

URBAN EXPLORATIONS: METHODS AND TOOLS

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During the years that I spent working as an architect, I often found myself struggling to maintain a last shred of professional integrity; the realisation that I was making a living from the continuous invention of potential future scenarios in the form of speedily produced designs of all varieties and scales – solely based on information conveyed to me in semi-professional briefs produced by up-and-coming developers or recent government officials with very particular interests – left me perplexed and devoid of answers to plaguing questions. Did being an architect, I was wondering, make me complicit in the methodical production and reproduction of the kind of socioeconomic processes that, under different circumstances, I would be committed to actively combat? Was I prepared to bear the responsibility for the possible social, economic, and environmental repercussions of my seemingly innocent practice as an architect? In view of questions like these, I chose to stop being a full-time architect for a while and shift the focus of my activities from the incessant production of random designs to the slightly slower pace and remoteness of ‘non-action’. I treated myself to the freedom of being a full-time researcher, instead (or rather, it was the Japanese Ministry of Education that treated me with that option by awarding me a Monbukagakusho Scholarship). Shanghai – where I had lived and worked over the last few years, and the city that I had learned to love – would serve as the setting for my research, its extremes so blatantly apparent.

- > Coming from a background in architecture, I was in the advantageous position to approach the transient subject of my research – the experience of ‘urban development’ in its various forms and manifestations – unprepared, unbiased, and, admittedly, uneducated. I entered ‘the field’ blissfully ignorant of basic theoretical approaches in the social sciences, a state that allowed me to be curious, perceptive, and aware of a number

of processes and their manifestations that, to the trained and experienced social scientist, would probably have appeared obvious or not worth noting. I was free to experiment with methods and techniques (inspired, for instance, by works like Bunschoten *et al.* 2001) and to develop own ideas about the observations I made before engaging with the existing literature in related areas.

The long-term character of my research allowed me to follow-up on emerging phenomena of interest over time, but I believe that some of the techniques I used would be valuable even for the brief, week-long study of any given urban context. The emerging work process hints at the potential of inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches to the study of an innately complex urban condition, the exploration of space, societal relations, and larger politico-economical forces. Some of the techniques outlined below may be useful in the process of developing ecological literacy (for more on ecological literacy and a quiz to determine your own, see Charles *et al.* 1981; Orr, 1992) in regards to any given site, in helping to find the answers to the **FOLLOWING TYPICAL QUESTIONS**.

HOW DID THE SITE COME INTO BEING?

WHAT FLOWS SURROUND THE SITE – IN TERMS OF MATERIAL, ENERGY, BIOSPHERE, SOCIETY, FINANCE, POLICY/POLITICS, INFORMATION?

WHAT ARE THE INPUTS, AND WHAT THE OUTPUTS? DOES THE SITE EXIST WITHIN A STABLE ENVIRONMENT (ECOLOGY)?

WHICH ELEMENTS ARE STABLE, AND WHICH ARE CHANGING?

WHAT GLOBAL FLOWS DOES THE SITE DEPEND ON?

The paper at hand offers a review of the methodologies that I found particularly useful for the architect, planner, or researcher looking to develop a better understanding of the context-specific socio-spatial particularities of any given site.

PREPARATION

- > Every study needs a minimum degree of preparation to frame the larger context of the research. Entering the field lacking profound previous knowledge of social structures, cultural predispositions, or particular issues on site, however, can be of advantage, because it is an opportunity to be free of preconceptions. I started my research because I was interested in finding out how the massive urban redevelopment of Shanghai was experienced by the city's residents, especially as it happened on such a huge scale. I had no clear ideas or intentions in terms of the methodological approach to my study, and was not aware of the existing literature in urban studies, human geography, or other related fields. I was looking for a particular site for my case study, a place in the city where I would be able to observe the process of renewal and speak to a significant number of residents that would be affected.

