

# Urban planners go undercover to create public amenities from 'dead spaces'

Yang Jian

Underneath the rumbling traffic on Shanghai's elevated roads and bridges are places once forgotten and long neglected. American-Canadian journalist and urban studies activist Jane Jacobs (1916-2006) called them "dead spaces."

Dead no longer. Shanghai urban planners are now converting these underbellies into parks, sports areas, children's playgrounds, cafés and art galleries.

One example is the Fantasy Mushroom Forest in Yangpu District, which features a playground for children, exercise facilities for the elderly and sports courts for young people.

Awan Ahmed Zamir, a Tongji University student majoring in industrial design, said the area, which recently opened beneath the Inner Ring Road, reminds him of his boyhood playing football in Pakistan.

"The viaduct creates a special architectural style over the park, while the greenery makes me feel peaceful," he said.

For his studies, Zamir has visited or studied renovation plans for multiple sites underneath bridges.

"I believe this can add magnificence and satisfaction to local neighborhoods," he told Shanghai Daily. "The rest of the world, including my home country, have a lot to learn from Shanghai's efforts."

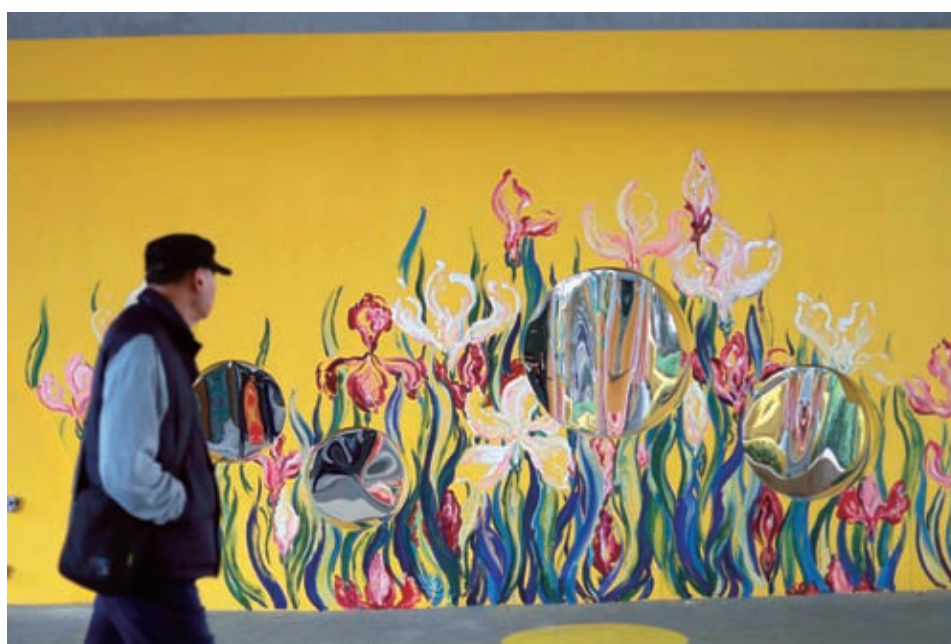
Since New York City built the world's first elevated roadway — the Miller Highway — in the 1930s, this style of concrete infrastructure has proliferated as a solution to traffic congestion in tight urban settings.

But overhead structures also became eyesores that divided communities, blocked pedestrian walkways, spoiled skylines and left a gloomy, noisy rift in the urban fabric.

Other cities have undertaken to reclaim "dead space." Success stories include Tokyo's Nakameguro Koukashita, a 700-meter-long commercial street beneath two elevated subway lines, and the One Green Mile Park below Mumbai's Senapati Bapat Marg flyover.



Children play in the Fantasy Mushroom Forest in Yangpu District. — Photos / IC



A man passes by a painting under the Gubei Road Bridge crossing the Suzhou Creek.

Shanghai has a large landscape to work with. Elevated expressways within Shanghai's Inner Ring Road stretch for 58 kilometers, creating about 3,500 underneath spaces. The 37 bridges spanning over the Huangpu River and Suzhou Creek add another 300 sites, according to the Shanghai Housing and Urban-Rural Development Commission.

"Most of these places lack general

planning or artistic design, and were left undeveloped," said Liang Jian'an, a senior official with the commission.

The commission has launched a three-year action plan to reclaim these forsaken pieces of city acreage and include them in the city's urban renewal campaign. The plans also dovetail nicely with the city's efforts to build "15-minute community life circles." The goal is to provide access to a variety of

lifestyle amenities within a 15-minute walking radius from home.

The New Hongqiao Central Garden, tucked beneath an elevated section of Yan'an Elevated Road, is the latest example of how Shanghai is implementing the plan.

Four basketball courts and two football pitches have been built within a greenbelt covering of 20,000 square meters, the equivalent of about three standard football pitches.

"There used to be just lackluster parking slots beneath the highway," said Zhou Jing, vice director of the construction management commission of Changning District. "Residents and nearly office workers complained about the shortage of outdoor sports facilities in that area of the Hongqiao business district."

The underbelly of viaducts turns out to be ideal for sports areas. There is natural shelter from rain and excessive sunshine, and the facilities can operate around the clock with no complaints about noise or light from nearby residential communities. The proximity to office buildings means white-collar workers have somewhere to get some exercise.

Rucker Park, the operator of the courts and pitches, said the Hongqiao garden has been popular among residents and office workers. The facilities are free from 6am to 9am on workdays. Customers can book and pay on WeChat account for use in other time slots.

"I used to go to indoor gyms in malls, which were expensive and crowded with people," said Vincent He, a senior accountant working in the nearby Arch Shanghai office building. "Now, I can play basketball with my colleagues during breaks or after work, which strengthens teamwork."

A similar project was earlier unveiled under the city's Middle Ring Road near Beidi Road, where four separate basketball courts and football pitches were decorated with lively colors and animal patterns, such as a flamingo, zebra and cheetah.

"We've gained experiences in building sports facilities beneath elevated roads, avoiding any distraction to drivers above and using protecting netting