

Environmental Renewal and Functional Reconstruction of Traditional Ancestral Hall Spaces in the Context of Rural Revitalization

Shengzi Miao^{1*}, Zuzhan Chen¹

¹ University of South China, Solux College of Architecture and Design, Hengyang, China

*Correspondence: Shengzi Miao

Received: 18 May 2026; **Accepted:** 12 June 2026; **Published:** 24 June 2026

Abstract:

Clan ancestral halls in traditional villages universally face the dilemma of “spatial hollowing-out,” characterized by functional stagnation, physical deterioration, and homogenization. To address this issue, this paper, from the perspective of environmental design and based on the theory of “Genius Loci”, proposes a composite revitalization strategy that balances the continuation of cultural context with contemporary needs. At the spatial level, emphasis is placed on structural framework restoration and the reuse of vernacular materials to anchor villagers’ memories through an authentic historical appearance. At the functional level, a “community-based” replacement strategy is adopted to integrate modules such as cultural exhibition, daily leisure, and experiential learning, thereby reshaping spatial scenarios. Through precise environmental renewal and dynamic functional integration, this study aims to awaken the endogenous place identity of ancestral halls, transforming them into catalysts for vitality that combine host-guest sharing and community service, ultimately providing a practical reference for the sustainable utilization of historical buildings.

Keywords:

Rural Revitalization, Traditional Ancestral Halls, Environmental Renewal, Functional Reconstruction, Public Spaces

1. Introduction

In the context of the comprehensive implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, how to activate idle historical and cultural resources in rural areas and enhance the quality of public environments has become a critical issue in the fields of urban-rural renewal and spatial governance. As typical representatives of traditional rural architecture, ancestral halls are not merely spiritual spaces carrying regional kinship heritage and collective memory, but also core nodes of village public spaces. As a type of “heritage” featuring both tangible and intangible cultural heritage characteristics, clan ancestral halls play an important role in the tourism-oriented transformational development of traditional villages [1]. However, with the transition of modern rural social structures, a large number of traditional ancestral halls have

gradually lost their original functions of ritual sacrifice and clan cohesion. They have long remained in an idle or partially damaged state of “static dormancy,” resulting in increasingly dilapidated architectural appearances and making it difficult to manifest their public cultural value.

Faced with the imperatives of traditional village protection and the growing cultural needs of villagers, conducting scientific renewal and functional reconstruction of idle ancestral halls from the perspective of environmental design has emerged as an urgent practical issue. Therefore, this paper first elaborates on the multiple values and the importance of revitalizing traditional ancestral hall spaces, followed by an in-depth analysis of the dilemmas of physical decay and cultural disconnection they encounter during modern rural transformation. On this basis, the paper proposes environmental renewal and functional reconstruction strategies, including structural framework restoration, the reuse of vernacular materials, and community-based functional replacement. The objective is to transform these structures into modern composite public spaces without destroying their historical fabric, thereby providing a practical and feasible solution paradigm for the dynamic revitalization and utilization of rural historical buildings.

2. Core Orientation for the Environmental Renewal of Traditional Ancestral Hall Spaces

In the spatial layout and social networks of traditional villages, the ancestral hall is by no means an ordinary physical dwelling, but rather a “spiritual landmark” and the public center of the village occupying a core position. To explore the importance of its revitalization and renewal, one must base the discussion on its irreplaceable multiple value systems and the current demands of temporal development.

From the perspective of tangible cultural heritage, traditional ancestral halls are often the highest crystallization of regional construction wisdom, possessing extremely high architectural art and historical research value. As the architectural entity with the highest specifications and largest investment in the village, the ancestral hall gathers the most exquisite traditional construction techniques of the local area. Its iconic beam-and-frame structure, the courtyard layout that emphasizes ritualistic sequence, and the delicate and vivid brick carvings, stone carvings, and wooden architectural components both inside and outside the building, not only demonstrate the ultimate pursuit of spatial aesthetics and mechanics by craftsmen of past dynasties, but also embody the ecological construction wisdom of adapting to the natural climate and regulating the micro-environment. These physical spaces, having weathered the test of time, are non-renewable rural cultural assets. Conducting scientific environmental renewal on them is a necessary measure to properly preserve the traditional settlement fabric and regional architectural genes.