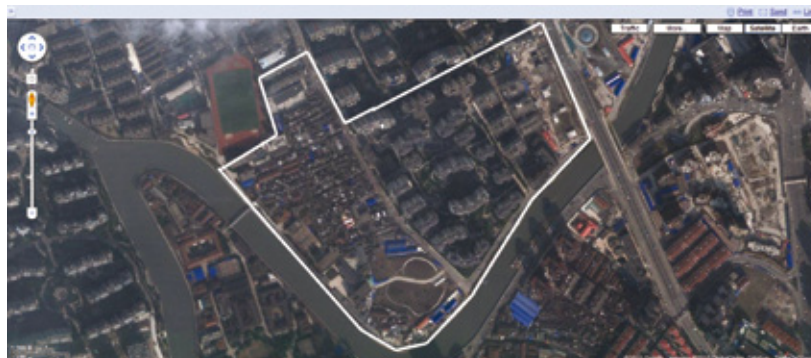
AERIALS AND MAPS

- > Large parts of Shanghai, at this time, still consisted of quickly disappearing old neighbourhoods, but one could never be sure when a neighbourhood would have to make place for redevelopment. I felt that my best guess would be an area where recently built compounds for the new middle and upper classes were located in very close proximity to old neighbourhoods, so that, rather sooner than later, gentrification would kick in, bringing about the demolition and redevelopment of the old neighbourhoods and displacement of their residents. Hence, despite knowing the city so well after having lived and worked there for more than three years, I began with the virtual exploration of Shanghai, using Google Maps to find sites that would contain juxtaposed pieces of old and new urban fabric.
- > Aerial photographs reveal the grain and structure of the city and facilitate the identification of small- and large-scaled structures and the prevailing urban grain (sprawling single family housing vs. high-rise apartment blocks vs. dense slums,

etc.), possible uses and functions (e.g. housing, commercial hubs, industry, recreation), existing infrastructure networks (rivers, highways, streets and roads, railways, public transportation, etc.), the embeddedness (or disconnections) that they bring about, and much more. Most importantly, the study of aerials makes it possible to locate the major breaks and ruptures within the urban fabric, pointing at subjects beyond urban morphology – be it genealogy, the historical context, or current tensions and conflict between different parties over the right to shape, use, and appropriate urban space. Using Google Maps and Google Earth carries great potential, especially since the software now offers the possibility to study historical aerials and to compare the current condition of a location with conditions dating several decades back, which can be exploited to trace back the development of any particular site. Once identified, the particularities of space open up directions for further inquiry. For instance, the coexistence of patches of very diverse urban fabric pose questions regarding development, displacement, and socio-spatial justice that can then be studied in detail through investigation on the ground.

EXPLORATION

In my case study, I initially used Google Maps to find the in-between spaces, the edges between what appeared old, mature, and genuine – and new, designed, and imposed (Fig. 1), and hence to locate the places (and, naturally, people) most likely to be affected by urban redevelopment in Shanghai. I drew a preliminary boundary around what I identified as a particularly interesting area – featuring obvious spatial difference, manifest in the juxtaposition of recently built high-rise residential compounds and the remainder of what could be easily identified as what once must have been an immigrant slum – to guide me in my exploration, and looked at blogs created by residents to discuss property prices, the 'situation' of the area, and other issues of general interest; government documents accessible on the Internet; the developer's plans



1. Identification and delimitation of potential study area based on Google Maps

screenshot

for the area; as well as historical maps and photographs in archives. Then, however, I set off to explore 'reality', spending between five and twelve hours every day on site.

PARAMETER

- > The first step to becoming familiar with the site was to attempt a walk along my pre-defined boundary, and to record this walk based on a set of pre-defined rules. I made up these rules by myself for no other reason than to introduce a degree of randomness, so that I would be forced to pay attention to locations that I would otherwise have neglected, and to use my camera to record 'everydayness' at these locations, and hence to build a database for later analysis. I took a photo in the direction of my walk along the predefined perimeter after every twenty steps, and wrote down whatever appeared special and worthwhile. While walking, I had to refine the perimeter in response to the actual conditions on site, taking into account that some parts of my boundary line were barred from access and hence I had to look for alternative routes. The set of photographs documenting this (always artificial) boundary (see Fig. 1) captures the changing conditions on site: from narrow lanes lined by shanty housing, to spacious sidewalks between six-lane motorways and mixed-use high-rises (Fig. 2). Walking and documenting the boundary line (in my case, one that I had predefined which, however, can be thought of as the more familiar 'red line' bounding any urban scale or architectural planning project) helps to identify the characteristics of the larger context within which a site is located, ranging from the architectural scale of the surroundings to questions of access, infrastructure, and atmosphere.

