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Investigation into Shanghai Spatial Publicness
An Alternative Discourse on Public Space and Its Urbanistic Manifestation
For Vera and Tintin
Acknowledgments

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Preface

The discourse on the urban publicness and public space might wane, were it not always possible to update it under new conditions. The rapidly transforming cities of China offer this discourse a contemporary field of empirical research and intellectual challenge. In this case, the discourse focuses on Shanghai, the hometown of the author. On the one hand, Chinese cities are integrated into a global network of city production and interpretation, while on the other, the specific conditions of China's urban society lead to the specific nature of urban spaces. Investigation – reconnaissance, research, exploration – describes the intellectual path of this book, an intellectual journey, in the course of which a theory of the character of public spaces in Shanghai develops. Various sociological theories are brought into play, and orientation is found in the company of – to name only the most important – Hannah Arendt, Rosalin Deutsche, and Jaques Rancière.

The author's intellectual background is that of an architect who is in ongoing struggle over what position architecture can assume in this field of discourse, dominated as it is by the social sciences, in order to be able to act as an architect. Not least to withdraw from the common imputations of urban discourse on public space – defined types of urban space are usually ascribed established public functions – Shan Yang calls for a new terminology: spatial publicness. He thus lays a path through theoretical space. The usual radical polarity between the private and public sphere as a condition of urbanism and the city that characterizes Western urbanism is questioned from other cultural contexts than the European.

The concept of spatial publicness is theoretically established in the first part of the book, and applied to Shanghai in the second part. In the crucial final section, the role of architecture is questioned. A Logical Diagram supports the reasoning of the argument. This is not evident at first, but the reading of a very dense text is thus well guided. The Logical Diagram also allows a linear reading of the text or as a tableau of theories and reports on architectural practices in the light of liminality, consensus/dissensus. In particular, the dialectic between consent and dissent is expanded into a theoretical foundation.

A wealth of considerations is presented that relate not only to the specific case of Shanghai, but which significantly enrich the professional discourse on urban studies with regard to the relationship between the production of space and the public sphere. Shan Yang manages to carve out an independent position in the already crowded field of urban theory.

Sophie Wolfrum
München, March 2016
Introduction

This research investigates *Shanghai spatial publicness* by virtue of the theoretical reflection on the essence of public space, the empirical survey on social spaces in Shanghai, and the instantiative exploration of professional responses from architectural and urbanistic perspectives. The whole discussion pivots on a new concept “*spatial publicness*” that is deduced to overcome the defect of the conventional concept “public space”, when confronting the complexity, fluidness, and polysemy of contemporary urban phenomena. The new notion with its inherent nature of indeterminacy, instability, and temporariness can facilitate disclosing the vibrant but long-overlooked potential in Shanghai’s social space. Lastly, some new strategies and tactics for promoting *spatial publicness* in recent architectural practices, including those in China, are explored in two ways – politics and art, two forms of *dissensus*. In fact, the research tries to answer the following three questions:

– What is the public space (*spatial publicness*)?
– What is the public space (*spatial publicness*) in the context of Shanghai?
– What can architecture (urban design) do for public space (*spatial publicness*)?

All theoretical resources involved in the dissertation can be identified as three categories: the first one comes under the heading of public space, public sphere, or publicness; the second refers to the theory of space and the discourse on aesthetics and politics, *dissensus* and *consensus* (the distribution of the sensible); the third is mainly about the studies of social spaces in Shanghai and China. The three topics represented by them – publicness, spatialness, and locality – will converge on the main issue of the dissertation, namely, *Shanghai spatial publicness*. Their mutual relations can be illustrated by a triangular figure (Figure 0.1).

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1. The triangular illustration, reflecting the major theoretical resources of the dissertation, would be constructed on three major aspects: firstly, theories of publicness, in particular the theories of Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Sennett, Hans Paul Bahrdt; secondly, Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space and Rancière’s discourses on aesthetics and politics; thirdly, theories of Shanghai social spaces – the classical research about Chinese social structure and urban space, especially about Shanghai.
Chapter 1 Meta-Spatial Publicness

The concept of public space is closely intricate and easily confusable with that of public sphere which is primarily concerned in political, philosophical, and social fields. Redolent with metaphysical and political elements, the public sphere is actually a kind of *meta-spatial publicness*. When *spatial publicness* or *public space* discussed, this *meta-spatial publicness* is an ineludible departure.

There are several key theories about *meta-spatial publicness* introduced in the chapter, including doctrines of Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Sennett, Hans Paul Bahrdt, and Rosalyn Deutsche. Among all of them, Arendt’s definition of public realm as “two closely interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena” – *common world* and *public appearance* – is established as a keystone to navigate the slippery territory. Subsequently, the two essential facets of publicness will be replaced by two spatialized terminologies “distance” and “representation” in the next two chapters.

Chapter 2 Distance – Relation-Equilibrating

The concept of “distance” represents the mutual tension in-between social relationships in *spatial publicness*. Their equilibrium is maintained by the distance, which manifests itself in the three dimension of spatial production: the physical, mental, and social. The researches of Edward T. Hall, Richard Sennett, and Erving Goffman echo the fact that the success of public life relies on the existence of a set of distance regime. However, the decline of public life was also attributed to inflation of the codes – the institutionalization of distance regime, because the over-powerful regime would suffocate another aspect of *spatial publicness* – *meaning-presenting*. The metropolitan personality like “indifference”, “reserve”, and “aversion” described by Simmel is exactly an essential impediment to the birth of new meanings. And the spatial segregation lasting from the 18th century to the present day demonstrates a trend of institutionalization of collective distance too.

As an essential factor for production of *spatial publicness*, distance finds itself in a subtle balance between its institutionalization and disappearance.