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Participatory Reconstruction of Community Planning from the Perspective of "Place Orientation" — A Case Study of the Renovation of Old Residential Areas in Nanjing City

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Abstract. With the issuance of the "Guiding Opinions on Comprehensively Promoting the Renovation of Urban Old Residential Areas" by the State Council in 2020, the renovation of urban old residential areas has been officially listed as a national policy. Currently, many renovations of old residential areas in China lack local characteristics, tend to be standardized and procedural, and seldom explore residents' genuine needs. As a result, residents' real interests are often overlooked. This study focuses on old neighborhoods in Nanjing to explore how community planning can become more participatory and locally grounded. Using literature review and case analysis, it is found that to genuinely protect residents' rights, three types of renewal must be implemented concurrently: renewal of stakeholders, renewal of processes, and renewal of spaces. The government should provide platforms and legal support; companies should commit to social responsibility and share decision-making; and residents should have a real voice. Only then can the local characteristic of living spaces be preserved.

Keywords: Locality, Renovation of old residential areas, Urban development, People's rights, Reconstruction

1. Introduction

The renovation of old residential areas constitutes a core component of urban renewal plan, livelihood development promotion and grassroots governance improvement [1]. It has become one of the significant topics in the new era urban planning since the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development launched a pilot program in some cities in 2017. However, according to Xiong [2], the current form of urban construction in China has generally shifted. models focusing on site renewal have transitioned to those centered on expansion. By the end of 2023, the number of old residential buildings awaiting renovation had reached 50 million units, but only 10% of them had been renovated to date. This indicates significant gaps in the renovation actions for old residential areas. Zhao [3] further indicates that, mostly apart from government policies and execution issues, there are also some issues in public participation so that the residents are unable to express their opinions effectively, leading to setbacks in renovation projects. This problem is closely related to whether the renovation retains "locality". To explore this opinion, this article will begins with the

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challenges of renovation in old residential areas of Nanjing, exploring the action path of participatory reconstruction from a local perspective, employing research methods such as literature analysis and case study analysis to provide theoretical references and solutions for the renovation of old residential areas.

2. Analysis of the challenges in renovating old residential areas in Nanjing

The renovation of old residential communities is a key strategy for promoting sustainable urban development and enhancing public welfare. Despite nationwide efforts, persistent challenges remain in certain regions. Nanjing is an example. This article explores the main contradictions in the process of renovating old communities in Nanjing: the mismatch between standardized supply and personalized demands, the disconnection between top-down decision-making and actual implementation, and the misalignment between renovation outcomes and the actual needs of residents.

2.1. The dilemma of standardized supply and personalized demands

In most renovations of older neighborhoods, the work is usually carried out by external developers rather than local authorities. However, as non-stakeholders, these developers often adopt standardized designs which prioritize simple operation and regulatory compliance. This phenomenon results in renovations that neglect residents' actual need, focusing more on task completion than on improvement in life. It results in unnecessary resource waste, cost overruns, and growing resident dissatisfaction, ultimately failing to deliver the intended qualityoflife benefits.

A typical example is the renovation of Shenjia Lane Community in Nanjing's Qinhuai District. As part of a safety upgrade, identical security doors were installed in every household. Yet the design was impractical: the door's fixed middle panel cut the usable opening in half, making it difficult to move furniture or even collect letters. Persistent appeals from residents went unaddressed. This case highlights the actual disconnection between the top-down, standardized renovation plan and the diverse, practical needs of local residents. Such disconnection often triggers conflicts and undermines the goal of community reconstruction.

2.2. Decision-making procedures and implementation efficiency

The renovation of old urban areas is a national nature livelihood project, which involves multiple stakeholders, including residents, contractors, and various government bodies. Specifically, People's Congress representatives may propose motions and regulatory amendments related to renovation projects; government departments coordinate planning and implementation; and sub-district offices act as intermediaries between residents and contractors. While this multi-stakeholder framework aims to ensure supervision and safeguard public interests, it also results in lengthy and inflexible procedures involving application, approval, and implementation. As a result, complex negotiations tend to marginalize residents' actual needs and slow down the resolution of issues. Unclear property rights further prolong the decision-making process. Due to inadequate initial planning in many old communities, the boundaries between public and private spaces often remain ambiguous [4]. This makes it difficult to align the interests of different stakeholders during renovation.

Notably, a clear example of this challenge can be seen in the old neighborhoods along Huju North Road in Nanjing. Composed mainly of former unit housing, the area lacks sufficient roads and parking spaces by current standards. Years ago, residents proposed converting the space under a

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nearby elevated bridge into a parking lot to ease congestion. However, due to unresolved property rights and inefficient inter-department coordination, the project has remained stalled for six years. This case clearly illustrates how unclear property rights and inefficient administrative coordination severely hinder the renovation process.

