

# Reflections on the Renewal of Historical Buildings in Old Urban Areas under the Organic Renewal Theory

## — A Case Study of Tianjin Quanyechang Area

Zhang Xiaoshan Li Jianghong Institute for Design, Hebei Academy of Fine Arts

### ABSTRACT

After the development of domestic cities has undergone internationalization and modernization, the academic community has increasingly recognized the growing issue of unsustainable urban development. Against this backdrop, the theory of organic renewal has gained widespread acceptance in the domestic academic community. Old urban areas, typically found in more mature urban regions, have become the primary focus of urban renewal efforts over time. This paper selects the Tianjin Quanyechang area as a case study, analyzing causes of the challenges faced in its renewal, including cost depression, unconventional renewal needs, and current regulatory constraints, and puts forward new ideas for the protection and reuse of historical buildings from many aspects..

**Key words:** organic renewal; old urban areas; historical building protection; historical building reuse; Quanyechang area

### 1 Organic renewal theory

The organic renewal theory was developed by Professor Wu Liangyong, based on his extensive research into the planning and construction of Beijing's old urban areas. This theory is grounded in an understanding of the historical and theoretical development of urban areas in both China and the West, tailored to Beijing's unique conditions. It advocates for "following the inherent development laws of cities, adapting to their natural textures, and exploring urban renewal and development on a sustainable basis." The theory was successfully applied in the renovation of Juer Hutong, demonstrating that organic renewal aligns with the principles of sustainable urban development and meets the specific needs of protecting and developing historical and cultural heritage. The core principles of this theory include organic wholeness (Organic Wholeness), step-by-step progress (Step by Step), and cautious renewal (Careful

Renewal).

In Professor Wu Liangyong's book *The Old City of Beijing and Its Juer Hutong Neighbourhood*, he summarizes: "'Organic renewal' involves adopting appropriate scale and dimensions, and properly addressing the relationship between the present and the future based on the content and requirements of the renewal. This process continuously improves the quality of planning and design, ensuring that each area develops in a relatively complete manner. By combining the sum of these numerous relatively complete areas, we can enhance the overall environment of old city of Beijing, achieving the goal of organic renewal." In this sense, the "organic renewal" theory is not only actively exploring a new urban design concept to adapt to the renewal of old city of Beijing, but also striving to apply the sustainable development strategy to the renewal practice of old city of Beijing.

## 2 Overview of Tianjin Quanyechang area

Tianjin, a city that has thrived along the river, has seen its urban space expand along the river. The city was fortified and established as a military garrison during the Ming Dynasty, and in 1860, it opened as a treaty port and established a concession. The Heping District has always been the heart of urban expansion. The city's development accelerated the formation of modern Heping, where it is said, though it is but a small corner, it holds the key to the rise and fall of the nation. As the heart of Heping District, Quanye Street was mostly developed before 1913, predating the now world-renowned Five Avenues. It was once the site of the Japanese and French Concessions, preserving a wealth of architectural styles from that era, imbued with a rich cultural atmosphere. Today, the Quanyechang area blends prosperity with solitude; as you walk through it, you can experience the city's most upscale commercial spaces and also encounter its narrow and crowded alleys.

### 2.1 Business center status

Currently, the Quanye Street area is home to over ten department stores covering more than 10,000 square meters, with a total construction area of approximately 800,000 square meters. It is a true commercial and trade center in Tianjin. Historically, this area has been the commercial heart of Tianjin. The Quanyechang, completed in 1928, not only sold goods but also integrated various entertainment venues such as the Tiangong Theatre, Tianhuajing Theatre, Tianle Theatre, Tianwei Ball Club Tianlu Teahouse, Tiansheng Theatre, Daguanyuan, and the rooftop night garden "Tianwaitian", which opened in summer. Known as the "Eight Heavens", these venues pioneered the concept of shopping centers in China and were the absolute commercial landmarks in the north at that time. After 1949, the International Building and the International Mall, as the first urban complex in Tianjin, became the earliest business and trade center in Tianjin. The International Mall was also the first high-end mall in China to sell imported goods.

