stop. Get out your maps and measuring tapes.

Expo

The 2010 Expo will be Shanghai’s response to the 2008 Olympics. However fabulous (or not) the expo itself may turn out to be, the lasting legacy for Shanghai will be the area around the expo site. Like the Olympics, the Shanghai expo is the incentive to clean house. Turn your gaze to just off-center and look for adjacent development of roads, mass-transit, greenspace, and mixed-use neighborhoods.

One City, Seven Towns

An ambitious effort to develop satellite new towns around Shanghai is already underway, some designed to accommodate up to 100,000 people – a scale rarely seen elsewhere. Each of these towns follows an international theme, and in many cases (well, ok, one, the “Italian Town”) there are serious efforts towards green-field urban development. A little strange to be creating foreign towns in China, you may say, but the best of these huge developments will be focused on creating sustainable, mixed-use environments, unlike most previous suburban residential ghettos. Best seen by helicopter, for now.

