

# Urban revitalization in historic urban residential quarter

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**Abstract:** The traditional urban form in historic Ningbo has undergone many radical transformations over the past two decades. The relatively homogeneous traditional fabric of the city has been damaged and remodeled following modernized urban models. This paper aims at synthesizing urban renewal and conservation through examining the revitalization of a particular traditional urban area. The case of the West Yuehu area of Ningbo is selected to show the planning approaches and proposals, constraints and contradictions regarding revitalization under this social transition. The methodology used in the research is divided into two parts: literature review and field study. The theoretical part of the research regarding urban conservation in China is based on literature review. The field study is conducted by the authors and groups of students from Southeast University. The complete methodology attempts to illustrate the dimensions of urban renewal by examining the processes, conflicts and results of revitalization of historic urban areas, considering the present changing socio-economic context.

**Key words:** urban revitalization; traditional urban areas; conservation; preservation

Many cities have quarters that confer on them a sense of place and identity through the historic and cultural associations they provide. They are often an integral part of the city's charm and appeal, and their visual and functional qualities are important elements of the city's image and identity<sup>[1]</sup>. The qualities of such quarters have not always been appreciated and valued. As all such areas cannot become museums or museums environments, there is a need for their revitalization as functioning parts of their city. Earlier conservation policies have therefore progressed from a simple and restrictive concern with preservation to an increased concern for revitalization and enhancement. Revitalization has focused on attempts to generate sufficient economic development to provide the finance necessary to conserve, maintain and enhance the quarter. All urban areas undergo change, but historic urban quarters have to cope with change in their economic fortunes while change in their physical landscapes is restricted and controlled in the interests of conservation<sup>[2]</sup>.

The case of the West Yuehu area of Ningbo is selected in an attempt to illustrate the dimensions of urban renewal and regeneration by examining the

processes, conflicts and results of revitalization of historic urban areas, considering the present changing socio-economic context. We focus on areas where there are significant numbers of traditional buildings concentrated in a small area which are considerably threatened by the force of rapid urbanization and now straddle a fine line between survival and destruction.

## 1 Case Study of West Yuehu Area

Ningbo is located in the middle of China's coastline and south flank of the Yangtze River Delta, bordering on Shanghai and Hangzhou. East longitude is from 120°55' to 122°16' and north latitude 28°51' to 30°33'. It covers an area of 9 365 km<sup>2</sup> including the urban area of 1 033 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 5.43 million. The West Yuehu area is located in the heart of Ningbo city. Situated between the west bank of the Yuehu (Moon Lake) and Changchun Road, the total coverage of the area is 0.45 km<sup>2</sup>, with approximately 1 097 buildings. Zhongshan West Road is the northern boundary line of the West Yuehu area, see Fig. 1. The quarter has a long historical and cultural significance. This area was the original center of Ningbo city and until 1949 its traditional architecture housed the wealthy and powerful people of Ningbo. Later, after Liberation, this housing area became the residence for common people; the environment rapidly deteriorated. The majority of existing traditional local-style residential houses in the Yuehu area were constructed in the Ming

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and Qing dynasties; they still can be regarded as representative of typical local-style dwellings. There are some buildings, which are a unique amalgam of East and West. The old buildings survived during these decades, time added beauty to those brick facades and lanes.

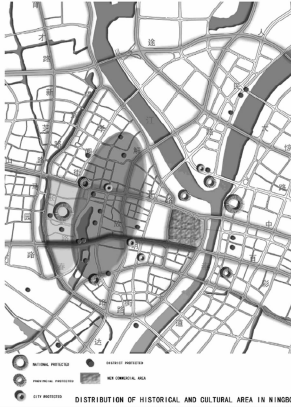


Fig. 1 Location of the West Yuehu area in Ningbo city

## 2 Re-Evaluation of the Values of West Yuehu Area

There are many reasons why historic buildings should be preserved. First, they have an aesthetic value. Historic buildings are often more interesting than the new, “industrial” buildings, housing and shopping centers. In our constantly changing world, we need reminders of how things were and preserving historic

buildings provides an anchor to the past, as well as an incentive for future design. This argument relates to the argument for architectural diversity. Historic buildings provide a contrast to more modern structures, which make them relatively more appealing. Arguments can also be made that historic buildings have functional diversity, resource value, value for continuity of cultural heritage, and economic and commercial value<sup>[3]</sup>.

