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Involving the Community in Inner City Renewal: A Case Study of Nanluogu in Beijing

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ABSTRACT. Robust economic growth and rapid urbanization led many Chinese cities to embark upon some of the world's largest inner city renewal projects. The official goal of inner city neighborhood redevelopment is to improve quality of life; however, it has often been used as an excuse to displace the poor. This paper explores a collaborative, grassroots approach to inner city renewal as was applied in the neighborhood of Nanluogu in Beijing. In China, the prevalent approach to inner city renewal has been physical redevelopment of the environment, involving the clearing of debris and addition of modern facilities. In contrast, the cultural approach, which is more collaborative and participatory, draws upon valuable cultural capital and local connections to build social networks, implementing the ideas of the residents and preserving a traditional way of life. In the nearly three years since a cultural approach to inner city renewal was implemented in Nanluogu, the area has succeeded in protecting its historical heritage and local culture, improving the living environment, enlarging community participation in planning, and providing local job opportunities without the need for large-scale demolition or displacement. This case demonstrates how a Chinese community can implement a local plan according to rich cultural and social connections within the neighborhood, rather than accepting a top-down approach imposed by municipal governments.

KEYWORDS. *Inner city, regeneration, neighborhood planning, Nanluogu Neighborhood, Beijing*

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1. INTRODUCTION

China is among the fastest-developing countries in the world; however, the decay of the environment of inner cities is gradually emerging as a critical urban problem. In the west, urban revitalization is usually integrated with neighborhood planning which allows local residents to express their thoughts related to community interests. For example in America, neighborhood planning has been increasingly focused on social, economic, and cultural concerns rather than only physical factors such as the protection of façades or the rerouting of traffic (Rohe 2009). The British government has advanced the 'Going for Growth' strategy, which highlights the need for equality concerning displacement associated with neighborhood gentrification (Cameron 2003).

Urban renewal is not limited to developed countries. In many areas, such as East Asia, South Asia, and South America, redevelopment is often used as a tool to push out the poor (Tibaijuka 2006). Municipal governments believe that by doing so, the city will present a more attractive image (Watson 2002) and become a center of growth (Logan and Molotch 1987). However, the interests of the community and local residents are neglected in the process.

Large-scale inner city development in China began in the 1990s. Initially it aimed at improving the quality of life of local residents and renovating dilapidated housing and alleys. However, it was not long before local governments and state-owned development companies realized the enormous revenue potential of inner city redevelopment. This revelation put profits ahead of quality of life (Wu 2001). Of the approximately half a million residents who were relocated between 1993 and 2003, fewer than one third were able to afford the prices after renewal and move back (Fang 2000). This mass displacement expelled disadvantaged groups to the fringes of urban centers, thereby severing their connections to their jobs and other facilities (Mayer 2003).

This paper reflects on the practice of large-scale, bulldozer-styled inner city redevelopment in China. We also examine an alternative to these methods, the cultural approach to neighborhood regeneration, which emphasizes the involvement of local residents as well as reinforcing neighborhood cultural capital and social networks. Currently, the physical approach remains the standard paradigm in most Chinese cities (Strobel 2003); however, planners and decision makers have begun to realize that this approach is not necessarily conducive to solving neighborhood problems or protecting cultural tradition and social connections (Fang and Zhang, 2003).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Part 2 provides a review of the literature on the negative effects of global inner city redevelopment, as well as the effect of public participation in neighborhood planning. Part 3 outlines the case of Nanluogu. Part 4 examines how stakeholders in Nanluogu constructed a neighborhood participation framework. Conclusions are drawn in Part 5.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Inner city redevelopment has stimulated interest since the end of World War II, when economic growth and residential development shifted from the city center to the rapidly developing suburban fringe. In response, many cities attempted to renew the inner city neighborhood through physical environment (façade) redevelopment. However, the destruction of the original physical environment resulted in a variety of social problems. The prevalence of large-scale, bulldozer-style planning has since declined markedly in developed countries. Concern for civil rights and a desire for equitable policies have made community participation a necessity in most planning processes. However, in much of the developing world, there is still a long way to go before local communities will have a say in inner city regeneration.