From the dimension of spiritual attributes and social functions, the ancestral hall is the bond that maintains the geographical and consanguineous relationships of the countryside, acting as the “physical container” of collective memory. Traditional villages inherit historical memories, rural life, cultural crystallization, and regional characteristics; they maintain the roots of Chinese civilization, carry the nostalgia of the Chinese people of all ethnic groups, and serve as the “living fossils” of traditional culture [2]. Over the long years, it has not only been a solemn venue bearing the traditional ethical order and public governance mechanisms but has also deeply engraved the growth marks and emotional ties of generations of villagers. Under the

fierce impact of modernization, revitalizing this spiritual field can effectively resist the phenomenon of “cultural amnesia” that easily occurs in rural development, reshaping a strong sense of cultural belonging and identity for villagers. In the contemporary context of comprehensively advancing the Rural Revitalization Strategy, the regeneration of ancestral hall spaces is endowed with more urgent practical significance. Currently, many villages face the shortcomings of scarce public activity venues and monotonous carriers of cultural life. The dynamic revitalization of idle ancestral hall assets provides modern villages with ready-made, high-quality carriers for public space at a relatively low environmental intervention cost. More importantly, the renewed ancestral halls can serve as spatial bridges connecting traditional cultural contexts with modern life. Through functional reconstruction, they transform into core engines driving the integration of rural culture and tourism, thereby truly achieving a synergistic symbiosis between historical building conservation and rural community vitality.

3. Practical Dilemmas Facing Ancestral Halls in Modern Rural Transformation

With the drastic changes in the modern rural social structure and the continuous outflow of the population, traditional ancestral halls are facing multiple practical challenges in the process of transitioning into modern spaces, including internal functional degradation, external physical decay, and blind human intervention.

3.1. The Mismatch Between the Stagnation of Original Functions and Modern Public Needs

In the evolutionary history of traditional villages, the spatial layout and circulation sequence of ancestral halls were often tailored to meet single, specific rituals such as solemn sacrifices and assembly deliberations. Thus, their spaces frequently exhibited a strong sense of enclosure and order. However, with the comprehensive transformation of modern rural lifestyles, villagers’ demands for public spaces have gradually shifted towards multi-dimensional directions such as daily leisure, community interaction, and cultural reading. The severe stagnation of the original functions of these traditional buildings creates a stark mismatch with the increasingly diverse public life needs of modern villages. The inherent spatial layout struggles to spontaneously accommodate modern, active life scenarios, leading a large number of ancestral halls to gradually detach from the daily lives of villagers after losing the normalized support of traditional rituals. Their public attribute, originally serving as the “source of vitality” for the village, has been severely weakened, reducing them to inefficient and idle “spatial islands.” This results in a massive waste of precious existing spatial resources in rural areas.

3.2. Physical Decay Due to Material Aging and Disrepair

Traditional ancestral halls predominantly adopt brick-and-wood or pure wooden structural systems, as illustrated in Figure 1, Natural materials inherently possess relatively weak resistance to climate change and natural erosion. These brick-and-wood structures, no matter how sturdy they are, will face the fate of destruction and decay if effective protective measures are not taken [3]. Long-term detachment from daily human maintenance due to functional idleness, coupled with a lack of professional repair funds and technical support, has caused many ancestral halls to experience severe physical deterioration. From the investigative perspective of

environmental design, issues such as dampness and decay in wooden beams and frames, termite infestations, structural cracking in load-bearing brick walls, and even uneven foundation settlement are universal pain points for such buildings. These structural safety hazards, brought about by nature and the passage of time, not only accelerate the demise of the architectural entities but also become the biggest obstacles to subsequent spatial reuse and functional integration.



Figure 1. Wooden structures of ancestral halls.

3.3. The Homogenization Trap Caused by Extensive Interventions and Distortion of Appearance

Besides natural decay, artificial, extensive modifications have caused irreversible damage to traditional ancestral halls. In past waves of rural construction or cultural tourism development, when dealing with idle ancestral halls in urgent need of restoration, some projects often resorted to massive demolition and reconstruction, or superficial “dressing up” style renovations. In pursuit of short-term visual effects, renovators blindly used rigid, shiny, modern standardized composite materials to cover or even replace the original old grey bricks, aged timber, and traditional small tiles. Such “destructive restoration,” lacking reverence, brutally erased the unique mottled texture endowed by time on the buildings, directly severing the deep connection between the space and the local cultural context. This has led many renewed ancestral halls into a stereotypical homogenization trap, completely losing their historical authenticity and “Genius Loci” (spirit of place) as carriers of regional culture.

4. Revitalization Paths for Idle Spaces Based on Genius Loci

Rural public spaces are not facing a comprehensive decline, but rather a demand for spatial transformation driven by drastic changes in rural society [4]. Addressing the dilemmas of physical decay and cultural disconnection that traditional ancestral halls face during modern transition, their regenerative design must—under the premise of strictly protecting the historical fabric—seek solutions that balance the continuity of the cultural context with contemporary needs through functional reconstruction and environmental optimization.