2.3. Renovation outcomes and resident demands

Additionally, since the construction companies involved are external contractors rather than direct extensions of the government or street offices, and since they often employ both internal staff and temporary workers, the renovation workforce tends to be diverse in scale and uneven in competence. Even with comparable labor costs, the lack of effective supervision can result in inconsistent contractor performance and significant disparities in renovation quality.

Furthermore, unlike conventional construction projects, funding for old residential renovations does not originate from homeowners. Instead, it is typically provided by government bodies or local housing authorities. Notably, regional economic fluctuations can affect funding availability, potentially causing delays in payments or even shortages. In turn, this may lead to contractor disengagement or work stoppages, seriously compromising the timeline and quality of renovation.

It is also noteworthy that because residents do not contribute financially, their influence over the process remains limited. This often results in a situation where neither construction companies nor the residents are satisfied with the final outcome.

3. Pathways to participatory regeneration: a locality-based approach

Issues related to supply, policy, and quality in the renovation of old residential areas collectively reveal a fundamental dilemma: current renovation processes are often dominated by conflicts among policies, procedures, and construction companies. Residents, as key participants, have been consistently marginalized, with attention primarily focused on contractors and on-site administrative departments. This oversight also reflects the neglect of the "locality" inherent to these communities.

While "locality" is an inherent attribute of architecture [5], originally referring to the integration of design with local natural, historical, and user-psychological contexts, it remains highly relevant to the renewal of old neighborhoods. To effectively address problems such as irrational planning, low resident participation, and inconsistent construction quality, this article adopts a perspective based on locality. It explores how old residential areas can enhance resident involvement through a threefold process of "reconstruction," thereby advancing toward a more participatory model of neighborhood renewal.

3.1. Reconfiguration of participatory entities

As shown earlier, the actual participants in old residential areas are typically construction enterprises and government bodies. However, residents, who should be the primary beneficiaries, are often excluded from the process. Unless invited by the government or companies to share their views, residents generally lack formal channels to express their needs. Therefore, the reconfiguration of stakeholders involves optimizing the participant structure in the renovation process, ensuring that residents are included as active participants. This shift also supports the transformation of the "locality" of renovation subjects. Importantly, such reconfiguration extends beyond merely including residents in the leadership. It requires clearly defining the responsibilities of the government,

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companies, and residents. Their respective rights, obligations, and mutual relationships must also be adjusted accordingly.

3.1.1. Residents

As direct beneficiaries of renovation projects, residents should contribute to defining requirements, participate in planning, monitor progress, and review final results. Their demands should be consistently reflected throughout the project. Since it is difficult to meet every resident's individual needs, a representative system can be adopted within the community. Residents may elect representatives to discuss and decide on renovation plans through regular meetings or councils. Community-wide assemblies can also be organized to collect feedback and establish clear standards, helping to ensure that the renovations deliver practical benefits to all residents.

3.1.2. Government

The government traditionally served as the direct coordinator with companies, but now should delegate certain powers to residents, such as the right to participate in and influence renovation projects. However, a core issue in current renovations lies in the lack of resident voice. When genuine beneficiaries lack a voice, projects often become distorted by competing interests. In this context, "locality" not only involves meeting residents' needs but also entails granting them concrete authority. To achieve this, the government must establish legally grounded, institutionalized platforms for deliberation. For example, a sub-district-level resident consultation system can formalize and structure participation. Furthermore, resident-supported opinions should be formally incorporated into renovation plans. Simultaneously, the government should provide institutional, financial, and capacity-building support to residents. Given the diversity among residents, prior to their formal participation, the government should offer training and guidance to help them express their needs in a reasonable and standardized manner.

3.1.3. Enterprises

As contractors, enterprises directly affect renovation quality. However, factors such as conflicting interests, varying capabilities, and inadequate accountability can lead to inconsistent outcomes. It should also be noted that qualification requirements for old residential renovations remain insufficient, allowing irresponsible corporate behavior to go unchecked and undermining the protection of residents' rights. Therefore, the role of enterprises must be properly regulated. A critical requirement is for enterprises to assume social responsibility. While fulfilling contractual obligations is fundamental, this alone is insufficient for public welfare projects such as neighborhood renovation. Enterprises should respect and support the central role of residents, avoid top-down decision-making, and instead engage at the community level to assist residents in making informed choices. Moreover, to ensure the long term effectiveness of these livelihood projects, enterprises should establish a full-cycle governance mechanism covering design, construction, operation, and maintenance. Such an approach not only serves public interest but also helps companies build reputation, expand their business scope, and achieve sustainable development.

3.2. Reconfiguration of process

The main goal of redesigning the renovation process for old neighborhoods is to change how the work is carried out and in what order, with a stronger focus on solving practical problems during

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implementation. The conventional renovation process follows a linear sequence in which the government first approves a plan before construction commences. This approach tends to be inflexible and allows limited participation from residents and other stakeholders. As a result, the objectives of those implementing the renovation often conflict with the expectations of residents, leading to widespread dissatisfaction.