2.1 A Global View of Inner-City Redevelopment

In the second half of the 20th Century, as residential growth shifted to the suburbs, inner cities witnessed an economic decline. At the same time, social problems such as racial segregation, poverty, joblessness, and crime emerged in the inner city (Rohe 2009). In this context, governments, quasi-governmental agencies, and non-profit organizations launched various movements aimed at urban renewal and redevelopment (Rhyne 1960). These projects show that large-scale inner-city redevelopment efforts are necessary in the pursuit of urban development in both developed countries (Rohe, 2009; Cameron, 2003) and developing countries (Butler 2001; Njoh 2003; Strobel 2003).

Cameron (2003) identified two trends in urban-renewal policies: urban renaissance and neighborhood renewal. The former emphasizes the creation of an aesthetically pleasing and livable physical environment capable of attracting more affluent individuals; the latter is concerned with the needs of disadvantaged groups within a neighborhood, especially those living in public housing (Cameron 2003). Large-scale bulldozer-style redevelopment dominated American urban renewal efforts in the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, the origin of gentrification can be traced back to slum clearance and mass housing redevelopment in the UK (Butler 2001).

Many socialist countries have undergone a similar transition involving inner city decline with suburban growth. In China, municipal governments have been eager to catch up with the West (Mayer 2003) in the creation of western-style modern landscapes and modernized infrastructure (Strobel 2003). It often appears that in the rapid urbanization stage, issues such as social equality and civil participation are totally neglected by governments.

2.2 The Dark Side of Redevelopment

Since the 1960s, large-scale inner-city redevelopment has been criticized for generating a series of social problems, such as driving out the poor (Jacobs 1961; Caldiara 2000; Tibaijuka 2006), destroying the sense of place (Montgomery 1966; Hall 1988), undermining social bonds (Hartman 1964; Putnam 1993; Putnam 2000; Putnam 2001) and increasing social conflict (Smith 1996).

Large-scale redevelopment is believed to aggravate discrimination, by merely transferring the slums from inner cities to suburbs without solving the problems that motivated the redevelopment plans in the first place (Jacobs 1961). Recently, the Executive Director of UN-Habitat, Anna Tibaijuka, criticized this type of large-scale planning as a tool of governments to hide or sweep the poor away. It has also been argued that large-scale renewal projects create homogeneous neighborhood landscapes, in which a sense of place and community are destroyed (Montgomery 1966). Large-scale redevelopment often destroys social networks and undermines the precious social bonds found in traditional neighborhoods. According to Putnam, social capital is critical for holding a community together by providing the neighborhood with special economic, social, and democratic abilities (Putnam 1993; Putnam 2000). Social capital is critical to “mutual support, cooperation, trust, and institutional effectiveness” (Putnam 2001), and is therefore particularly important to disadvantaged groups in the community. Finally, the often-discriminatory displacement that accompanies inner city redevelopment also tends to trigger social conflict.

2.3 Citizen and Community Participation

Through the decades of post-war social improvement, citizens have gradually gained a say in the planning field and have become influential in the policy-making process. Arnstein (1969), Maier (2000, 2001), and Healey (1997) discussed a series of questions related to public participation, such as who should be involved, how they might participate, and the most efficient ways to involve the public. Rohe (2009), Brownhill and Carpenter (2007) found that the neighborhood represents an efficient scale for participation. They also found that developing an understanding of the neighborhood is a necessary aspect of the planning practice.

Planners and policy makers have realized that the physical approach to redevelopment alone is insufficient to solve social problems (Gans 1962; Fried 1963; Hartman 1964). Thus, civic participation has come to play an increasingly important role in the planning process (Mayer 2003). It is widely believed that the groups involved will benefit from collaboration, by sharing information and knowledge (Healey 1997). At the local level planners and policy makers now

realize that they need community support to guarantee the smooth implementation of their plans (Rohe 2009). The community may be the critical domain in creating a new and open participation plan, providing opportunities for collective action rather than individual behavior (Brownhill 2007).

