

Urban Development Issues in China's Cities: Part Three

Renovating housing in an aging society

Housing and retirement: how elevators free 'abandoned city tower' dwellers from isolation

Source: *Xinmin Zhoukan* (Xinmin Weekly), No. 24, 9 July 2007

Abstract: The demand for retirement housing is increasing considerably in Shanghai, the first city to undergo the transitions of population aging. 95.8% of elderly people prefer to spend their retirement years in private housing, meaning that the vast majority of elderly residents in China's major cities choose to live at home. As early as 2005, a study of the living conditions and needs of Shanghai's elderly population revealed that 69.9% of those living in high-rise accommodation within the city limits found going up and down the stairs was their most difficult task out of a list of ten daily activities. There are over 10,000 of these old, state-owned apartment towers in Shanghai. These dilapidated and non-functional buildings that resemble a stack of matchboxes, were erected between the 1970s and 1990s to solve the city's persistent housing shortage. For the elderly living there, stair climbing is a daily struggle.

In April 2007, the Shanghai Municipal Housing, Land and Resources Bureau completed a new study into the feasibility of installing elevators in multi-storey apartment buildings. As early as 1999, the Municipality of Shanghai began improving these buildings and repairing their façades, and had identified certain buildings as pilot projects. However, due to the considerable investment required by the public authorities and disagreements with residents, the project was not extended to other buildings once work on the pilot buildings was completed. Past experience should therefore serve as groundwork for future project planning.

The most important step is to reconcile the conflicting interests of different groups such as the government, tenants' associations, landlords' and homeowners' committees, as well as certain individual tenants. Could renovating old city neighbourhoods in a context of population aging be an opportunity to develop a democratic consultative process among the inhabitants of urban residential areas? Could this constitute a type of experiment for solving differences and enabling the voice of the general public to be heard?

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