### 2.2 Narrow road network and exotic street style

The old community of the Quanyechang area was

basically built during the concession period. The whole block style retains the narrow road network form of European and American blocks, with a building density of more than 60%, while the average building density in the six districts of Tianjin is only about 35%. The average height of residential buildings, public management and service facilities, and commercial service buildings in the area is around four stories, giving the region a style reminiscent of traditional European blocks. The diversified investment in concession construction has also promoted the integration of diverse architectural styles. At that time, the developers included national capital, Sino-foreign joint ventures, and foreign-funded projects from various countries, leading to a fusion of Chinese and Western design philosophies in building designs. Many buildings feature a blend of modern and classical architectural elements. Some courtyards have European-style front courts and Chinese-style backyards.

### 2.3 The oldest community, the most crowded space, and the worst living conditions

The old community in the Quanyechang area occupied 47.9 hectares and had a construction area of 416,000 square meters before 1980, accounted for nearly one-third of the area. According to the 2016 permanent resident population data, the average living space was 15 square meters. However, due to severe unauthorized construction and renovations, the actual living space in some units was less than 10 square meters. The Quanyechang Street area has the largest scale of severely damaged houses, far exceeding other historical areas. Recent statistics from relevant departments on the scale of severely damaged houses show that the scale in the Quanyechang Street area is much larger than in the Five Avenues and other concession areas. These severely damaged houses are mainly concentrated in non-historical blocks and the construction control zones of historical blocks, with many houses being incomplete and numerous illegal constructions inside. Moreover, a large number of residential buildings have "legal status" and have been identified as protective buildings of various grades such as national security and municipal security. The current status of these buildings is not much different

from the past; the main residents are low-income urban residents, mostly migrant workers. The internal space of the buildings is clearly divided, and subletting, vacancy, and multiple households living together are common phenomena in the Quanyechang Street areas historical buildings, posing significant challenges to the protection of these historical buildings. (Figures 1, 2)



Figure 1 Current situation of street environment and interior space of buildings in Quanyechang area

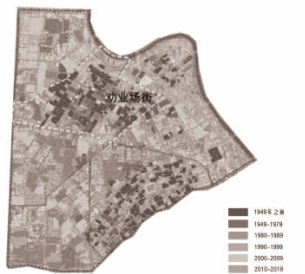


Figure 2: Distribution of residential years in Heping District

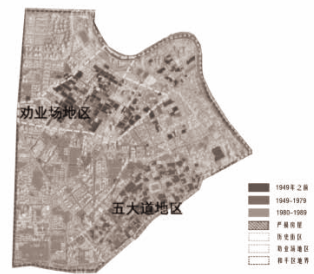


Figure 3: Distribution of damaged houses in Heping District

### 3. Challenges of historical building conservation and reuse

#### 3.1 Management chaos caused by cost depression

The century-old community of the Quanyechang Area is just a street away from the city’s commercial center, with various medical facilities nearby. The community offers ample affordable housing, making it

a natural cost depression that has attracted many low-income migrant workers and informal workers, gradually transforming it into a “settlement city” behind the bustling facade. Moreover, unauthorized urban housing and unlicensed catering businesses are widespread. Although the facades of buildings in the area have been partially renovated, the underlying issues remain unresolved and the timeliness is poor, leading to a persistent environment of dirt, disorder, and poor conditions, which increases the difficulty and cost of urban governance and building renewal.