Walton (1998, 2000), Bayat (2004) and Davis (2004) found planning practices still lack public participation in most developing countries. In many post-communist countries, for example, there remains a strong tendency to rely on a state planning model that lacks civil involvement (Putnam 1995).

3. CASE STUDY AND METHOD

Nanluogu Alley is located in one of Beijing's twenty-five Traditional Courtyard¹ Housing Preservation Districts. *Nanluo Alley* comprises approximately 140 courtyards and 700 families. It is also rich in historical and contemporary culture, with dozens of cafes and bars. Since the early 2000s, the local community² was seeking ways to revitalize their community other than using the growth machine approach. In this case study, interviews were the primary data collection method used to gain insight into the community planning process. This data was supplemented with statistical data from Dongcheng District's yearbook and the annual report of the Jiaojiakou Local Branch.

Since the Nanluogu Area was included in a historical protection area, redevelopment projects have been rare. However, due to the success of one courtyard redevelopment project, the Ju'er Hutong, in the 1990s, district governments and developers came to recognize the profit potential of redevelopment projects, and began forging alliances (growth machines) to seek redevelopment opportunities (Fang and Zhang, 2003). In this approach, planning teams are usually hired by developers or the government and the resulting plans reflect a technocratic interpretation of the interests of developers and the government without little concern for the interests of local residents. However, with the rising consciousness of civil rights at the end of the 1990s, this approach began to lose support.

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1. Courtyard, or Siheyuan in Chinese, is a historical type of residence with four buildings surrounding a courtyard that was commonly found throughout China, most famously in Beijing.
 2. The words "community" and "neighborhood" are used to imply the following respectively in this article: the word of "community" is used to include both the social environment, while the word "neighborhood" is used to refer to the physical environment within a clear set of boundaries.

The Nanluogu Alley in Beijing is located to the southeast of the Tower Building, which is the center of the inner city. Nanluoguxiang has 23,041 residents and 11,769 households (Dongcheng Statistics Bureau 2006). The 770 meter Nanluogu Alley includes approximately 140 courtyards and 700 households (according to a survey by the author in 2006). Most of the residential houses in Sihe Yard are in the traditional style, built before the founding of the P.R.C. in 1949. Broadly speaking, one third of the houses are publicly-owned, one-third are privately-owned and one third belong to state-owned work units (Zhang 2008). Local families have lived in the community for more than three generations. More than 35% of the residents are between the ages of 35 and 55 and many are vulnerable to being laid off.