GRID

- > Once I had defined and tested the spatial boundary (always 'soft' and subject to change!) of my research, I took to the next step: documenting the differing characteristics on site. To do so, I used the Google Maps aerial and placed a random-sized

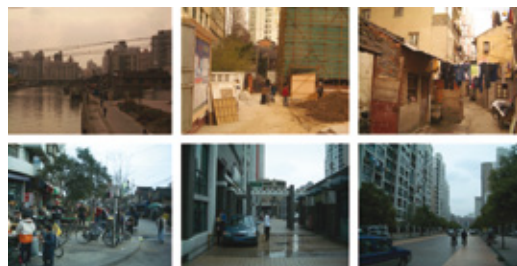
grid upon it, dense enough to let me explore the area thoroughly (Fig. 3), and decided on a direction randomly in which to take photographs at every point of the grid. In general, being in the study area on a daily basis and walking around equipped with a camera and, sometimes, tripod, caused a bit of a stir among residents, who were usually curious to find out who I was and what I was doing. Hence, I was able to easily establish first contacts with residents on site. Trying to gain access to certain locations on my grid that were not readily accessible helped to make further contacts. I labelled all photographs according to their location on the grid (e.g., A10, or J1; Fig. 4), and stored them systematically, creating a digital catalogue of spatial features – building sizes, degrees of informality, infrastructure and organisation, atmosphere, and more – so that they could be compared with each other and with sets of photographs which I would take, in the same manner, in the future.



3. Random grid imposed upon study area facilitates systematic mapping of the site



4. Grid mapping. Taking a photograph facing in the same direction at each point of a pre-defined grid allows for the survey of the qualities of a given site, and also, if done periodically, for the tracking of changes on site over time.



2. Recording the conditions along a predefined parameter (regardless if set for research purposes, or defined by the client for an architectural or urban design/planning project) allows for the analysis of varying conditions regarding access, infrastructure, density, atmosphere, and many other aspects of any given site.

- > The analysis – looking at the photographs over and over again and tagging what appeared significant (for more on the analysis of photographs, see, for instance, Becker, 1974) – of the ‘grid’ set of photographs, revealed, of course, that the study area I had selected could be divided into the two major parts that I was able to easily identify using Google Maps. However, it also revealed a complexity that went far beyond this simple distinction. Countless smaller fragments emerged. For instance, buildings in some parts of the ‘old’ area were very obviously self-built and altered to suit changing requirements over time, while in other parts they appeared to have been planned and purpose-built. In certain parts of the ‘old’ area, buildings had not been significantly improved for at least four or five decades, while in others, most were just recent additions. Also, there were varying degrees of building standards, care in management, and accessibility in the ‘new’ parts of the study site.
- > The photographic archive that I created over time based on the grid proved particularly useful later on, when I began with interviews, and when the people I spoke to could point at the photographs and tell me about events and phenomena that were important to them, and that I would not have noticed otherwise. Hence, it became an instrument for looking at difference and differentiation both in different spatial contexts during a particular fragment of time (i.e. the same temporal moment in different locations on site), and at particular spatial fragments within different temporal contexts (i.e. the same location at different moments in time).