### 2.1 Aesthetic value

The aesthetics of the past might simply be appreciated and valued for their own sake. Old buildings and towns are valued because they are intrinsically beautiful and antique; as antiques they have a scarcity value. In a world of rapid change, visible and tangible evidence of the past may also be valued for the sense of place and continuity it conveys. The presence of historic buildings is a testimony to the passage of time in a particular locality. In the West Yuehu area, the traditional buildings nestle into a maze of narrow streets, alleyways, courtyards, and the more mundane and anonymous texture of gray-tiled sloped roofs gives the area its physical character, see Fig. 2. All spaces and solid volumes in the historical urban fabric are characterized by the intimate knowledge of human scale. The narrow streets of the winding old city centre conjure up visions of ancient life during the dynasties with every step along the historic cobblestones.

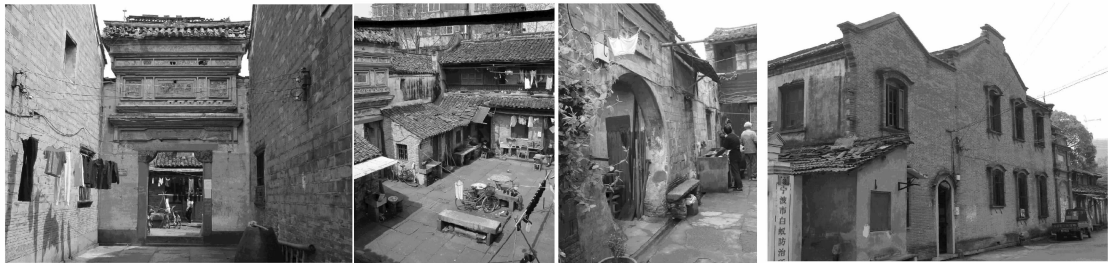


Fig. 2 Existing traditional houses

### 2.2 Value of architectural diversity

The aesthetic appeal of a historic place may result from the combination of many buildings rather than the individual merits of any particular building. In the West Yuehu area, the surrounding architectural fabric has a diversity of different housing estates and small manufacturers, as well as infrastructure and public office buildings, most of which were built in the 1980s. Living and building conditions in those newer, planned areas are of varying quality. The main commercial and business strip along Zhongshan West Road and Changchun Road has, for the most part, an

appropriate appearance. Building mass and height are well adjusted according to the opposite street facades. Some temples, Fan’s house and Tianyi library are places of historic and touristic interest.

### 2.3 Value of functional diversity

The range of renting profiles resulting from a diverse range of different types of space in buildings of varying ages enables a mix of uses. Thus, maybe there is a synergy between different functional uses in adjacent areas resulting from the nature of the property in each area<sup>[4]</sup>. The West Yuehu area of Ningbo city can serve as an entertainment quarter enjoying a mutually

beneficial symbiotic and synergistic relationship with the nearby office district. Similarly, historic areas may offer lower rents that allow economically marginal but socially important activities to have a place in the city.

#### **2.4 Continuity of cultural heritage value**

It is not merely an aesthetic visual continuity, but a continuity of cultural memory that seems important. Visible evidence of the past can contribute pedagogically and educationally to the cultural identity and memory of a particular people or place, locating a contemporary society in relation to a previous tradition and giving meaning to the present by interpreting the past<sup>[5]</sup>. The West Yuehu area, which is very close to the present city center, is an important source of historical events, having been the main traditional living area of this city for a long period. In the center of this site, Tianyi library, which was the residence of a former scholar of ancient China, is presently serving as a museum. Housing the public library, local history research center, ancient works creation workshop and sales center, this complex is now acting as the cultural center of this area. There are also some important temples scattered over the site, which enhance the historical significances of this area. Most of these buildings are in good condition and receive regular maintenance.

#### **2.5 Social value**

In the West Yuehu area, most of the residences in this traditional housing area have lower living conditions than the minimum standard of the general regulation of old areas. The density is very high here. The population of the area is largely indigenous; many families have lived there for generations. More capable persons, especially the young generations, prefer to move to other places. Therefore, most of the residents living here are poor and aged. We experienced that many owners have a love/hate relationship with this area.