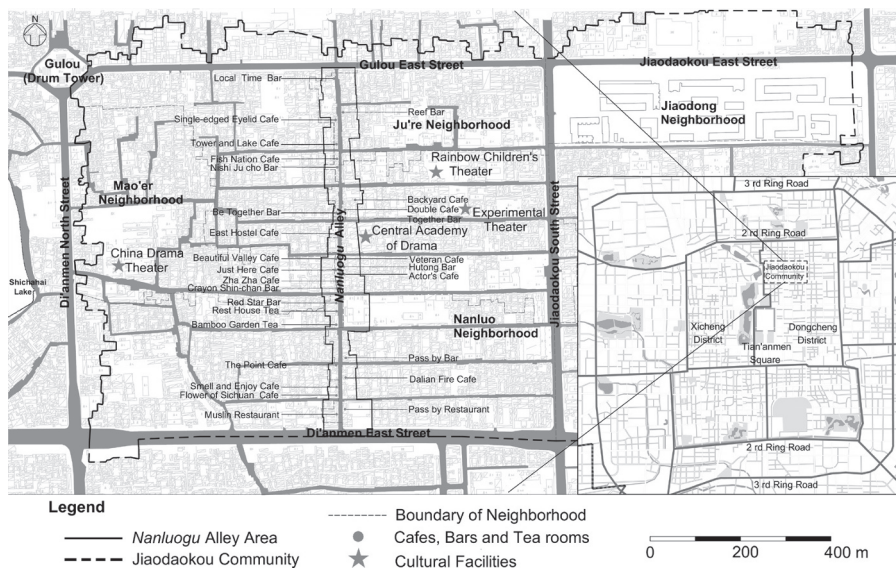


Figure 1. Location of *Nanluogu Alley* and *Jiaodaokou Community* in Beijing

New cultural facilities, such as theaters, add vigor to this traditional community, which faces decline due to poor living conditions and laid off workers. Partly due to efforts at the national level to preserve cultural facilities³, a group of cafés and bars have opened along the alley as social gathering spaces. The construction of these facilities provides a guide for how to regenerate a neighborhood from the margins of decay.

Statistical data were obtained from the Dongcheng District's yearbook and the Jiaojiaokou

3. These include the Central Academy of Drama, China Drama Theater, Rainbow Children's Theater, etc.

Local Branch’s annual report. First-hand account data was collected through in-depth interviews before, during, and after the development of the plan. The interviewees included three local branch officials, two neighborhood committee members, ten local residents, and five entrepreneurs. The interviews were semi-structured and designed to collect data on the following:

- (1) Why and how were you selected to participate in the community planning process?
- (2) How are you involved in the process?
- (3) Which aspect of neighborhood planning concerns you the most? To what degree has it influenced the plan?
- (4) In your opinion, what will be the advantages and disadvantages of the regeneration project?
- (5) The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded.

The Dongcheng District government attempted to redevelop the district to trigger economic development and commercial revitalization (Department of Commerce in Beijing Dongcheng District 2006). However, the local community representatives understood that few of the local residents wanted to move out, and therefore opted to create a planning team focusing on the interests of their own community. The planning team was a non-profit consulting organization, comprised of members drawn from universities, four local officials from the Dongcheng District, a professor, two post-doctoral students, three graduate students, and eight undergraduate students.

4. PLANNING RESPONSE STRATEGIES

Using the Bothwell street neighborhood regeneration as a framework (Medoff and Sklar 1994), the planning strategies of the *Nanluogu* Alley regeneration plan are outlined as follows (Fig. 2).

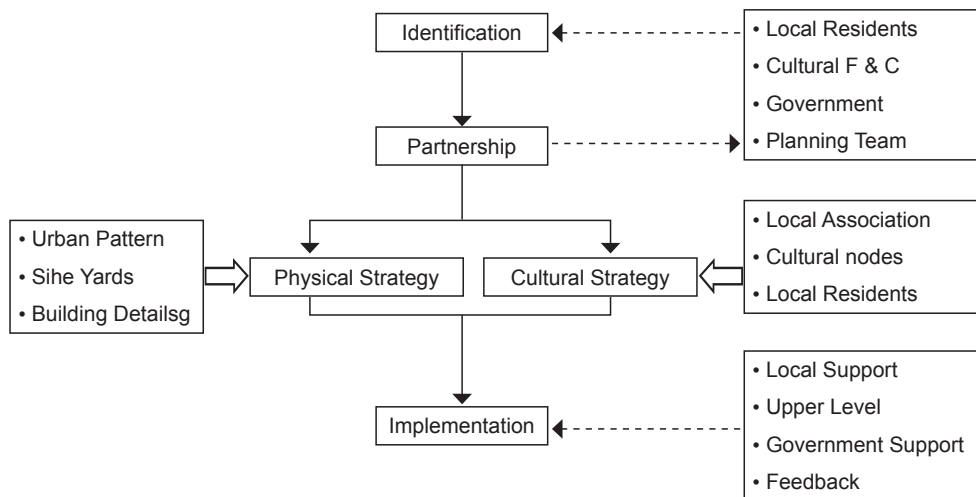


Figure 2. Progression Model of Community Planning

4.1 Identification and Creation of Vision

At the beginning of the planning process, key players in the neighborhood must be identified to organize resources and to define long-term development goals. A collaborative network of key players can then be established to mobilize all of those involved. Local networks play an important role in drawing the community from the edge of decline and invigorating it by identifying elements in both the physical environment and existing cultural networks that need to be preserved. With regard to the physical environment, it was determined that urban courtyards should be strictly protected to maintain a sense of place and local activities, while building details would be updated according to modern living standards.

