

Third Spaces in Shanghai and Beijing

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Abstract: This research paper explores the concept of third spaces—transitional areas that foster social interaction, equality, and cultural exchange amidst the challenges of urbanization and globalization. As digitization enables remote work, the significance of these accessible spaces has grown, allowing individuals to engage in both professional and personal activities in public settings. This study examines two prominent examples of third spaces: Shanghai's Columbia Circle and Beijing's Mix Island, highlighting their unique characteristics and the benefits they offer to urban communities. This research paper will also include different people's perspectives towards the renovation of these two locations, and a compare and contrast between them, reflecting the concept of third space. While third spaces facilitate communication and relaxation, they also present challenges related to their multifunctional use. Some scholars have applied the concept of third spaces to specific urban contexts, exploring how these spaces contribute to social cohesion, cultural exchange, and community building. For instance, a study examines how space in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story collection, "The Thing Around Your Neck," serves as a mirror of cultural tensions and intricate dynamics between gender, race, location, space, and authority. Much of the past research has not focused on the Chinese example. Therefore, this essay differs from other papers because it will give two examples from China to help illustrate the concept of the third space.

Keywords: third space, urbanization, renovation, reality, virtual world.

1. Introduction

Third spaces are transitional areas that promote equality and social contact between people. This place is easily accessible to everyone and provides a space for social interaction and cultural exchange. [1] In the face of increasing urbanization and globalization, these areas foster a sense of community and enhance well-being. People are moving around increasingly, so third places are becoming increasingly essential. This is because, nowadays, working from anywhere is made possible by digitization. [2] "People are spending more and more time in transit zones – and out of doors in their neighborhoods. This results in new conflicts of use." People using laptops can be seen in some urban parks and cafés. Not only are certain professional tasks becoming more public, but some previously private activities are also doing so. To some extent, third spaces are beneficial and functional; however, they also have drawbacks. Plus, the third spaces are unique from one another at various locations. This paper will demonstrate an application of the third space principle to new spaces, and

I will look at two examples, Shanghai Columbia Circle and Beijing Mix Island, to help delve deeper into the concept of Third Space.

2. Case 1 --- Shanghai Columbia Circle

2.1. History of Shanghai Columbia Circle

Columbia Circle, which includes preserved colonial monuments and former industrial buildings, is a historically significant site along Yan'an West Road, Shanghai's main East-West artery. Following World War I, those from Europe and the United States who crossed the ocean during the Concession Period in Shanghai came hoping to become wealthy. Country clubs, which were popular in Europe and the United States, are built on the outskirts of Shanghai to satisfy their longing for their idyllic pastoral lifestyle and to ease their homesickness. [3] Membership quickly increased as a result of its popularity, and the club had over 400 members by 1920.

The original club structures were designed and constructed in Spanish styles in 1924 by American architect [4] Elliott Hazzard for the elites in America. Another historical building, the [5] Sun Ke Villa, was designed by [6] Hungarian architect László Hudec in 1930. Over the past 100 years, the building has seen some amazing changes. Initially, it was a luxurious place for American elites to relax and entertain. After liberation in 1952, it was turned into the Shanghai Institute of Biological Products (SIOBP). It is currently experiencing a renaissance as a hub of business, culture, and arts, providing a lively environment for living, working, and having fun. Covering an area of more than 70 acres with a building area of nearly 50,000 square meters, it consists mostly of four contemporary buildings with different styles, eleven industrial reconstruction buildings throughout the growth of New China, and three historical buildings, Sun Ke Villa, Columbia Country Club, and Navy Club.

Why did Shanghai Columbia Circle undergo its renovation? Villa Xinhua, which was the new name for Columbia Circle following the People's Republic of China's founding, has a distinct history that has evolved with the times. As China was established, the expatriates from Europe and the United States left Shanghai. Thus, their residential area, Columbia Country Club, was transformed into the more practical and academic Shanghai Institute of Biological Products (SIOBP) and acquired the Country General Association in 1951. Later, it was not altered into a private development; instead, it was transformed to a more socialized community where it fostered social interactions and communications between people.

2.2. Renewal of Shanghai Columbia Circle

The landscape design for Columbia Circle aimed to create a cohesive and unified district, rather than simply preserving the site as a historical landmark or completely demolishing and rebuilding it. The renovation of Shanghai Columbia Circle was to balance the old and the new, respecting existing historical structures like the clubhouse while simultaneously embracing innovation and introducing new architectural styles. I think this combination of the old and the new brings an innovative perspective to this area and can attract more visitors to appreciate this location. This was achieved by creating a distinct visual identity for the connecting streets and public spaces while allowing for diversity and variation in the design of individual buildings. Plus, the Sun-Ke Villa underwent a complete renovation, including its garden. The landscape design prioritized collaboration with the higher social class's programmatic needs and the architect's proposals. This meant integrating unique industrial and fashion functions, incorporating creative buildings, preserving legendary historical contexts, and blending remarkable landscapes into a harmonious whole, all contributing to the unity of the district.

