

CITY SEEKS HARMONY

Shanghai's rapid development is producing some spectacular projects and proposals but these are not certain to achieve its leaders' desires for harmony, suggests *Robin Hambleton*



Shanghai: large-scale developments are going up alongside continual growth of city's economy

It starts with the high-speed maglev experience. Two minutes out of Pudong International Airport, you are already going at 290kmph. Once the train really gathers pace, you hit a steady 430kmph.

Within seven minutes of boarding you have travelled 35km and are disembarking in Pudong, a relentlessly modern neighbourhood east of the Huangpu River. Here opposite the Bund, the historic wall of neo-classical buildings on the west bank, is a forest of high-rise buildings. The Jin Mao Tower, an 88-storey architectural masterpiece, is being overshadowed by the much less uplifting World Financial Centre, which will be 101 floors tall when completed next year.

Arguably the most vibrant city in China, Shanghai is undergoing economic and urban restructuring at a bewildering pace. Last year, this city of 13 million people had a gross domestic product equivalent to £69 billion. The 12 per cent increase on 2005 made 2006 the 15th consecutive year of double-digit growth (see panel). It is not surprising that foreign investment is flooding in.

From an urban planning perspective, Shanghai is even more interesting. The city is a potential trendsetter for China, the world's fastest-growing economy. Despite the risks that arise when major urban investment decisions are made

against the clock, mayor Zheng Han and civic leaders can claim to be breaking new ground in city planning and urban design.

The 300-step climb to the top of the Lupu Bridge, just south of the city centre, offers a magnificent view. In the foreground sits the 5.3km² World Expo site, a swathe of derelict land and run-down dockyards next to a massive snaking river. It could almost be London Docklands in 1980.

World Expo promotes exchange of ideas

Although drawing parallels with the Olympic Games may be a step too far, the World Expo is now a well-established, high-profile international gathering. This major global event is designed to promote the exchange of ideas, experience, culture, economic breakthroughs and science and technology, allowing different countries and cities to show off their achievements.

Shanghai was named host for World Expo 2010 in 2002 and an enormous amount of planning activity followed. The results are on display in the Shanghai Urban Planning Exhibition in People's Square. The organisers of the event, which will run from May to October, hope that 200 nations and international bodies will take part and are preparing for 70 million visitors.

Shanghai provides a vivid example of how an urban university can make a significant contribution to place-shaping. Staff and students from the University of Tongji college of architecture and urban planning (CAUP) are heavily involved in detailed planning and design projects for the expo. Planning students say they find the work very challenging but also very stimulating.

CAUP dean and World Expo chief planner Zhiqiang Wu explains that the overall theme behind the planning principles is "better city, better life". Various sub-themes express the importance of harmony, whether that is intercultural communication, ecological harmony or balancing the past and future. The plans make imaginative use of levels to bring visitors into close contact with the edge of the river and there is a very sophisticated transport plan.

At an international forum held in Tongji in May, China's minister of construction Wang Guangtao emphasised the importance of harmony in city planning. In a rapidly urbanising country, he recognises that it is imperative to balance rural and urban development and let low-income families enjoy the fruits of economic and urban progress in cities as well as outside them.

This echoes president Hu Jintao's emphasis on "harmonious development". As Will Hutton notes in *The Writing on the Wall*, we can discern a creative marrying of communism and Confucianism. The Confucian goal of perfect harmony can perhaps be adapted to ideologically underpin a Communist Party beset by many challenges.

But how harmonious is urban planning in China? John Friedmann of the University of British Columbia, who has spent the past ten years studying modern China, has his doubts. In a perceptive lecture at the forum, he suggested that Chinese planners are in danger of neglecting the small spaces in cities, the intimate, human-scale places "where we make a home for ourselves".

Evidence to support his concerns can be found in Shanghai. The mega-projects in Pudong may attract headlines and features in the architectural press, but is New York-style high-rise development the right model for modern China? There is a Shanghai saying contrasting the intimate urban living of Puxi, the area west of the Huangpu, with the lifestyle of Pudong: "One bed in Puxi is better than one house in Pudong."

This view is likely to be contested by Pudong's residents. But it contains a message for modern planners. As we create exciting urban areas, let us not forget that grand does not always mean good or harmonious. ■

Robin Hambleton joins the University of the West of England as professor of city leadership next month. He is also a visiting professor at the University of Tongji.

SHANGHAI GROWTH

Indicator	2006 (bn yuan)	Increase from 2005
Industrial output	1,963	14%
Hi-tech output	446	16%
Chain retail sales	125	15%
Post and telecommunications	55	34%
Municipal urban investment	112	27%

SOURCE: SHANGHAI MUNICIPAL FOREIGN AFFAIRS OFFICE