To emphasize working with the cultural network, a collaborative relationship framework was established to include all the potential actors (Fig. 3). In this framework, local residents were considered to be the keepers of the original local culture. Cultural facilities and companies (F&C) seek profit through cultural consumption.

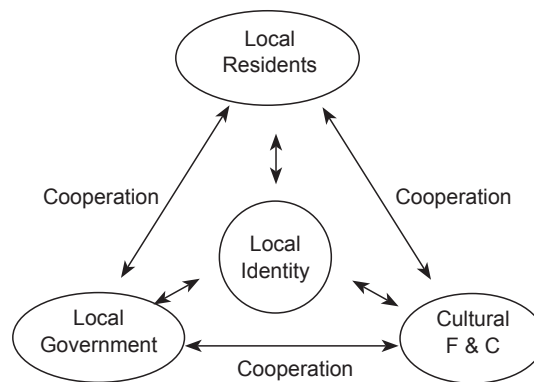


Figure 3. Framework of Multi-Actors Partnership Cooperation

At a community meeting, the following goals were agreed upon:

- Protect the local historical and cultural milieu
- Respect the diversity of different cultures
- Seek ways to combine cultural and economic development
- Mobilize collective activities by supporting local social capital

The identification process was necessary to emphasize local community values, implementing a different approach from those used in previous renewal projects in China.

4.2 Roles and Partnership in Participation

In China, meetings where locals can express public opinion are required in some community-planning cases; however, the public does not really have a say in the process. This case study demonstrates that community-planning could be shifted to a collaborative approach, involving relevant groups in each stage.

In the case of Nanluogu Alley, the roles and responsibilities of participants were clearly defined, varying according to the stage of planning (Table 1). To establish long-term goals for neighborhood revitalization, each interest group selected several representatives to form a small-scale advisory panel to work closely with the planning team. Final decisions were made by a relatively large number of people to ensure community support.

The means of participation also varied. In the case of Nanluogu Alley, participation included the following: (1) Face to face communication, usually in the form of public meetings. For example, offices were opened on the weekend to solicit feedback, gather suggestions, and provide information about the planning process. (2) Negotiation with key figures in the government. For example, the planning team and local officials lobbied the upper level of government for support.

Table 1. Participation in Community Regeneration

| Stage and Steps | Means of Participation | Guider | Participant/ participator | | |
|--|------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|------------|---------------|
| | | Planning Team | Local Residents | Government | Culture F & C |
| Before the planning | | | | | |
| 1. Identify the value of community | ⊙ | ○ | ● | ● | ● |
| 2. Select community development goals | ⊙ | | ● | | |
| During the planning | | | | | |
| 3. Establish a cooperation framework | ⊙ | | ○ | ● | ○ |
| 4. Data collection and investigation | ∞ | ○ | ○ | ● | ○ |
| 5. Data and materials analysis | ▽ | ● | | ○ | |
| 6. Identify problem and evaluation | ∞ ⊙ | ○ | ● | ● | ○ |
| 7. Physical and cultural planning strategies | ▽ | ● | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8. Planning scenario analysis | ∞ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| 9. Decision and coordination | ⊙ | ○ | ● | ● | ● |
| 10. Supporting methods | ⊙ | | ● | ● | ○ |
| 11. Reflection and evaluation of planning | ∞ | ○ | ● | ● | ○ |

(Roles in participation: ●Major role; ○Supplementary role; ⊙Face to face, large scale; ∞Back to back, small scale or individually; ⊙Negotiation with key figures in the government; ∇Dependent studio work.)