### **3 Present Situation of Study Area**

Except for some six- or seven-storey apartments at the northern end and the western edge of this area, most of the buildings are two- or three-storey traditional brick houses, without a wide lane in between. The type of housing is the Chinese courtyard house, which was traditionally occupied by a single family but later was shared by several families. The qualities of these houses vary from privately preserved houses in good conditioned to extremely dilapidated houses.

This area has no central heating or modern sewage. Courtyards have running water, there are no private toilets or kitchens, and people use the public lavatory, wash their own clothes in the courtyards, and mostly cook their food in simple added huts. To keep up with the pace of increasing population and alteration of function, the residents themselves, according to their needs and economic ability, are renovating the courtyards, which has ruined the original layout. Due to the problems of limited financial resources and ownership, the residents are unable to afford normal renovation and protection for the buildings, thus these rich cultural treasures are becoming shabby.

The electric wire poles and electric wires are placed in a disorderly fashion, which seriously destroy the traditional street scene. The original road system is maintained and the infrastructures are outdated. The water supply and drainage system are not perfect, and water supply is often inadequate or drain-off water is blocked. The collection of solid waste in this area is encumbered by the fact that access to the housing areas is difficult for the larger collection vehicles as well as by the lack of a clear collection management scheme. Garbage is dumped haphazardly and often ends up in street corners. Public communication is limited, and there is a lack of necessary public activity space and green fields. The only green patches exist in the form of small plantings in the midst of the courtyards. All these factors have brought serious destruction to the traditional environment.

### **4 Basic Principle and Goals of the Project**

It is generally accepted that housing renovation may be an effective mechanism for stimulating the conservation and enhancement of cultural heritage in deprived or potentially declining historic urban quarters. In this context, through the provisions of the planning legislation, a variety of conservation schemes and programs were undertaken, which focus on the rehabilitation of the historic cores by revitalizing the socioeconomic structures and enhancing the existing environment<sup>[6]</sup>. Revitalization can create a new urban pattern, corresponding to the traditional fabric. Relying on the master plan and the historical city conservation plan of Ningbo, based on the conservation plan of the area, and in light of the policy of protection first and integral renewal, we plan to make a deep and comprehensive research on the area for its conservation and future redevelopment. The following principle issues

have been considered in this revitalization project:

- ① Identify this historic area and related natural features that give the community its special character and that can aid its future well being;
- ② Make the preservation of the historic area an integral goal of planning for land use, economic development, and housing;
- ③ Develop revitalization strategies that capitalize on the existing assets of historic neighborhoods;
- ④ Ensure that policies and decisions on community growth and development respect a community's heritage and enhance overall livability;
- ⑤ Demand excellence in architectural design for new construction and in the stewardship of historic properties;
- ⑥ Use a community's heritage to educate citizens of all ages and to build civic pride.

This project is intended to resolve these basic issues. We should make decisions about what to keep and what to demolish. Any new additions should respect the scale and pattern of this historic site. After reconfiguring every necessary service and infrastructure, we still have to preserve most of the original experiences of this old traditional area. There is also the question regarding which new material and new technology to use in the renewal process. The basic goals of the project:

- ① Organize and develop land use activities within the historical quarter to strengthen cultural and social interaction;
- ② Take advantage of the location of the historical quarter, which is very close to downtown;
- ③ Create a new urban quarter and housing-form from the traditional;
- ④ Create a strong, walkable, pedestrian-friendly historical quarter core and keep the original street and lane structures as much as possible;
- ⑤ Preserve, enhance and restore the natural environment;
- ⑥ Clarify circulation systems to create a safe, convenient, and accessible environment;
- ⑦ Create a strong sense of place that supports the cultural and social life;
- ⑧ To rehabilitate the people who have been originally living here for generations, rather than moving the ordinary people to the outskirts of the city and selling the new houses to richer people or to people with higher social status to ensure necessary funds to maintain the traditional structures;

⑨ Strengthen physical connections and historical activities that serve the surrounding community;

⑩ Respect the historic fabric to achieve contextual continuity;

⑪ Develop a comprehensive program of environmental improvements;

⑫ Provide an adequate mix of attractions and ancillary facilities;

