

THE ARTS/CULTURAL DESK

Salvaging Jewish Heritage in China, Block by Block

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Every morning at 5 Christopher Choa gets up for his daily run, logging 8 to 10 miles on his trip to and from the North Bund, which includes the old Jewish ghetto in Shanghai.

A New York architect who moved to Shanghai three years ago, Mr. Choa became enchanted by the area and its history. So when he learned that the North Bund was facing redevelopment, he decided to try to save as much of the old ghetto as possible.

"The history of the Jews in Shanghai is so compelling," said Mr. Choa, who is Roman Catholic, but whose great-grandmother was a Sephardic Jew. "It's really worth preserving. It's part of the fabric."

The ghetto, in what was once the American and then the International Settlement and is now called the North Bund, harbored more than 20,000 Jews who fled Nazi Europe from 1933 to 1941 and another 5,000 to 10,000 who fled Stalin's Russia before that. Viewers of Steven Spielberg's 1987 film "Empire of the Sun" got a glimpse of the area. Known in Chinese as Hongkou (or Hongkew), the ghetto was a haven for stateless refugees in a city that for years did not require a visa to enter.

Almost all the Jews, except a few descendants of mixed parentage, resettled in New York, Los Angeles, Tel Aviv and elsewhere as the Communists took power in 1949. They left behind a charming neighborhood with row houses, schools, a synagogue, a park and even a Little Vienna Cafe. The district is now inhabited by working-class Chinese, some of whom live in rooms lighted by a single hanging bulb and with three or more families sharing a kitchen and bathroom. When Shanghai officials announced urban renewal plans for the North Bund almost two years ago, they said they envisioned turning the area into a masterpiece of the 21st century, a modern business and residential district with skyscrapers, apartment buildings, cruise ship docks and even an enormous Ferris wheel.

The gleaming metropolis that city planners had in mind did not leave room for a quaint old neighborhood. Officials had earmarked about 400 historic buildings for preservation citywide, but in the old ghetto only the Ohel Moshe Synagogue and a block or so of row houses made the list.

Mr. Choa had a different idea. He and his New York-based architecture firm, HLW International, entered a competition to design a master plan for the new North Bund.

HLW, along with two other firms, the Cox Group of Australia and RTKL Associates of Baltimore, won.

Mr. Choa, who had already restored the Art Deco lobbies of the Park Hotel and the Peace Hotel annex, architectural jewels from the era when Shanghai was known as the Paris of the East, has experience in environmentally sensitive design. The centerpiece of his plan is creating a memorial park around the synagogue, where there are now buildings, and bringing in gravestones of Jewish residents from former cemeteries. He says his idea would symbolically link the park to the Huangpu River on one end and an ornate Buddhist temple on the other.

Yet creating the park would mean saving only a few more of the ghetto buildings than the city required, Mr. Choa said. By tearing down some of the row houses, developers, who would be chosen by the government, could build more profitable high-rises.

"The choice was to keep the housing or put in a park," he said. "Park space was so underrepresented. I thought the park was more important."

"I agonized a lot about what to do in this area," he added, calling the decision a "Faustian bargain."

Mr. Choa said that no matter what he proposed, much of the ghetto could be torn down anyway. "There's no guarantee that even a municipal-preserved building will stay," he said.

But momentum is growing to preserve the entire neighborhood. An alternate plan has been drawn up by two Canadians, Ian Leventhal and Thomas M. Rado, who are Jewish. They formed a company called Living Bridge, that is trying to raise \$450 million to preserve at least 50 ghetto buildings in a nine-block area.

"Our plan calls for the restoration of all the buildings of significant architectural importance, such as the row houses, the Broadway Theater and of course the Ohel Moshe Synagogue," Mr. Leventhal wrote in an e-mail message, though he declined to say how much money has been raised.

Mr. Leventhal and Mr. Rado, who are working with government-appointed preservation professors from a Shanghai university and a Toronto architect, made a presentation to district officials in Hongkou last Monday. If district officials can be convinced of the financial viability of the Leventhal-Rado restoration plan -- which also calls for a boutique hotel, an extensive memorial park and a car-free pedestrian zone -- it would then go to the Shanghai city government for consideration when they auction the area to developers.

"In principle the government is supportive, and our next step is to do a more detailed version for presentation early this summer," Mr. Leventhal said, adding that he hoped to set a precedent for heritage conservation and development.

The Ohel Moshe Synagogue is already a tourist attraction. No longer used for worship (Judaism is not officially recognized by the Chinese government), the synagogue operates as a small museum and Jewish cultural center supported by donations. A museum plaque listing visitors during the last few years includes photos of Hillary Rodham Clinton, former Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder of Germany and former Israeli Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Benjamin Netanyahu.

Because Shanghai has not decided which redevelopment path to take, no one knows what, if any, buildings beyond the synagogue and the row-house block will be preserved. All Mr. Choa, Mr. Leventhal and Mr. Rado can do is keep urging government officials to consider the tourism potential of the district so that they in turn might transfer that pressure onto future developers.

"You're just trying to save as much as possible," Mr. Choa said.

Photos: Christopher Choa, of the architecture firm HLW International, is trying to preserve the old Jewish ghetto in Shanghai. (Photo by Fritz Hoffmann/documentChina, for The New York Times)(pg. E1); Christopher Choa at the Ohel Moshe Synagogue, a central building in his preservation plan for the North Bund district of Shanghai. (Photo by Fritz Hoffmann/documentChina, for The New York Times)(pg. E5)

Map of China highlighting Shanghai and its North Bund section. (pg. E5)