Rather than dominating the entire process, the planning team alternated between playing a major and playing more supplementary roles at different stages of the process. Facing the complexities of the community environment, planners acted more as listeners and coordinators, guiding community members to provide input. The opinions gathered from community members were recorded and individual replies were made for both relevant and irrelevant suggestions. The planning team agreed that it was dangerous to make strict judgments based on professional experience.

4.3 Improving the Physical Environment

Physical and cultural strategies for controlling and improving the physical environment were then be developed and implemented. These strategies were made at four levels: the macro level, the courtyard level, the micro level, and the infrastructure level.

First, the urban form at the macro level was to be strictly protected. The Hutong, a residential building structure dating back to the Yuan Dynasty, had to be preserved (Fig. 1). Any occupation of the Hutong public space had to be restricted. Second, the courtyard also had to be protected, repaired, re-decorated, or cleared. The goal at this level was to return the messy yards to their traditional form of friendly, open spaces for social interaction (Fig. 4). The specific actions taken depended on the type of ownership, quality of the buildings, and the natural elements in the vicinity. Both traditional and modern-style private buildings had to be preserved, and temporary and ancillary structures had to be torn down and government compensation provided. Publicly owned buildings had to be repaired inside and out, and temporary and ancillary structures had to be torn down; however, there was no need for compensation. Semi-public buildings belonging to government employers had to be repaired or re-decorated using government funding. Efforts were also made to involve both the work unit and residents by having them work together.

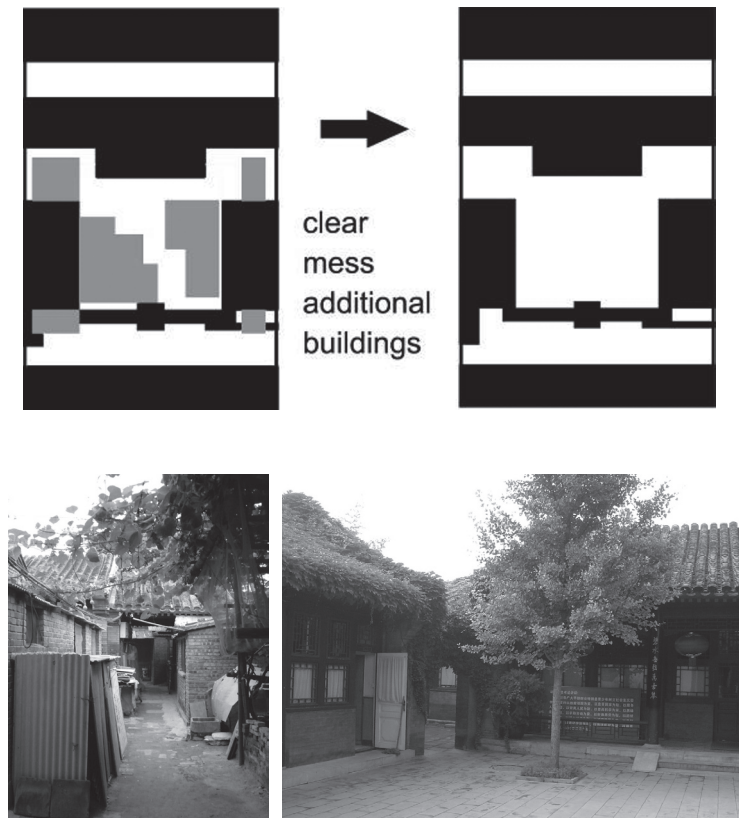


Figure 4. Returning Messy Yards to the Traditional Layout of a Si-heYard

Third, the façades of buildings and other details at the micro level had to be controlled according to predetermined guidelines, which provided detailed suggestions regarding roofs, walls, doors, windows, and billboards. In addition, the height of new buildings was limited in order to preserve the traditional style of buildings. Thus, some temporary second floor layers were removed.

