An Alternative Path of Conservation and Renovation of Historic District Conservation of Urban Heritage in Real Estate Project:

A Case Study of Shanghai Old Town

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Abstract

During the process of Shanghai urban development, the social space of old residential blocks in down area tends to be stratified, meanwhile the historic scenes have been damaged gradually. As a case study of Shanghai Old Town—one of the historic districts in Shanghai—this article analyses the effects of the urban policies, the protection plan, the state-owned developer and the international designers on the district. This article also reflects the social demolishment in the process of renovation, the dilemma of protection of the urban heritages’ authenticity, and the tendencies of urban culture’s commercialization.

1. Evolution of Shanghai Old Town

Backed up by the network of rivers and Huangpu River, Shanghai Old Town prospered from a port into a bustling market from the 13th through 19th century. A fishing village surrounded by walls thus came into being. In order to connect foreign concessions at the outskirt of walls, rivers were filled into roads in the early 20th century and the town’s layout initially formed. Since 1910s to 1940s, Shanghai Old Town was the wartime center of Chinese settlement, where a large number of poor old lanes located. From 1950s to 1980s, the density of population in Shanghai old town gradually increased. Due to its bad living conditions and concentration of the poor, the Old Town became an inferior area in downtown Shanghai. Starting from the late 1990s, roads were broadened, high-rises were built and tourist spots were renovated within this area. Native habitants moved out and migrant workers moved in during the decade. After 2000, with the launching of large-scaled development projects, numerous old houses were demolished.
2. General situation of Shanghai Old Town

Shanghai Old Town is one of the twelve municipal-level historic and cultural areas in downtown of Shanghai with the total area of 199 hectares. The district is featured with local culture and landscape of the traditional urban life of Shanghai in the end of the Qing Dynasty. It has clear boundaries and unique scenes. The streets densely cross the district, carrying the multiple ordinary life of Shanghai. The structure of the streets is formed spontaneously, which is the attractive network for people to learn and experience Shanghai’s transformation.
1) The diversities of urban life and urban space

The diversity and uniqueness of Shanghai Old Town is distinctive in downtown Shanghai. Originating from the previous network of rivers, traditional streets and lanes were densely distributed in the Old Town. Though its habitants were natives at first, they were influenced by western colonial culture later. So architectures distinctive of Shanghai, of both Chinese and western style, and of western style can all be found there. With these various architectures combined together, a diversified and unique urban space was formed in Shanghai Old Town.

Different from others areas in Shanghai which are influenced by western lifestyle, the social lifestyle in Shanghai Old Town is similar to that in traditional Chinese cities. We can still find street markets, buy fresh vegetables from farmers, and join neighboring activities… These vibrant scenes demonstrate the long-term evolution of social structure in Shanghai Old Town.

2) Demographic structure

Most of the habitants of Shanghai Old Town are natives, but due to its poor conditions in living and inconvenience in traffic, high-income habitants have gradually moved out since 2000, leaving those with low income, especially the aged, still living there. As for the migrant renters, 90% of them are workers and vendors with low income. They move frequently and...
Figure 7  Architecture and space types in Shanghai Old Town

Figure 8  Community Life in Shanghai Old Town
live under the same roof with the natives.

3) The stratification of social space and damage of historic scene

The old residential area with distributed old sheds and Shikumen, is the settlement of low-income, less-educated and aged people, whose living space per capita is less than 5m². The new residential area is full of luxury high-rises with middle or higher class residents. The living space per capita is more than 30m², even 50~60m².

![Figure 9](image9.png) The demographic structure of a neighborhood

![Figure 10](image10.png) The spatial distribution of migrants per house (the light to dark color shows migrants increasing from 1 to 11)

![Figure 11](image11.png) Tradition lanes in Shanghai Old Town (left) and renovated lanes (right)
Though the percentage of re-developed area is small in the renovation of Shanghai Old Town, new constructions and old ones are 100% kept apart. Communities on the two sides of a street are separated by a wall, which deprives the street of its vitality and social significance and turns public space into private space within the wall.

Traditional space scale and continuity is also damaged by this situation. Sharp comparison in height and shape between constructions on the two sides of the street tears apart the integrity of historic scene.

3. A case study of Luxiangyuan Project

1) Overview

Developers: Shanghai Chengtou Holding Co., Ltd. (a large state-owned company) & Hongkong Land

Luxiangyuan project covers an area of about 149,300 square meters and construction area of 391,600 square meters, floor area ratio of 2.53. The project is mainly composed of residential buildings, including both public and commercial facilities. The relocation and construction of the project will be divided into two phases with the total investment of 6.2 billion.