The renovation of Shanghai Columbia Circle was completed by [7] OMA Architects and [8] West 8. The primary plan of OMA Architects calls for rebuilding the original building structure in addition

to constructing three new structures that will enable additional space expansion and offer new features not found in the original structure. [9] West 8, another architectural company that participated in the renewal of Columbia Circle, will be in charge of designing the restaurants, retail stores, hotels, event spaces, cultural venues, creative office spaces, and outdoor areas that will be dispersed throughout the project to create a lively destination.

Concerning this renewal, I think it is necessary because, with the development of the times, people's needs, and ideas are changing, so we should make corresponding reforms and adjustments according to the time of development. For instance, between 1929 and 1932, Hungarian architect László Hudec designed more than 20 villas in 13 styles, including English, Italian, Spanish, Hollywood, and English countryside, for the Columbia Residential Circle, which became the first choice of residence for Shanghai's upper-class expatriates. Later, when Japan declared war with Britain and the United States in 1941, the Public Concession fell, and Ballard was imprisoned in Longhua Concentration Camp, and the Country General Association was used by the Japanese as a third concentration camp. Then, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, in 1951, the Village General Association was requisitioned for the Shanghai Biological Products Research Institute. Now, it is a place for people to visit, entertain, work, and have fun. Therefore, from a residential area to a concentration camp, then to a biological institute and an entertainment center, Shanghai Columbia Circle undergoes dramatic changes. However, some people may think that all the historical buildings that carry culture should be preserved as places for future generations to visit and learn and shouldn't be renovated.

2.3. Consequences and Perspectives of the Renewal of Shanghai Columbia Circle

Shanghai Columbia Circle's renovation project prioritized preserving architectural diversity and customizing the renovation of each building to respect its unique character. [10] Historic structures like the Columbia Country Club and Sun Ke Villa were carefully restored using a "restoring the old as the old" method, maintaining their original features. The project also emphasized openness and sharing of space, creating a central green space and plaza that connects with the surrounding living areas. This inviting public space encourages community interaction, providing a place for residents to walk, shop, socialize, and enjoy the outdoors, particularly on weekends.

Last year, I went to the Shang Sheng Xin Suo. As I entered through the gate with the imposing words "Columbia Circle" emblazoned across it, I was immediately struck by the way the buildings were laid out, almost like a small community. It felt like stepping into a miniature city, with its internal logic and rhythm.

What truly caught my eye, though, was the swimming pool. I found it odd, yet intriguing, that a pool would be nestled in such a public space. It seemed out of place, but somehow fitting, offering a touch of luxury and leisure amidst the urban landscape. The water in the pool, shimmering gold in the sunlight, practically beckoned me to dive in and cool off. The sight of it was so alluring, so inviting, that I almost forgot where I was and felt like I was on vacation.

The concept of the third space refers to a space that exists between the real and the imagined, offering a unique environment that transcends traditional dualistic understandings of space. What makes a third space a "third space" is that it cannot be programmed or even designed. I wonder if this swimming pool in the Columbia Circle is like the concept of the third space by providing a physical location that serves as a bridge between the tangible world and the realm of imagination. Soja makes this point that in the modern city, we pay for every breath we take in advance. Those who cannot pay for this experience, by having a private space, to clean themselves to appear acceptable, cannot participate in the public space. Therefore, there is a social class difference when discussing third spaces.

Swimming pools can be seen as spaces where individuals can escape from the constraints of everyday life and immerse themselves in a different reality. They offer a sense of freedom and possibility, allowing people to explore new experiences and perspectives. In this sense, I consider that this special swimming pool can indeed be likened to the concept of the third space, offering a space for entertainment and a potential for transformation beyond conventional boundaries.

Additionally, after visiting, different visitors have different viewpoints. For instance, one visitor said, “The interior of Tsutaya Bookstore is very unique, with stained glass windows, each with a different color and pattern. The large bookshelves have a library feel to them. Tsutaya coffee and cultural creations are appealing and love the atmosphere. The Tiffany blue pool looks good any way you photograph it, and the colonnade space surrounding the pool circle has been transformed into a dining area for the restaurant.” By contrast, another visitor said, “I don't understand why there would be a pool in a common area. Also, wasn't this a biological institute before, I don't think it should be turned into a commercialized location for people to entertain and work.” Hence, the former visitor appreciates the pool in the Columbia Circle, whereas the latter one was not convinced that swimming pools can be thought of as places where people go to escape the confines of their daily lives and submerge themselves in other worlds, or as a third space.

3. Case 2 --- Beijing Mix Island

3.1. Brief Overview of Beijing Mix Island

Beijing Mix Island - Sicilian Village is a composite commercial space located in Beijing, designed by [11] DAGA Grand View Architects. The space combines a multi-format business model and café attributes, aiming to provide young people with a leisure place that combines food and beverage, culture, entertainment, and socialization. Mix Island, with its unique design concept and operation model, creates a village-style utopia in the city, providing a relaxing environment and attracting young people to gather by organizing a variety of community activities. The main focus of Mix Island - Sicilian Village is on the “outdoor camping style” and “pet-friendly” shopping area, which consists of several stores and outdoor space, the outdoor space is a shared area of the city. Even though it's mostly outdoor seating, this place is all open at night for lots of ambient little lights, music, and bands. So, it is a good choice to come here on weekdays to “lie down” for half a day and relax.