Finally, contemporary infrastructure and facilities had to be incorporated to replace previous systems, such as the replacement of coal with electrical cooking and heating systems. Another example is the reconstruction of the toilets. The plan called to triple the number of toilets to meet basic residential needs as well as to install a new water flushing method to improve the sanitation.

4.4 Revitalization of Cultural and Social Networks

Strengthening the community's cultural and social networks is also very important. In this case, local businesses provided multi-functional support to preserve cultural facilities. Organized by alumni of the Central Academy of Drama, the local businesses formed a network in 2006. Planners and government officials reorganized the network of local businesses with additional powers, financial support, and human resources. By 2007, more than forty bars, cafes, tearooms, bookstores, and other businesses in the alley had joined the network, accounting for more than half of the businesses in the area. Through the network, the local businesses held regular gatherings. The head of the network of local businesses was selected from among the managers and owners of businesses along the alley, while the coordinators were selected from the local government and residents.

One function of the network of businesses was to organize the alley's nodes of cultural locations into a network. The cafes, bars, and tearooms close to cultural facilities such as theatres and opera houses were identified as locations for cultural and social interaction in the community. The network of businesses helped to promote these cafes, bars and tearooms to bring in more economic activity.

The other function of the network of local businesses was to link residents to the revitalization process and share the benefits of economic development. The network helped training local residents who have been laid off to find new job opportunities within the emerging culture-based economy. For example, the residents living in traditional courtyards were trained to participate in the tourism industry by showing their courtyards to tourists.

4.5 Building on Success and Implementation

Obtaining support from upper-level government officials as well as local residents was essential to the development and implementation of planning. Agreements were gradually reached after numerous rounds of participation and according to records of these meetings, each interest group, through collective action, agreed to fulfill its responsibilities and duties as promised in the plan (Table 2).

Table 2. Responsibilities and Obligation of Actors in the Fulfillment Stage

| Actors or | Responsibilities and Obligation |
|--|--|
| Local Government of Dongcheng District | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lobby upper level government for more favorable policies and financial support - Attract investment - Fulfill the obligations within the budget of local branch as promised - Propagate community plan and educate the public |
| Local Resident | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community volunteer activities - Community care and watch action |
| Culture F & C | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide funding - Provide internal service opening to community |
| Cultural group | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extend the cultural network - Provide cultural communication activities |

Lobbying upper-level government officials was one of the more difficult and time-consuming tasks. At first, the municipal government paid little attention to this grassroots community plan; the officials dismissed it as “self-entertainment of the neighborhood grandma.” However, because of the policy goal of emphasizing a more harmonious society, the evaluation system for government officials gradually shifted from a narrow focus on economic growth to include more comprehensive goals such as improving level of citizen satisfaction. Six months after finalization of the neighborhood regeneration plan, the occurrence of criminal incidents reached extremely low levels. This attracted the attention of municipal government, which gradually began to offer favorable policies and funding to help with the implementation of the plan.

This case study presents an open, adaptable, collaborative implementation process, which is very different from the traditional approach to planning. To incorporate suggestions made by the community, the plan was revised three times even after it met community approval. As the planning team said, “There is no a final plan; only a better plan”.

The long-term potential for local cultural brands has been gradually recognized as increasing numbers of companies and studios have moved into the area. A US cable television network, the Discovery Channel, has a photography studio in the neighborhood. It regards Nanluogu Alley as the place most representative of Beijing’s original culture.

With support from the district government, the community has been able to fulfill the major

projects envisioned in the plan. In September 2007, the community promoted local cultural brands by holding a Creative Cultural Neighborhood Fair, which attracted both domestic and foreign tourists.

More importantly, most of the local residents regard the community plan as their own, because it represents their efforts and contributions to the community. In addition, they have been able to remain in the neighborhood in which their ancestors lived and benefit from amenities, such as the famous elementary schools and high quality hospitals. Local businesses develop well in such a historical and cultural environment, and continue to provide job opportunities (Fig. 5).