SEQUENCE

- > After gaining some understanding of the larger case study area, I moved on to define my focus more clearly – to select one particular area which I would then examine in more detail and observe with more care. I decided that the best location to serve my purposes would be the street dividing ‘old’ from ‘new’: **the Borderland**, as I later came to call it. I surveyed the street rigorously, starting with

one photograph of both sides of the street taken at every twenty steps. In the process, I came to realise that a continuous, gap-free documentation – a sequence – would be much more useful to keep track of changes over time, and subsequently photographed the street in its entire length, at least once per year. This strategy allowed me to compare the physical qualities of one side of *the Borderland* with those of the other (see Fig. 5 for the conditions on *the Borderland* in 2009). The repetition of the photographic recording made it possible to look in detail at the changes that appeared over time, and to pay attention to details that had appeared insignificant at the time of the recording (see Fig. 6 for an impression of the changes that took place at two selected locations on the ‘old’ side of the street – 84, 55 – in the period between April 2007 and October 2009; for more, see Iossifova, 2009b).

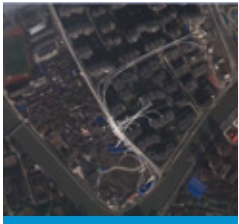
Visual mapping – the parameter, grid, and *Borderland* series – and their repetitive application over the course of three years in the case study proved useful tools to trace change and continuity in space though comparison over time. The large visual database that I collated allowed identifying spatial details to which I had not paid attention when in the field – but which emerged as significant later on: for instance, when they were discovered in photographs or mentioned by research participants in interviews. The rigorous mapping of the study area and the successive analysis of the collated material led me to identify the appropriate instruments to address specific emerging questions in the consequent steps of research. For instance, the presence of fences and guards to protect the ‘new’ compound – and, reciprocally, the presence of ‘informal guards’ (elderly residents) sitting at the entrances to the alleys leading into the ‘old’ neighbourhood – raised questions of permeability and access: did residents and users in the area, indeed, stick to the formal and informal regulations, or were these rules soft and adjustable?



5. Top: locations 33, 45, and 58 on the ‘old’ side of the street; bottom: locations 33, 45, and 58 on the ‘new’ side of the street.



6. Sequence of photographs taken at locations 84 and 55 in the period from April 2007 to October 2009 (from left to right).



7. Exploring and documenting resident and user groups' paths on site.

'STALKING'

> To find out, I set out to 'stalk' people that represented, at least on appearance, different groups present on site: residents of the 'old', and residents of the 'new' (Fig. 7). Exploring and documenting the paths that different people take by following them from a distance, apart from revealing obvious routes, helps to shed light on visible and invisible barriers in the socio-spatial fabric of any site, and to arrive at conclusions and further questions regarding the reasons behind their existence. Stalking, however, should be done with care, as not every socio-cultural and political context would allow for that.

OBSERVING

- > In the study area, as mentioned above, one particular location had surfaced as especially interesting: the entry gate to one of the gated residential compounds, located on the street between 'old' and 'new', and right opposite the local wet market and a narrow alley leading into the 'old' part. I chose to observe the everyday in this location in order to become even more familiar with the different ways in which space was used by locals, passers-by, and visitors over 24 hours, and documented the events on site by taking a picture every ten minutes (see Fig. 8 for an excerpt), recording a video of thirty seconds every thirty minutes, and repeating this exercise every time I returned to the case study site – at least once per year.
- > In addition to the photographic recordings, during the periods of observation I took count of events that appeared to be repetitive or that showed certain dynamics, such as people from the 'new' compound returning from shopping at the wet market in the 'old' part across the street; or the frequency of passing of police cars. When compiled into a diagram, these occurrences showed patterns that revealed a degree of predictability regarding the everyday dynamics of place (Fig. 9).
- > Observing the everyday is useful in situations where, for instance, resources like space are used

differently by different users, where user groups or users change over time. This is an opportunity to discover 'subcultures', existing in parallel to those most dominant or obvious. While 'counting' events and occurrences helps to reveal larger patterns (such as the fact that most people in the focus area do their groceries shopping in the mornings before lunch), writing down the more qualitative aspects of the things one observes can be of help, too. In the case study, I took note of all details, including activities, people, sounds, and smells, as they happened around me, without 'censoring' my notes by restrictions to what I felt was important and what was not (for excellent literary examples of descriptions of the everyday, see, for instance, Percec, 1997). A field note, then, would look something like this:

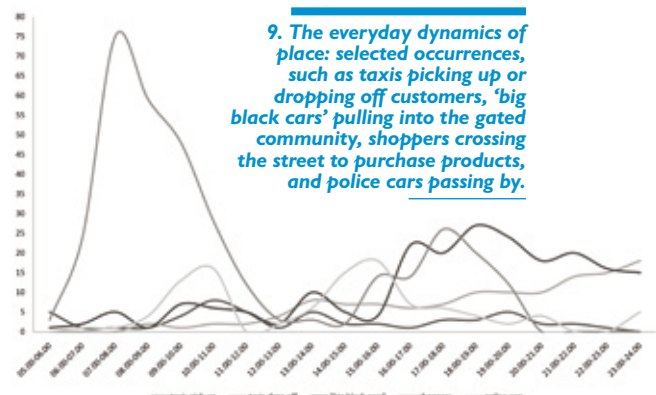
5.30 am. Market is open. All but S6 and S7 closed. 'Migrants' sleeping on sidewalk. Pipe guy on street, with big brown dog. Man on a little cart is picking up garbage. Little dog in MV. Big truck delivering pigs in halves. Two drunken boys at S6 drinking beer. Incredible amounts of flies, biting. Woman with scale and young girl on her way into market. Taxi in front of me, driver gets off to buy breakfast at S6. Then smokes cigarette. Lady in suit out of SAHT and into waiting taxi. Boys finish their beers, one returns the beer bottles, and the other disappears in CJC alley. CW standing next to me, watching me. First user of water suspender for the day. Youtiao finally out at S7. First market shopper of the day. Green stuff delivery at wet market. Kites are already up. Market door is being fully opened. CW carrying big plastic bags with green stuff from truck into market (how come?). SAHT woman buys breakfast at S7. One of the sleeping beauties carries his bed into WM, while I have company from an old lady with walking stick, who picks my bottle from the street. Yellow dress girl is up. Old lady and old man down BYL, apparently searching for plastic bottles? Motivation? WY's husband on moped with plenty of stuff. Woman with pot from SAHT over to S7, buying porridge and youtiao. Then on to S6 for the flat bits. Another woman with porridge pot and breakfast sticks. (Field Note, 18 July 2009).



8. Discovering the dynamics of space over 24 hours.

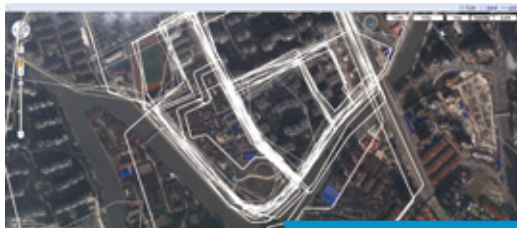


9. The everyday dynamics of place: selected occurrences, such as taxis picking up or dropping off customers, 'big black cars' pulling into the gated community, shoppers crossing the street to purchase products, and police cars passing by.



INTERVIEWING

- > The mapping and observation of an area can be supported by a number of different interviewing techniques that help to discover what might have been overlooked and what is important to residents. Interviews can be conducted in groups or privately; they can be based on pre-defined questionnaires when probing for particular information in response to clearly articulated questions – such interviews will often ask the participant to convey basic information such as age, sex, occupation, etc.; they can be open-ended, narrative interviews, leaving the participant free to talk about subjects of his or her choice, without restrictions set by the interviewer. Interviews can be recorded using a digital voice recorder – subject to the interviewees' consent – and transcribed afterwards; otherwise, the interviewer might want to take notes during the interview, or, if that proves impossible or unwanted, too, write down notes from memory shortly after the interview. In any case, written consent should be requested from every participant (the same, by the way, goes for the use of any photographs featuring a person outside of the public realm, or photographs taken by participants).
- > Given the political context in China, I obtained verbal permission to use the material gathered, be it photographs (my own or those made by participants), interview data, or any other original material. My interviewees included mostly residents of the focus area; their identity remains anonymous and I keep no written account of their real names or contact information in order to avoid any risk of harm for them. In total, I conducted over fifty interviews with residents of the focus area in order to shed light on their socio-economic background, residential history, and purpose to be on site. My questionnaire was designed to determine if the 'objective' spatial boundaries that I had previously identified coincided with the 'subjective' spatial boundaries of participants – that is, the boundaries that different people drew around the places with which they identified (their cognitive maps;



