

Urban Micro Renewal Strategies For Residential Blocks in the Old Towns - Taking Suzhou Old Town As An Example

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Abstract:

Urban development has started to reassessment the rough incremental expansion as the city grows, and micro-renewal has progressively gained widespread attention. The old town is an important part of the city that retains much of its cultural landscape and daily life, and it is an important target of urban micro-renewal. Nevertheless, the numerous renewal and redevelopment projects have adversely affected the historical and cultural environment, the spirit of the place, and the old town's traditional appearance and culture, which only focus on economic benefits at the expense of the historical and cultural connotations. Therefore, in the conservation and renewal of old towns nowadays, it is necessary to seek a renewal strategy for old towns that can effectively coordinate physical renewal and historical and cultural inheritance. This research takes the residential blocks of 37th, 38th, and 44th in the old town of Suzhou as the object of study, explains in detail the connotation and characteristics, the importance, the current problems of old town conservation and renewal, and researches and summarizes the content of the theory of urban micro-renewal. An exploration of micro-renewal in the old town from the perspective of daily life orientation. It tries to examine how urban micro-regeneration can serve the daily life-oriented urban renewal of Suzhou's old town. It investigates how micro-regeneration can contribute to the formation of local culture. It maximizes the satisfaction of residents' daily life needs and provides a new opportunity to transform the old town's renewal strategy.

Keywords:

Urban Micro-renewal, Old Town, Residential Blocks, Daily Life-oriented, Conservation and Renewal Strategies

1. Introduction

The concept of urban renewal first appeared in the West, and the process of urban renewal in the West can be broadly categorized into four distinct stages: urban reconstruction and restoration; urban renewal practice with national welfarist color; market-led, public-private urban redevelopment; and public-participation,

community-building oriented urban micro-renewal stage, which is currently in the fourth stage [7]. The relevant explorations of foreign scholars in urban micro-renewal have a very important inspiration for domestic urban renewal, which makes us realize that in order to improve the adaptability of cities and achieve sustainable Development, it is necessary to make local adjustments and renewal of cities [27]. In the past, for a long time, China's approach to solving urban problems has been to demolish most of its old cities and build new ones, and to overemphasize economic benefits. While this approach may temporarily improve the country's economy and promote urban prosperity, it does not help to achieve cities' sustainable development [9]. As a result, there has been a gradual change in the approach to urban renewal, from large-scale demolition and construction to micro-renewal, which involves localized repairs to enhance the quality of the urban environment and improve the environment for residents. At the same time, this small-scale, incremental approach to micro-renewal also applies to old towns with complex and changing conditions [14].

As an important part of the city, the contradiction of the old town is particularly prominent. Lack of human activities in the old town has lost its original vitality, vigor and cultural characteristics, and evoking the function of life in the old town has become a significant step in constructing urban characteristics and enhancing urban vitality [4]. Daily life reflects people's most original, safe, random and free activities, which are completely human-oriented and is the main component of urban regional culture [4][5][16]. Re-injecting the original daily life into the old town space is of great significance in highlighting the cultural characteristics of the city, arousing its vitality, and prospering its public life. Realizing the conservation and renewal of old towns by micro-renewal oriented to the needs of daily life is a common problem faced by old towns and has become a focus of attention [16][26].

Although people's needs are appropriately addressed in the urban micro-renewal process, the conservation and Development of cultural resources in old towns often go hand in hand. To address this dilemma, urban micro-renewal serves a daily life-oriented urban renewal agenda, and this research proposes a theoretical framework based on theories of old towns and urban micro-renewal. These previous studies have not mentioned how micro-regeneration can promote culture formation, thus solving the problem of cultural displacement and ultimately realizing the preservation and Development of old cities. The research gap proposes a theoretical framework to promote cultural formation, solve cultural displacement, and identify and fill the gap.

First, this research achieves objective 1 through literature review and case study methods. A comprehensive understanding of urban renewal and a theoretical framework is proposed based on extensive reading of related literature and data integration. Secondly, the study is conducted throughout the research process. Taking Suzhou old town as an example, the research proposal was written based on the proposed theoretical framework to explore its strengths and weaknesses and verify its effectiveness in practice.

2. Literature review

The old town has gathered rich historical and cultural resources with high historical cultural and socioeconomic values. However, various urban problems accompanying rapid urbanization have hindered the benign development of old towns. At present, the problems facing in old towns are not only material aging, urban function and structural decline, but also serious social stratification, accelerated population aging,

and monitorization of the functions of old towns, etc. A crisis of degradation, disintegration, and decay of unprecedented scale is coming to the old towns, which negatively affects the residential blocks, traditional streets and lanes and the distinctive architecture of the old towns. As the development of urbanization enters a new stage focusing on improving quality, planners summarize and reflect on urban renewal methods, and propose the urban micro-renewal model, which is a small-scale and gradual approach based on the full consideration of human behavior. Nowadays, with the people-oriented concept deeply rooted in people's hearts, the conservation and renewal of old towns should focus on economic growth and the long-term development of human behavior and psychological activities. Micro-renewal seeks to achieve the goal of conservation and renewal of old towns through simple and easy-to-operate means of renewal, utilizing small-scale environmental renovation within the city to achieve the purpose of enhancing the vitality of cities, to realize the goal of old town conservation and development [6].