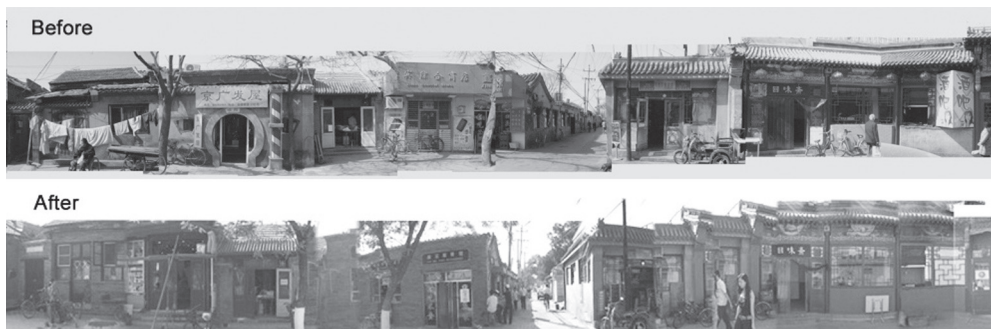


Figure 5. Neighborhood Landscape Before and After Implementing the Plan

Nonetheless, these measures have also attracted a certain amount of criticism, including a perceived lack of concern for temporary migrant residents, the noise brought to the once-quiet neighborhood by new businesses, and the mismatch between available job opportunities and the skill set of local workers. Nevertheless, most people agree that the bottom-up approach to community planning is better able to meet local needs than the traditional approach, even if there is room to improve in the future.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper illustrates a grass-roots, cultural approach to the collaborative regeneration of an inner city neighborhood in China. This cultural approach highlights the value of cultural capital and social networks in historical neighborhoods, rather than focusing only on the physical built environment. Nearly three years after its implementation, the *Nanluogu Alley* plan has successfully protected the historical heritage and local culture, improved the living environment, and provided local job opportunities without large-scale demolition or displacement. The benefits of this approach are as follows:

- (1) Public participation and the cooperation of multiple stakeholders reduced social conflict during the implementation process.
- (2) The quality of life of local residents was improved by the removal of temporary shelters and the incorporation of contemporary amenities.
- (3) Local economic development opportunities were provided by the network of local businesses to benefit local residents to attract both domestic and foreign visitors.

This study proves that quality of life can be improved and the local economy can be catalyzed without expelling local residents. The success of this case is also dependent on the policy and financial support of the upper-level government and presence of national-level cultural facilities such as theatres.

In conclusion, a plan to regenerate a neighborhood cannot neglect the inner cities' long history, rich culture and social networks. This case shows the ability of a Chinese community to create and implement a local plan according to neighborhood values and interests, rather than accepting the top-down plans imposed by the municipal government. The implications of the Nanluogu Alley case are very important in both planning scale and planning approach. Government officials gradually recognized the power of the community and are increasingly aware of the civil rights of local residents. They realized that traditional planning strategies cannot succeed without community participation. What used to work in the era of the centrally controlled planning began losing the support of local residents. This grassroots, bottom-up approach to planning may be not perfect, but it is a small step in the process of drawing a shy, hidden community out from behind the bamboo curtain.

Determining the best methods to achieve future inner-city regeneration involving more community participation will be a critical step for Chinese cities. Nonetheless, there remains a long way to go in promoting this approach. In some inner city neighborhoods, local governments and/or developers are still focusing more on exploiting commercial or tourism profits than on preserving cultural values. In some cases, community participation is loosely implemented, used mainly as a token without any real involvement by residents, who have little say in determining the future of their neighborhood.

These challenges will likely inspire new research topics regarding the issue of regenerating the inner cities of China. For example, it is necessary to explore the means by which community participation can be improved under the current institutional setting of Chinese cities.

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