#### 3.2 Renewal of the conventional living environment that can't meet the needs of the people

The residential building renewal in the Quanyechang Area goes far beyond the scope of conventional updates. For instance, the Chuhuitun block, which was renovated a few years ago, originally belonged to the postal company and consisted of four two-story row houses, each with an independent courtyard on the ground floor. After 1949, the former postal workers gradually moved out, and many of the houses were sold or rented out. In 2015, the district government carried out extensive renovations on the buildings within the block, including decorative repairs, door and window replacements, and simple repainting of the interior spaces, but did not reinforce the structures or address moisture issues. Over the past five years, local residents have been critical of the governments renewal efforts, arguing that they failed to address the fundamental issues of aging structures and damp walls. Moreover, the superficial renovations are short-lived; the wall surfaces quickly become damp and yellow, and the courtyard environment remains disorganized, let alone the integration of new industries. This case highlights that conventional methods of improving living environments are not suitable for these century-old communities.

#### 3.3 “Excessive constraints” imposed by existing laws and regulations on the renewal of residential historic buildings

Most of these living spaces lack essential living facilities. During the renewal, it is necessary to add essential ancillary facilities, such as kitchens and

bathrooms, to make the living spaces more “complete”. Additionally, improvements in insulation, energy efficiency, and other building equipment are required. These enhancements are crucial for improving the quality of internal spaces, enhancing the building environment, and promoting the sustainability of the building. However, according to the National Law of Cultural Relics and the Tianjin Regulations on the Protection of Historical Style Buildings, museums, storage facilities, and tourist attractions are not encouraged for other uses, and the external appearance of buildings must not be altered. In the process of renovating living buildings to make them more complete, the building area will inevitably increase, leading to more or less changes in the buildings appearance. These non-compliant but essential renewals require new regulations for recognition and control.

#### **4. Ideas for the renewal of historical buildings in the Quanyechang Area**

##### **4.1 Building property rights sorting**

In the organic renewal of old historical and cultural blocks, the first step is to clarify the responsibility of residents and relevant departments or institutions for the protection of the blocks and buildings through property rights sorting. At the same time, the replacement of housing property rights in the block is encouraged to improve the enthusiasm of residents to participate in the protection and renewal of the block.

##### **4.1.1 Increasing the circulation rate of property rights of houses in blocks**

The current street area has a significant number of public housing units. Considering their preservation and utilization, the government plans to improve the policies for transferring these properties, prioritizing the sale of affordable housing to original residents. Public housing units with good architectural features within the block will be treated specially, leveraging the scarcity of resources to attract economically capable individuals to purchase. Measures such as tax reductions on private house transactions will be implemented to mitigate the negative impacts of protection policies, enhance property circulation rates, and appropriately update the population.

##### **4.1.2 Clarifying rights and obligations**

The Commission of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the Municipal Real Estate Administrative Bureau, and other relevant departments should be involved in the property rights circulation process of houses in historical and cultural blocks. They should clearly define the rights and obligations of both parties through a house purchase contract and establish a reward and punishment system. First, residents are responsible for maintaining their houses, while the government is responsible for providing financial subsidies and ensuring the use of formal construction teams. Second, the government should follow the policies for affordable housing, restricting public houses in historical and cultural blocks from being directly sold on the market after privatization.

##### **4.2 Strategies for improving the management system**

The residential functions and management models of old blocks should evolve into modern residential communities, adopting the concept of modern property management. Commercial and property management companies should be established or hired under the existing community residents committee. The residents committee will focus on administrative functions, while these companies will handle market operations, achieving a “separation of ownership and management” model in property management. This involves establishing a unified management system to separate ownership from operational rights. By introducing property management, economic benefits can be generated. Additionally, the residents committee should leverage its administrative role to ensure that these economic benefits support block protection, creating a cycle where block renewal supports industrial development, and industrial growth in turn supports block protection.