3.2. Mine and Others' Perspectives of Beijing Mix Island

This summer, I went to Beijing and visited Mix Island - Sicilian Village. As soon as I approached the area, I was mesmerized by the pool in front of me. Not too big, but just right. It reminded me of the amazing experiences I had at Columbia Circle in Shanghai last year. The place had a great lighted atmosphere at night and I sat around with everyone and laughed. Some kids were swimming in the pool and adults were eating BBQ and drinking on the shore. I had a super relaxing, casual, and laid-back time here. I also went to the pool for a while, and for a moment it was as if I had escaped from my usual stressful and fast-paced life and let go of my busy school schedule for a while.

I interviewed some tourists and locals while I was there and most of the feedback was upbeat. For instance, one lady said she often comes here in the evening with her friends to relax her mind and have a chat and dinner together. She said that the swimming pool here is very unique, and it's the only place in Beijing that has such a design. Of course, there are also a small number of negative comments. For example, a somewhat older man said he didn't quite understand the sense of atmosphere and recreation that young people like nowadays. Of course, it's normal for different people to see the world in various ways and think differently.

Swimming pools are more than just places to cool off. They provide a unique escape from the routine of daily life, offering a sense of freedom and allowing individuals to explore new experiences

and perspectives. This particular swimming pool in Mix Island - Sicilian Village embodies the concept of a "third space," where traditional boundaries are transcended and entertainment and transformational potential are present.

3.3. Contrast Beijing Mix Island with Shanghai Columbia Circle

The swimming pool in Beijing, though built at a later stage, echoes the spirit of Columbia Circle in Shanghai by offering a similar "third space" experience. Like its counterpart in Shanghai, this pool is more than just a place for swimming; it's a hub for social interaction and entertainment, fostering a sense of community, where people of similar hierarchy stayed together, and a break from the everyday. The monthly themed activities in Mix Island further solidify this "third space" concept. While playing these themed games and activities, people feel like time flies by, like it's imaginary. These events create a dynamic and engaging atmosphere, encouraging individuals to interact, participate in diverse activities, and enjoy a sense of belonging [12].

While the Beijing pool might not be housed within a historic building as in Shanghai, its integration within the community and its focus on fostering social interaction and entertainment demonstrates its role as a vital "third space" in the modern city. This "third space" concept, prevalent in both Beijing and Shanghai projects, transcends the boundaries of mere physical space and delves into the realm of social and cultural experiences.

4. Conclusion

Cities are growing very fast and with that comes stress of people's lives. Therefore, people need time to relax, enjoy life, and escape from the real world. Unlike traditional spaces, which are confined, the third space can facilitate communication and exchange between people. Water is turned into entertainment and spectacle in modernity. It is somewhere between the two dimensions that the idea of third space emerges, but blurred boundaries and their control. In this article, two examples of third spaces in Shanghai and Beijing are talked about - open spaces that both have a swimming pool where people can go in and play and entertain themselves as they please. Other than having pools as a third space, there could be other designs that demonstrate the usage of third spaces. Other cities have built buildings utilizing the concept of third space, and hopefully, there will be more similar cases in the future, waiting to be built by more architects and construction companies.

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Appendix

Interview transcript 1:

Interviewer: Hi there, thank you for taking the time to chat with me today. I noticed you often come here in the evenings with your friends. What draws you to this place specifically?

Interviewee 1: Oh, absolutely! This place is just perfect for unwinding after a long day. My friends and I love coming here to relax our minds, catch up on each other's lives, and of course, enjoy a delicious dinner together. It's become our little sanctuary in the city.

Interviewer: That sounds lovely. What's one unique feature about this place that stands out to you?

Interviewee 1: Well, the swimming pool here is just amazing! It's designed in a way that you don't see anywhere else in Beijing, really. The ambiance and the way it's integrated into the overall space make it feel so special. It's definitely a highlight of our visits here.

Interviewer: That's fascinating! It sounds like the pool adds a lot to the overall experience. Thank you for sharing that with us.

Interview transcript 2:

Interviewer: Hi sir, thank you for taking the time to chat with me today. I am curious, as someone who might not fully understand the current trends among younger people, what are your thoughts on the sense of atmosphere and recreation they seem to enjoy these days?

Interviewee 2: Ah, well, I suppose it's a bit of a different world than when I was younger. I find it hard to fully grasp the appeal of some of the places and activities that young people seem to enjoy nowadays.

Interviewer: That's understandable. Could you elaborate a bit on what you mean?

Interviewee 2: Well, for one thing, the emphasis on novelty and unique experiences seems to be a big deal. Places like this one, with their unusual designs and amenities, seem to cater to that desire for something different. But for me, simplicity and comfort are often more important.

Interviewer: Interesting perspective. Do you think there's any value in trying to understand or appreciate these newer forms of recreation?

Interviewee 2: Absolutely. I think it's always good to be open-minded and try to see things from different perspectives. Even if I don't fully understand or appreciate everything about the current trends, I can still appreciate the fact that they bring joy and relaxation to others.