2) Path

(1).Acquiring land development right around 2000;  (2).Sustained relocation and demolition from 2003-2008;  (3). Completing the protection plan of historic and cultural districts in 2005;  (4). Revising schemes for several times; 5. Starting construction by stages from 2010.

■ Relocation and demolition of the site

Till year 2008, about 4000 former households in the block were relocated, and the process lasted 5 years.
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All the old houses except 7 buildings qualified by the plan were demolished. According to the project, residents were relocated through means of cash compensation or housing in another place (for exchange). Buildings not included in the conservation plan were all demolished, and houses newly built were sold in the market to get investment returns.

Figure 13 The original project site and its demolition
In year 2003, Luxiangyuan project coincided with the starting point of municipal regulation of historic and cultural districts. Shanghai Old Town was one of the 12 government-designated districts, so the related plan of Luxiangyuan was stopped. In year

Figure 14 The protection planning

Figure 15 The project plot map
2005, “The Protection Plan of Shanghai Old Town Historic and Cultural District” was approved. The original project planning of Luxiangyuan must be adjusted base on the protection plan, redefining which building should be preserved, rethinking the height control landscape conversation, and adjusting the functions of space within the block. As a result, difficulty of the project was increased, and profits for the developers decreased.

- Comparison between protection plan and development scheme
  
  - Small plots combined to big ones

In order to conserve the urban fabric of Shanghai Old Town, the protection plan specifies the sizes and boundaries of plots (construction communities) to be developed (see black bold lines in figure 14). As a result of the combination of architectural complex in small plots, the urban fabric of Shanghai Old Town is fine and sophisticated, the scale of constructions and space is small, and architectures and space are diversified. If the complex of constructions is not organized by small plot, the unique urban fabric is definitely to be affected, which in turn will damage the historic scale of the Old Town. However, the project is transferred and implemented by the developer as a whole. Though the original streets and lanes are preserved, combination of architectural complex is not in fully accordance with the
protection plan.

The objective cause is that the protection plan had not been made before the projects were initiated. But what’s more important, we should notice that, in big projects most developers don’t want to organize architectural complex by small plot, because it will cost more time and money.

- The design changed the fabric and scale

As small plots were combined into big ones, the layout went through many revisions. The first layout scheme submitted by the developer was totally different from the original one in urban fabric and space scale. It failed to demonstrate the diversity of layout and space, and the whole space tended to be homogeneous. After communication with the developer, the final scheme was completely unlike the first one. However, it still altered the original fabric and scale in some parts, imposing a negative influence on the historic scene.

- Original lifestyle changed by the design scheme

The project will take up 1/4 area in the northwestern part of Shanghai Old Town and be built into a luxury residential community with an average price of over 50,000 yuan (even up to 70,000 yuan) per square meter. Original features and symbols in architectural style are kept, but due to its high price, first-class materials and luxury environment, the community is sure to stand out sharply from its neighboring constructions. It will not only result in an isolated space, but also create a totally different lifestyle.

4. Conclusion

1) Reflection on the social demolition in Renovation

While conserving and renovating old districts, how to balance the protection of heritage
with improvement of living standard is a comprehensive topic. The path of conservation and renovation will exert a direct influence on the balance. Who is the subject is the most critical factor, because its operating pattern and value determine the way of conservation and renovation. Luxiangyuan project in Shanghai Old Town tells us the conservation and renovation of historic districts shouldn’t be integrated and large-scaled. That’s because when a company undertakes a project, a series of products instead of diversified ones are produced. The result will necessarily lead to breakup of the previous social space and disintegration of the existing social structure.

2) WHAT & WHY for conservation?

The basic principle of cultural heritage protection is to preserve its authenticity, including requirements to protect the authenticity of living heritage. Therefore, the significance and
value of historic district protection should not only contain material elements and cultural symbols, but also embody collective memory and structure of the community. Contemporary cultural consumption on cultural heritage tends to drive the conservation and renovation of historic districts to extreme commercialism. Once people realize the infinite added-value of culture, this pattern is repeatedly applied to all protection and renovation projects unconditionally. In Luxiangyuan project, native habitants have moved out. While some are of their own willingness, some prefer staying in new buildings constructed at the same place. So when we talk about protecting collective memory, especially during balancing, the collective memory of native habitants is often ignored and substituted by the meaning of all citizens' or even the whole nation's collective memory.

3) Urban cultural symbol and global imagination

Considered against global background, the topic can be regarded as a common view on the economic value of cultural heritage under the influence of global economic integration. The globalization of Shanghai enlarges the consumer group of traditional Chinese cultural heritage and leads to overheated pursuit of the economic value of urban cultural heritage in a short period of time, greatly accelerating the commercialization and fining of urban cultural heritage protection in Shanghai.