##### **4.3 Overall protection and local renewal**

In the practice of protecting and restoring modern historical buildings, buildings should be viewed as living entities with a lifecycle, not just static objects. The formulation of technical strategies is akin to a doctor diagnosing and formulating a treatment plan. Therefore,

when determining specific protection and restoration techniques, it is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of modern buildings and to establish an effective holistic restoration plan. In addition to the commercial street along Binjiang Road, the other areas have largely preserved the architectural styles of the Japanese and French concessions. However, not all these traditional areas have been designated as historical blocks; some areas have been excluded. The exclusion is primarily aimed at balancing local development needs with historical preservation requirements, with little difference in architectural style characteristics or historical and cultural value. Therefore, under the current context of optimizing existing resources, it is recommended to treat the Quanyechang area and the entire concession zone as a cohesive scenic area for comprehensive planning and renewal. While buildings with cultural heritage status should be updated according to relevant laws and regulations, the numerous background buildings with general architectural styles should also be respected during the renewal process. Additionally, the street fabric and block modulus of the entire area should be protected and preserved. In the process of revitalization and renewal, emphasis should be placed on preserving cultural carriers and historical sites, and new reuse and renewal activities should be carried out based on this foundation.

Meanwhile, the severe damage, limited functionality, and widespread unauthorized construction in the historical buildings of the Quanyechang area necessitate that the renewal of these buildings should prioritize functional needs. This includes updating some facilities within the indoor spaces, repairing or replacing damaged building components while preserving their “authenticity”, and strictly removing unauthorized constructions to ensure the overall uniformity of the buildings.

#### **4.4 Moderate residential-to-commercial transformation and cultivation of back street economy**

The act of changing a residential house into non-residential use for office, commercial, hotel, or even production activities is commonly known as “residential-to-commercial transformation”. This model is designed to encourage mixed functions, rebuilding a composite social

ecosystem characterized by diverse values, coexistence of multiple industries, and cohabitation of various communities. This model has been widely adopted in the renewal of many old streets in major Western cities, and Tianzifang in Shanghai also follows this approach. However, if not handled properly, this model can have negative impacts on community life, such as excessive noise and heavy environmental burdens. In severe cases, the living scenes and spatial forms that coexist with it can be severely distorted. Therefore, the residential-to-commercial transformation model requires selecting suitable test sites. Considering the current situation of the Quanyechang area, non-historical blocks with relatively intact traditional styles should be chosen, such as the area east of Anshan Road and west of Jinzhou Road. This area is adjacent to the commercial center of Tianjin, the Heping Road and Binjiang Road commercial street area. The district is a naturally open area with narrow roads and dense networks, making it an ideal experimental field for the back street economy. Paris, London, New York, and Tokyo all have well-developed “back street economies”, where the main streets are “linear”, and the back streets are “block-like”. The main streets represent hard power, while the back streets represent soft power. The success of the “back street economy” depends on the deep exploration of local cultural characteristics. In Paris, the back streets of the Champs-Élysées gradually shift humanistic and artistic activities to the back streets as the main streets become more commercialized and tourism-oriented. Similarly, in London, Oxford Street’s back streets, together with the main streets, form a vertical distribution of retail formats, creating a tiered brand mix that includes mass-market, high-end luxury, and top-tier luxury brands. The back streets of New York’s Fifth Avenue conceal a “Gui Gang” that rivals Silicon Valley. In Tokyo’s Ginza, the back streets blend night life with time-honored brands, preserving various Japanese time-honored brands and contrasting sharply with the modern commercial atmosphere of the main street. The Quanyechang area, with its naturally advantageous geographical location and rich cultural heritage, is well-suited for developing a “culture+” themed back street

economy. Since it lacks legal protection status, the methods and approaches to updating the area can be more flexible.

## 5. Conclusion

In addition to the aforementioned update strategies, innovation is a constant driving force for urban development, and the renewal of old blocks still relies on innovation. Therefore, we can draw on the experiences of many large cities in Western countries, where old blocks have been revitalized through the renovation and updating of historical buildings. This approach aims to enhance the quality and optimize the physical space assets, attracting more knowledge and technology-intensive economic assets related to the production and exchange of knowledge and information. The goal is to transform the entire old block into a space characterized by new economic prosperity, thriving industries, and organic sustainability.

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