The old town of Suzhou, like other historic towns in the country, has a large number of old buildings, a lack of infrastructure, a high population density, and a deteriorating overall environmental quality, which seriously affects the maintenance of the appearance of the old town and the protection of some important monuments [3]. Therefore, renewing is urgent and practical to protect the old town's appearance and improve the living environment. Prof. Ruan Yisan suggests conducting a census of the historic neighborhoods' current architectural style and quality of the historic blocks, and then carrying out all kinds of conservation and renewal based on a comprehensive assessment. Furthermore, the improvement of existing old towns and historic blocks should adhere to the principle of maintaining the integrity of the old [8].

Daily living is not purely and narrowly human-centered but a sustainable urban development concept that focuses on the human living environment, spiritual civilization, and cultural connotation [4]. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the living quality of the old town, create a vibrant open space, and strengthen the function of cultural leadership. The city's unique geographical characteristics and historical heritage are gradually disappearing as a result of urban expansion. On the one hand, the original living environment has changed in the city, eroding the city's historical and socio-cultural resources in an irreversible trend, resulting in the absence of the city's regional characteristics. On the other hand, people's production and living styles, cultural concepts, and values have changed, and traditional urban life is disappearing [20][24].

Daily life-oriented urban micro-renewal emphasizes the improvement of the urban environment and the conservation and renewal of history and culture through minor modifications of urban spaces and facilities from the perspective of the needs of residents in their daily lives [25]. The lifestyle of the old town is relaxed and free, fostering deep relationships and catering for the many urban needs of a diverse group of people. Its vibrant living environment and rich cultural narrative go hand in hand with the city's growth [22]. According to the existing problems of the old town, combined with field research and related literature, the existing problems of Suzhou's old town are summarized as an example.

3. Research Methodology

The 37th, 38th, and 44th residential blocks of Suzhou's old town are typical residential blocks of the old town, with numerous old neighborhoods and traditional

houses with high historical value and cultural connotations. In addition, the area has its unique advantages and significance. However, with time, these old neighborhoods and traditional houses are facing some problems that need to be solved, such as aging, dilapidation, and single function. Through the research and practice of the 37th, 38th, and 44th residential blocks in Suzhou's old town, it is possible to understand better the historical background and cultural characteristics of the residential neighborhoods in the old town to solve the problems they face, to improve their environmental quality and quality of life, and to promote their sustainable development [10][11]. Therefore, choosing the 37th, 38th, and 44th residential blocks in Suzhou's old town as the study area can provide a better understanding of the historical background and cultural characteristics of the old town's residential blocks, as well as an in-depth understanding of the current situation and problems of the old town's residential blocks, which can provide a practical basis for the development of urban micro-renewal strategies [1].

The research strategy of this research is qualitative. In addition to the literature review and fieldwork, the main data collection method is a field interview survey because the viewpoints are difficult to express through the questionnaire information. Face-to-face questions and answers are more conducive to collecting and analyzing information. The interviews were organized into two parts based on the research questions and the reality of the 37th, 38th, and 44th residential blocks in the old town. The first part is to know the interviewee's basic information, and the second part is to investigate the interviewees' feelings about the locality and to make suggestions to the visitors. In this research, interviews will be conducted with residents and staff of the 37th, 38th, and 44th residential blocks of Suzhou's old town and with representatives of the government and other related areas. The comments and feedback will help determine opportunities and barriers, and clarify the advantages and disadvantages of micro-renewal in the old town while applying micro-renewal in the old town to the local perspective. Based on the above, this chapter will be divided into three work packages to describe the research methodology.

4. A Study of the 37th, 38th, and 44th Residential Blocks of Suzhou's Old Town

After completing the research on the current situation of the 37th, 38th, and 44th residential blocks of Suzhou old town, the author conducted a survey on the daily life of the residents in the blocks and their needs for the current situation of the blocks through interviews and observations. The exploration of daily life is the core of this research, which helps to understand the daily needs of the residents in a real and comprehensive way, and it is also the basis and principle of this research. This research was conducted through observation records and interviews to increase the understanding of the residents' living and working conditions.

The public space that satisfies the residents has the characteristics of accessibility and humanization simultaneously and it is also a place where residents and even passers-by can find spiritual support daily [22]. In addition, the public space that satisfies the residents is also a place of intimacy and flexibility, so everyone who stays in such a space can enjoy his or her own time with ease and comfort. For the public space renewal of the 37th, 38th, and 44th residential blocks, it is necessary to pursue the pleasant scale of the space and the spiritual function of the street from the user's point of view, attract people to stop here and communicate with each other, to bring

the place back to life, renew the energy of the street, and revitalize the street with a new lease of life [13][18].