10. Mind maps. The boundary lines drawn by all interview participants in response to the question: *Which area do you identify as 'home'?*

Fig. 10); and if there was a difference in the degree of identification with place (Place Identity Scale; see Lalli, 1992) between residents with different socio-economic backgrounds in the 'old' and 'new' parts of the focus area (see Iossifova 2010 for more details). In addition to the close-ended interviews described above, I conducted open-ended, in-depth interviews with twenty individuals, and, repeatedly, follow-up interviews with nine of them. Some interviews were based on photographic material (Collier and Collier, 1986; Schwartz, 1989), often photo diaries solicited from participants. Providing selected participants with disposable cameras and asking them to take photographs of the spaces that they think of as important for their everyday lives over a number of days, then developing their films and arranging for an appointment to talk about their photographs, will serve as a solid basis for long and deep interviews, during which participants will be willing and more likely to speak openly about their everyday lives and their relationship to the built environment (Fig. 11). When my own photographs served as a basis for the interviews, they often triggered unexpected reactions and stories, which would otherwise have remained hidden from my understanding. Most interviews, particularly those with people I met repeatedly over the course of the three years of research, evolved into life histories as interviewees were willing to share details that were more private over time.

VISUALISATION

Once recorded, there is the question of what to do with the pages over pages of field notes, how to make sense of all the recorded observations, how to put them together in a way that manages to convey the core information? I found it useful to analyse my field notes and interviews using Excel sheets: going through my data over and over again, I decomposed the text and sorted the elements it contained into categories like 'actors' (who?), 'activities' (what?), 'location' (where?), 'means' (how?), 'time' (when?), 'repetition' (how



11. Photos from solicited photo-diaries help interview participants to speak about subjects that are important to them

photo:
Anonymous Participants

often?). Those, however, are just some very basic categories and their number can be expanded to accommodate additional elements. The Excel tables (Fig. 12), once compiled, can be rearranged, sorted, annotated, or colour-coded according to personal requirements and preferences, and the extracted information can be visualised using different approaches.



| no. | element | actors | type | act | medium | settings | actors | type | act | medium | actors | type | act | medium | actors | type | act | medium |
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| 35 | | residents | old | meeting | public | public | residents | old | meeting | public | residents | old | meeting | public | residents | old | meeting | public |
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| 39 | | residents | old | meeting | public | public | residents | old | meeting | public | residents | old | meeting | public | residents | old | meeting | public |
| 40 | | residents | old | meeting | public | public | residents | old | meeting | public | residents | old | meeting | public | residents | old | meeting | public |

12. Analysing textual field notes and interviews.

One such approach is the creation of maps or diagrams showing the relationship between different actors. The visualisation of relationships is not particularly difficult: actors can be shown as nodes (for example, circles for female actors, and squares for male actors; larger circles containing different actors as signifiers for families, and so on); the different relationships between actors can be expressed through connecting lines,

varying in width according to the strength of the relationship, and in type according to the character of the relationship (e.g., friendship; conflict; economic exchange). If the number of actors and relationships is relatively small, such maps can be developed based on the Excel sheets created earlier (Fig. 13 and Fig. 14). For more complicated social network analysis, freely available software, such as NodeXL, can be of help. In the case of my case study, creating a map of the social networks based on my observations and interviews revealed the close interconnections that existed between residents of 'old' and residents of 'new', ranging from micro-economic activities to established friendships (lossifova, 2009a).