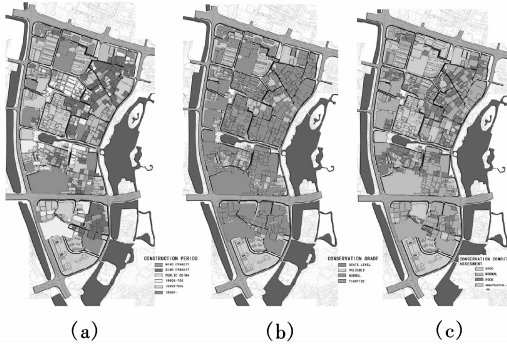
⑬ Maintain high standards of urban design and quality buildings.

Problems of combining conservation and renewal in revitalization process should be identified. The proposals concentrate on the physical urban realm and are designed to improve the permeability and legibility of the quarter.

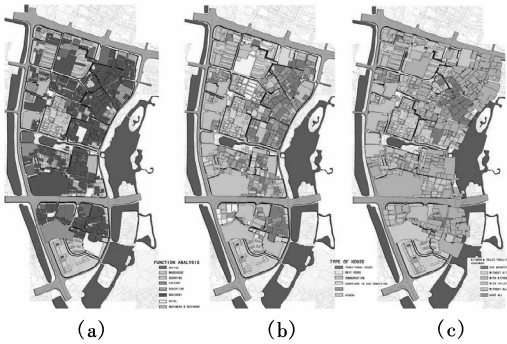
## 5 Planning Approaches

The revitalization of historic urban quarters involves both the renewal of the physical fabric and the active economic use of those buildings and spaces. The revitalization of the historic urban quarter involves two processes which inevitably conflict: the rehabilitation of buildings and areas, which seeks to accommodate the consequences of economic change, and the preservation, which seeks to limit change and protect a historic building and an area's character. We have to protect the scale and character of traditional neighborhoods and combat the loss of the historic urban fabric<sup>[7]</sup>. The harmonious developments among the city economy, function and social, cultural and historical values should be ensured. The plan should include a comprehensive package of recommendations for preserving and revitalizing the West Yuehu area, with design and demolition review procedures. In order to preserve the physical character of the West Yuehu area, a critical mass of historic buildings has to be preserved, restored and reactivated. The outer appearance of the traditional houses should be kept and restored and the living conditions inside should be improved. Necessary service facilities and infrastructures, especially sewerage and drainage systems, should be provided to ensure a healthy environment. Increasing numbers of historic buildings should be rehabilitated for residential use as medium priced lofts. There should also be attempts to provide a more diversified housing mix to balance the existing upper middle class housing. In the rebuilding process, the old houses in very poor quality should be destroyed and some new houses, based on the concept of the tradi-

tional courtyard houses, built. The height of the new buildings should be mostly three storeys high; hence the scale of the residential area will be sustained to keep the intimacy within and around the block, see Figs. 3 and 4.



**Fig. 3** Analysis maps. (a) Construction period; (b) Conservation grade; (c) Structural condition



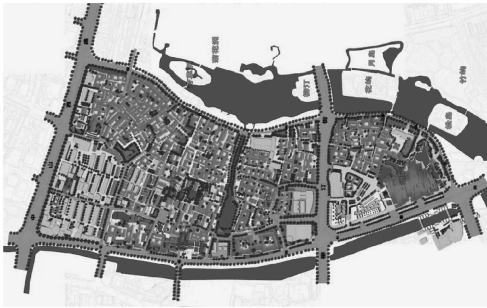
**Fig. 4** Analysis maps. (a) Functional analysis; (b) Type of house; (c) Service facilities assessment

The networks and patterns of the streets and lanes around the block and within the block have to be preserved. The new spatial organization should respect the old space layout and relationship between the spaces of different uses. The courtyard and outdoor spaces should be kept and recreated so that the direct relationship of indoor spaces and outdoor spaces will be maintained. We have to create some community spaces where the people can sit and talk, and children can play. The West Yuehu area should attract entertainment and arts-oriented establishments, unique shops, arts, retail and restaurants.