The problem of crowded buildings, lack of open space and inconvenient transportation is prevalent in the 37th, 38th, and 44th residential blocks of Suzhou old town (Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3). It is necessary to break through the existing constraints of the crowded status to pursue the maximization of space utilization [12]. Following the principle of demand for renewal, the gray space is created to give users a comfortable feeling of being close to nature, infiltrating people's will into the site, and constructing a public space layout form and landscape style characteristic of traditional blocks [12][23]. For example, space resources near bridges and rivers are poorly utilized, with unclear intentions and negative functions. Traditional open spaces such as bridgeheads, riverheads and wells assume the function of places for residents to interact. There are many bridges and ancient riverheads along the Guantaiwei River, and there are many ancient wells in the base, and some nodes have been designed and remodeled to show the traditional spatial intention of the Jiangnan water town. However, there are also cases of low utilization rate and rough design of some nodes, and some ancient wells and bridges have completely lost their traditional spatial intention, and the remaining remains have lost their meaning [3][17][23].



Figure 1. *Lack of Public Rest Space (Photo by author, 2023).*



Figure 2. *Non-Motorized Parking Takes up Public Space (Photo by author, 2023).*



Figure 3. *Narrow Roads with No Separation of Pedestrian and Vehicular Traffic (Photo by author, 2023).*

To solve this problem, public space can be set up by combining the resources with important symbolic significance in the old town blocks. The integration of sites within the blocks, the addition of small squares and open spaces within the community around important heritage buildings, and the construction of some of the characteristic landscape sketches [18][22]. In addition, the stopping space of the pedestrian system is increased, thus increasing the stopping and vitality of the street space. Regarding the river, the river culture can be utilized to build new public green spaces, implanting small-scale plazas and parks, etc., to promote the communication of residents and satisfy everyone's needs [2][19]. Meanwhile, integrating the river with life, the waterfront space is arranged with tree pools (retaining trees), stone tables, and seats for people to stay, and combined with the setback space to form a permeable view [15][21]. In addition to providing facilities suitable for the elderly to play chess and drink tea, it also provides recreational seating and three-dimensional landscaping to return ecological protection to the residents [22][23].

In addition, it is also possible to create multi-functional composite spaces with a variety of community life services, uses traditional festivals and folk customs and other functions that represent collective memory to be integrated into the neighborhood, improve street space to strengthen the communication between neighbors, and establish a link between physical space, traditional memory and daily life to arouse people's recognition of collective memory, and to achieve the sustainable inheritance of history and culture as well as the unique experience of history and culture [17]. The project will also help realize the sustainable inheritance of history and culture and the experience of characteristics.

5. Conclusions

The urban micro-renewal strategy for residential blocks in old towns refers to the improvement of the living environment and living conditions of the residents through minor renovation and upgrading of the interior of the blocks based on the conservation and renewal of the history and culture of the old town. This strategy aims to improve the living environment of old town residential areas through a series of specific measures without destroying the overall appearance of the old town while preserving its unique historical and cultural values.

Firstly, urban micro-renewal should give full consideration to the needs of residents and improve their quality of life. Through measures such as improving infrastructure and increasing public space, the living comfort of residents can be enhanced. In addition, residents should be encouraged to participate in the planning and implementing projects to enhance their sense of belonging and satisfaction. Secondly, urban micro-renewal needs to focus on the conservation and renewal of history and culture. In the project implementation process, the characteristics of history and culture should be fully considered, and correct cultural guidance should be provided to solve the problem of cultural disappearance. At the same time, the government, enterprises, and residents should have multi-party cooperation in urban micro-renewal projects.

Continuously refining and improving the urban micro-renewal strategy can provide better solutions for the urban development of the old town's residential blocks and promote sustainable development. The urban micro-renewal strategy of old town residential blocks is a sustainable urban development model which can provide a reference for the urban renewal of other old town residential blocks. Through

scientific and reasonable planning, the dual goals of urban regeneration and preservation of old town residential blocks can be realized, making a positive contribution to the preservation and development of the old town.

Regarding limitations and future work, in the data collection, it is known that some residents are highly satisfied with the current situation and do not want the area to be changed, which may lead to possible resistance to the micro-renewal project and make it difficult to advance the project. In addition, the condition of old towns is very complex, involving a wide range of economic, political, cultural-religious, and artistic issues, among others, and is regionally specific, making it difficult to generalize. This research summarizes the research strategy based on the existing value, problems, necessity, and urgency of old town conservation and renewal, and the constructed system needs to be adjusted accordingly with the actual operation, which can only stay at the feasibility study level. Micro-renewal of old towns is a long-term and gradual process, and the study is hoped to help future related research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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