To address this, this study restructures the three key stages of decision making, implementation, and evaluation by applying the principle of local focus. This ensures the process better reflects the actual needs of the community.

Reforming decision-making mechanisms is the core of this restructuring. Currently, plans are typically formulated in a top-down manner: a design team develops a proposal, the government approves it, and the final plan is presented to residents. While this may appear efficient, it excludes residents from the process even though they are the primary beneficiaries. Involving residents in decisions from the beginning can significantly improve outcomes. A notable example is the renovation of Liuzhou New Village in Nanjing. Rather than following the conventional model of demolition and reconstruction, the project team organized more than sixty meetings with residents during the design phase to gather input. This people-centered approach centered on community needs before construction began. Through surveys, meetings, and design voting, residents were granted substantive role early in the planning process.

The implementation phase frequently encounters comparable difficulties, as residents are rarely adequately informed during construction and typically lack opportunities to supervise work, monitor quality, and track progress, often having to accept the final results without meaningful involvement. To address this, transparency must be integrated into the construction process. Opening the site for resident visits and inspections and setting up a resident supervision group to monitor ongoing work can be two key points. Composed of resident representatives, construction professionals, and independent observers, this team can conduct reviews at key stages, inspect materials, track progress, and help ensure the result aligns with residents' expectations.

The evaluation of renovation projects also requires a new approach. At present, officials and experts mainly evaluate success by verifying whether the final work aligns with the original designs and adheres to the budget. However, this method is insufficient for old neighborhoods. Residents' opinions should play a central role in assessing project success. Beyond a single review after completion, a continuous evaluation system can be implemented. This system would track how effectively the renovated spaces are used in everyday life. It can also monitor whether residents remain satisfied over time. Furthermore, it can assess how the community's quality of life improves. This approach ensures renovations truly meet residents' needs.

3.3. Reconfiguration of spaces

In the process of renovating older neighborhoods, spatial redesign is the most visually prominent aspect. Unlike adjustments in policies or procedures, it delivers tangible, observable upgrades that directly transform buildings and the surrounding environment. Amid rapid urbanization, renovations in these areas often replace original features with modern, standardized designs. While such designs may appear aesthetically pleasing, they frequently disappoint residents. Therefore, optimizing spatial utilization is essential. This section explores the physical, cultural, and social dimensions of "locality" in spatial redesign and offers relevant recommendations.

Physical space redesign involves upgrading community infrastructure, refreshing building exteriors, and reorganizing street layouts. Traditional renovations typically rely on uniform, standardized plans, but this repetitive, rigid design can make residents feel disconnected. To

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effectively redesign physical space, planners must focus on residents' actual living patterns, starting with soliciting their input. Based on resident feedback, targeted, small-scale modifications can be made. For example, unused corners can become play areas for children or pets, and shared facilities can be made movable to ensure flexible use. This approach enhances spatial utility and strengthens residents' sense of belonging.

Cultural space redesign connects emotional meaning with physical place. Luo [6] highlights that Locality with phased theoretical development, which include architectural phenomenology, emphasizes the connection between buildings, people, and places, highlighting the role of collective memory. Spaces in old neighborhoods embody shared memories and reflect local identity. Simply replacing them with standardized construction will erases community history and severs the link between people and place. Now residents should actively communicate with renovators, who can preserve or gently update features with collective significance. This action can help maintain residents' sense of belonging and well-being.

Previous inadequacies in social space renovation mainly stem from neglecting residents' actual interaction patterns. Uniform designs tend to overlook existing social networks and disrupt daily routines. Redesigning social spaces should center on people and their connections. Effective renovations may encourage neighborly interaction by creating shared gathering spaces or adding amenities that support casual socializing. This approach directly addresses residents' needs for convenient daily contact and helps build stronger community ties.

4. Conclusion

Renovating old residential areas is consistently significant for urban development and public welfare. However, current practices in Nanjing show that implementation challenges persist despite strong policy backing. Issues here include mismatched supply and demand, inefficient procedures, and inadequate capacity. These problems mainly caused by renovations that often neglect the "locality" of communities, which encompasses their unique social and physical context, and lose sight of the core goal, which is to protect residents' interests and meet their needs. Therefore, this study examines neighborhood renewal through three aspects: stakeholders, processes, and spaces, proposing a framework focused on locality. The main suggestions are summarized below. First, residents' opinions should be integrated into renovation plans. The government can support this through formal consultation systems, training for residents, and transparent oversight to ensure the fulfillment of community needs. Second, designs should preserve the unique social and cultural features of each community. This means avoiding uniform, standard plans and adopting solutions that fit local identity and daily life. Finally, enterprises, the government, and residents should each assume clear roles and collaborate effectively to complete renovation projects. It should be noted that this study is mainly based on cases from Nanjing and does not include comparisons with other cities. Future research could incorporate cities from different regions or countries to explore how diverse cultural and institutional settings affect neighborhood renewal.

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