**5.1 Urban planning and design process**

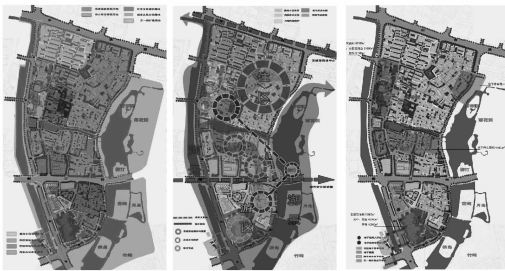
During the urban revitalization process for the West Yuehu area, two levels of action are proposed. First, at the level of the study area as a whole, the master plan for the site is proposed, which includes a general land-use plan map; historical quarter conservation policies report; community input; economic development; traffic, urban management; urban design; and affordable housing and fabric conservation strategy for

the West Yuehu area ( see Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5** Proposed master plan for physical revitalization of the West Yuehu area

Secondly, to ensure the construction quality for the conservation, the whole project will be in different phases, see Fig. 6. Initially, a piece of land in the site will be selected as the first phase and testing area on the basis of the detailed planning for the revitalization project of the West Yuehu area in Ningbo city. After obtaining the experience of initial renovation and subjecting it to the full assessment, the all-round renovation and rehabilitation in the area will be launched. The whole project for conservation and renewal of the West Yuehu area will be completed in 2006 or 2007.



**Fig. 6** Different conceptual and schematic plans

**5.2 Pilot project: selected area development plan**

The northeast part of the West Yuehu area is selected for the first phase of the revitalization process. There are several aspects that should be considered in this process: clarification of whether the present inhabitants will stay or move out or if a function change has to take place; clarification of the takeover of the costs; protect and renew the traditional courtyard houses with a new and modern interior but in harmony with the traditional arrangement, enclosed by a protected and maintained exterior; sensible conversion of the design concepts, respecting the historical values and traditional environment and stimulation of private groups to begin restoration projects on their own, and expanding the governmental conservation policy to create a sustainable area that is both livable and dynamic, see

Fig. 7.

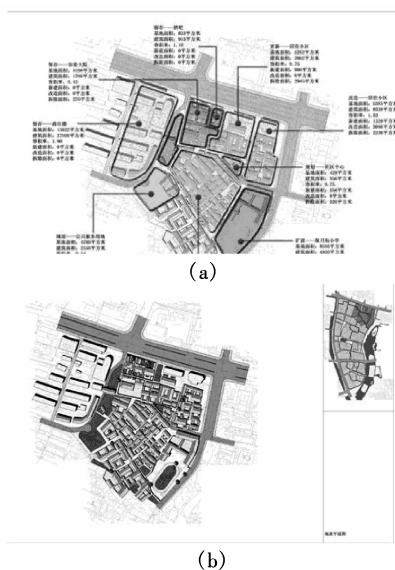


Fig. 7 Pilot project. (a) Analysis plan; (b) Proposal plan

## 6 Conclusion

We cannot succeed in saving our cities unless we develop the ability to understand their real problems and all issues related to them, unless we face these problems with full understanding of their magnitude and of the historical phase of urban growth. Conservation-oriented urban renewal does not provide all the answers to the complicated problems of contemporary urban development. Creating and implementing the ideas and strategies for development and revitalization of old cities is a great challenge for one person or one

generation. We need many more new concepts in every field of thought and action. These are sometimes conceived simultaneously by several people in different surroundings. But the most important concepts are that we should exploit our minds, develop the advantages of our culture, and save our heritage from decay. The challenge today is to develop the sustainable cities of tomorrow while preserving the old historical areas.

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## 再现城市历史居住区的活力

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**摘要:** 在过去 20 年中, 宁波传统历史街区经历了快速转型. 新的城市形态取代了传统城市形态, 传统城市格局遭到了破坏. 本文通过对一些特殊历史街区的分析研究来阐明城市中的保护与更新. 以宁波月湖西部地区为例, 提出了规划设计的方法, 阐述了其中的一些限制性因素及矛盾与冲突, 并以此为案例来阐述在此大背景下再现城市活力的重要性. 文中运用了 2 种学习方法: 一是通过对资料的学习来获取理论来源, 二是通过现场调研获取第一手资料. 试图通过对传统历史街区在更新过程中的冲突与结果的分析来阐明传统历史街区更新和再现活力的情况.

**关键词:** 城市活力再现; 传统城市街区; 保护; 保存

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