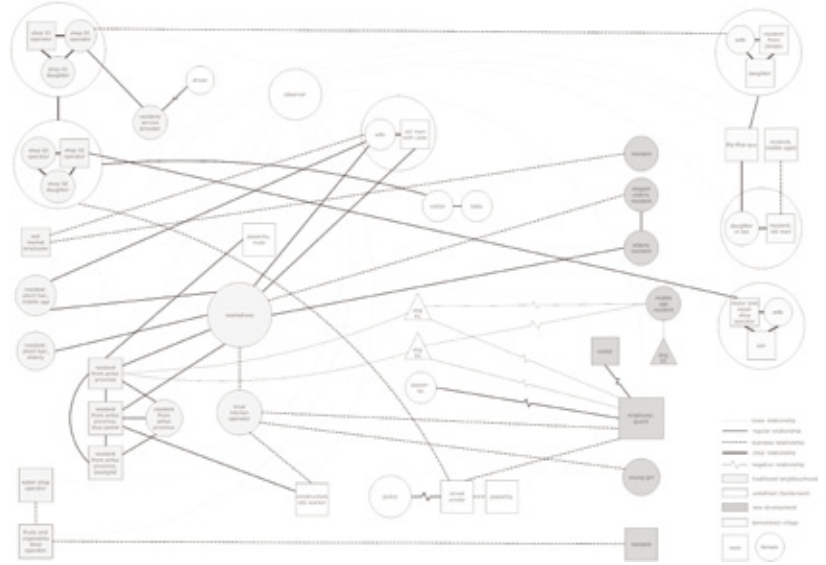
(RE)ACTION

Using the outlined methods and techniques has enabled me to define the different groups on the physical *Borderland* between constructed dichotomies like old and new, rural and urban, poor and rich, resident on the selected case study site in Shanghai. It led me to write a dissertation on the spaces 'in-between'; the simultaneity of gentrification, very real, and ghettoisation, real or perceived; the emerging mode of coexistence, requiring constant negotiation between the individuals involved in and affected by this condition, establishing their positions and identities – who they were seen as and who they aspired to be. I was able to build on the narratives of long-term residents, in addition to the extant literature to locate the ongoing and historical large-scale processes (economic, political, ideological, and otherwise defined) that contributed to the formation and maintenance of individual and group identification, particularly in relation to space and place. Residents' cognitive maps, as representations of fear and desire, helped me to understand how they identified with place, and how they negotiated the processes of continuity and discontinuity in their socio-spatial identities. From my inquiry, I could further conclude that major insecurities among residents emerged largely from

the lack of information regarding the authorities' plans for the area. Such insecurities could easily be addressed by increasing transparency in the planning process.

- > Releasing clear information about the timing of scheduled redevelopment, for example, would contribute to an overall feeling of long-term commitment and stability. Most interestingly, however, the mapping and observation of the processes on **the Borderland** between 'old' and 'new' led me to understand its importance as the social interface and shared space enabling everyday encounter between the 'different' and contributing to the weakening of acquired (learned) categories, or preconceptions.
- > It is old news that diversity – be it biological, spatial, cultural, or of any other kind – is integral to the possibility of resilience: the quality that cities of the future will need most. However, current planning practice is deficient in its ability to manage the coexistence of different social groups in shared urban space. The changes affected on people's lives by the transformation of space often have largely negative consequences in terms of social cohesion, continuity, and the right and ability to negotiate livelihoods. Especially in view of the challenges that cities are beginning to face increasingly, urban designers, planners, and policymakers cannot but acknowledge the value of **the Borderland** as central to processes of negotiation, reconciliation, and mutual recognition.
- > Furthermore, currently, the process of creating urban space – not only within the context of urbanising China – is characterised by the very obvious lack of interaction and communication between actors and agencies in research, planning, design, development, and implementation, and the close-to-complete neglect of the needs and wants of those supposed to use it. Meaningful action toward (more) sustainable urban futures is only possible if we manage to combine the knowledge and skills of those involved in the understanding, production, and appropriation of the built environment. We need more inclusive

tools for urban planning and design, and we need to develop the skills that let us understand the major drivers that contribute to the emergence of liveable urban space.



13. Eco-map of actors and their network as observed in the focus area over one week's time.



14. Making information more accessible – combining the relevant part of the eco-map with a photograph of the respective actor.