4.1. Structural Framework Restoration and Safety Reinforcement

Faced with structural degradation caused by years of disrepair, the primary task of environmental renewal is to “cure the disease and consolidate the foundation.” At the onset of design intervention, a rigorous and comprehensive scientific survey must be conducted on the wooden beams, load-bearing walls, and foundations of the ancestral hall. The restoration process should adhere to the restrained principles of “minimum

intervention” and “reversibility.” For critical nodes suffering from dampness, decay, or cracking, concealed modern steel structure reinforcement or traditional splicing techniques should be used for localized replacement, resolutely avoiding holistic demolition and reconstruction. In specific operations, it is imperative to completely preserve the iconic tailiang (post-and-lintel) or chuandou (column-and-tie) timber frames, maintaining the permeability of the courtyard and the macro-spatial scale formed by the halls. This restrained and rigorous physical restoration not only solidifies the foundation for the subsequent safe operation of the space but also preserves the authenticity of the building to the greatest extent.

4.2. Material Reuse and Aesthetic Control

To reverse the cultural disconnection brought about by homogenized transformations, the reshaping of architectural character must abandon rigid modern industrial wrapping and return to the localized aesthetics of “restoring the old as it was.” In the renewal of the architectural skin and interior environment, scattered old grey bricks, aged timber, and traditional small tiles found within the village should be recovered and reused to the maximum extent. Through traditional craftsmanship, delicate patching should be applied to incomplete sections, as shown in Figure 2, allowing a natural integration and transition between the new and old materials in their weathered texture. Meanwhile, in creating the environmental atmosphere, it is necessary to cleverly utilize the introduction of natural light and shadow from the courtyard, moderate brightening through localized lighting, and microclimate regulation to soften the intrusiveness of modern design techniques. By extracting and transforming regional traditional stylistic symbols, the traditional ancestral hall can emit a familiar sense of warmth while being revitalized, thereby firmly anchoring the villagers’ emotions and memories of bygone years.



Figure 2. Fan Clan Ancestral Hall renovation and renovation.

4.3. Functional Replacement and Circulation Organization

The core to breaking through functional stagnation and “spatial hollowing-out” lies in shattering the single, enclosed layout and re-stitching the ancestral hall into the active public life network of the modern village. In functional planning, a “primary-secondary hierarchical” replacement strategy should be adopted: preserving the solemn attributes of the core main hall by transforming it into a central hub for village history exhibitions, intangible cultural heritage displays, or rural elites’ deliberations; meanwhile, the affiliated side rooms or wing rooms can be flexibly converted into community reading rooms, after-school classrooms, and handicraft experiential workshops, precisely matching the high-frequency daily needs of villagers and the

educational experiences of visiting tourists. In terms of macro-circulation organization, by moderately clarifying site boundaries and establishing visual corridors or intermediate “gray space” transitions, the physical boundaries between indoor and outdoor areas are blurred, naturally guiding the strolling paths from outside the village into the interior of the ancestral hall. This composite scenario construction and dynamic intertwining of circulation successfully transform the idle “spatial island” into a vibrant catalyst that combines host-guest sharing, cultural experience, and community service, truly realizing the dynamic protection and sustainable utilization of traditional architecture.

5. Conclusions

In the context of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, as core spiritual landmarks carrying the regional cultural context and collective memory, the protection and revitalization of traditional ancestral halls possess significant material and social value. However, facing modern rural transformation, ancestral halls are confronting multiple practical dilemmas, including the mismatch between original functional stagnation and modern needs, physical decay caused by years of disrepair, and the distortion of architectural character triggered by extensive modifications. Addressing these pain points, this paper proposes a set of composite revitalization paths that balance the protection of the historical foundation with the needs of the times. At the structural and aesthetic levels, by adhering to the principles of “minimum intervention” and “restoring the old as it was,” concealed safety reinforcements are applied to the architectural framework, and local aged materials are reused to the maximum extent to preserve the authentic warmth of the place. At the spatial and functional levels, a “hierarchical” strategy is adopted to break the single enclosed layout, deeply integrating cultural exhibitions with daily community services and experiential learning. In summary, under the premise of preserving the historical appearance, this environmental renewal and functional reconstruction strategy successfully transforms idle “spatial islands” into modern composite public spaces shared by hosts and guests, providing a practical and feasible paradigm for the sustainable utilization of rural historical buildings and the synergistic development of cultural tourism integration.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- [1] Hu, H.; Zheng, Y. Research on the tourism revitalization of clan ancestral halls in traditional villages: A case study of the ancestral hall group in Chengjiang Village, Yudu. *Construction of Old Revolutionary Base Areas*, 2019, 08, 11-15.
- [2] Wang, C.; Chen, J. Research on the activation design of traditional villages from the perspective of rural tourism: A case of Qingshui Village in Hancheng City. *Urbanism and Architecture*, 2023, 20(04), 24-26.

- [3] Zhu, H.; Chen, N. The functional evolution of village ancestral halls and its impact on the construction of a new socialist countryside: An integrated study based on 50 ancestral halls in Xincheng Town, Wenzhou City. *China Rural Survey*, 2009, 02, 86-94.
- [4] Feng, J.; Zhao, N. Restructuring the rural public space in the context of rural hollowing: A case study of Sangzhuang Town in Dengzhou. *Human Geography*, 2016, 31(06), 19-28.



© 2026 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)