Historic Neighbourhood Upgrading with Community Participation

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Abstract:

A substantial historic area with traditional neighborhoods characterized by 1 to 2 storey courtyard buildings remains in the Old City of Yangzhou of China. As in other Chinese cities, the area is deteriorating and threatened by rapid economic development and urbanization. There is a high risk from the unfortunate customary redevelopment model of demolition and relocation. Because of the deteriorated housing, poor municipal infrastructure and lack of proper sanitary facilities, many of the higher-income and younger generation are moving to new city areas lured by the modern living standards.

The Yangzhou Municipal Government, GTZ and Cities Alliance have cooperated to introduce a sustainable urban conservation concept which links heritage preservation to the improvement of living conditions of residents, by upgrading the historic neighborhoods and supporting self-help initiatives. A long-term strategy following a participatory and process-oriented approach has been developed and tested. In a pilot block, residents were involved through Community Action Planning (CAP), resulting in agreement on appropriate housing standards and self-help modernization of houses and facades. Living conditions were remarkably improved through this mobilization of the community. Based on the successful experience, it is now being adopted for use throughout the old city in Yangzhou, and viewed as potential model for use throughout China.

Key Words: historic neighbourhood upgrading; Community Action Planning; community participation.

Background

China is developing at a tremendous pace. Rapid economic development and urbanization have led to an enormous amount of construction activity in terms of new urban districts, but also with demolition and redevelopment of inner city areas. In many cities, the historic areas are being swallowed, resulting in a loss of cultural heritage. In Yangzhou, however, there still remains a substantial historical area of 5.1 km² with about 110,000 residents, characterized by 1 to 2 storey courtyard buildings with narrow streets and alleys.

Already for several years the Yangzhou Municipal Government has recognized the historical and economic value of the old inner city and has paid special attention to preserve the historic area. GTZ (German Technical Cooperation) and Cities Alliance supported the Municipal Government’s efforts in preserving the old city centre and introduced the concept of “Sustainable Urban Conservation” for the rehabilitation of the old city. It aims to improve the living conditions of residents in traditional urban neighbourhoods by upgrading these areas and supporting self-help initiatives. The program elaborated a comprehensive upgrading strategy for the whole inner city of Yangzhou, which focuses not only on the preservation of listed historic buildings, but also on the residents, particularly the lower-income groups, in improving their living conditions, and modernization of their houses. By following a process-orientated, gradual
upgrading approach, the relocation of residents was minimized. It encouraged the residents to participate in the modernization of their house and community and benefit from the growing economic vitality of these areas.

In 2006, as a component of the strategy development, a pilot neighborhood was identified by the iYET (international Yangzhou Experts Team) jointly with the government counterparts of Yangzhou. This 1.4 hectare area contained 147 households, and included the major problems that are typical of traditional neighborhoods in the Old City.

- Sanitary conditions of the houses in the area are often poor, individual toilets or bathrooms are often missing. Most of the residents still use public toilets.
- The physical condition of the housing is generally deteriorated, and desperately needs repair and updating.
- Infrastructure needs attention. The existing storm water drainage needs upgrading. It is increasingly used for discharge of grey water and sometimes with sewage from toilets. Major collection pipes for sewage along major roads leading to a sewage treatment plant are in place; however the local network is not connected and needs replacement. Gas service is not available, and electricity needs substantial improvement.
- Over the years, provisory extension of houses has reduced public spaces and access. Public space in the vicinity of the houses as well as within the neighborhood plays an important role in community interaction and small-scale economic activities (selling of food and other small goods from carts). Access is already limited due to traditional narrow lanes and high building density, and encroachments make this more problematic. Emergency access, public maintenance and services need to be addressed.

Fig.1 Aerial view of pilot area
Fig.2 Historical areas in the Old City, Yangzhou
Source: GTZ Project Team
Fig. 3 Living conditions in the pilot area: makeshift kitchens, poor sanitation, broken and unsafe pavements, and limited public facilities.
Source: GTZ Project Team

Due to the deteriorating physical conditions of the buildings, many younger and richer residents have moved to new city areas. As a result, the majority of the residents are now low income.\(^1\) Approximately 37% of the residents are older than 61 years, and this forewarns a significant demographic change within the next 10 years.\(^2\)

Fig. 4 Population by income in pilot area, RMB/month (left); Demographic structure in the pilot area (right). Source: GTZ/Yangzhou Municipality (2005), p. 25

The challenge of the program is to involve the residents in the improvement of the area as an alternative to demolition. The opportunity for Yangzhou is to link upgrading with historical rehabilitation and develop a model for conservation applicable throughout China. In this approach, a parallel focus is placed on families and history, with neither being dominant. ‘Community Action Planning’ (CAP) was introduced to improve the awareness of residents and encourage the active involvement of the communities. By the active participation of the community, the CAP methodology brings in the community as a development partner with the city.
The ‘CAP’–Workshop in the pilot neighborhood

An initial CAP workshop, organized by iYET and YFCC (Yangzhou Famous City Company), focused on testing Community Action Planning and developing strategies and a development timeline for a pilot block. The target was to establish a participatory planning approach for rehabilitating and upgrading the historical neighborhoods.

Established by GTZ experts and representatives from local authorities, iYET was composed of both local and foreign professionals. A special government institution ‘Old City Office’ (OCO) was established as primary partner representing the city, and was the key counterpart of the iYET team. The implementing partner was the YFCC, a technical organization. Several other city agencies also participated in a supporting role: mainly the Cultural Bureau, Planning Bureau, Construction Bureau, House Management Bureau, and Environmental Protection Bureau.

The Framework for Structuring Inputs

A three-level framework was developed to structure the issues to be explored with the community - Lane/street, Facade and House.

- “Lane/street” is the key planning element whose change is immediately visible. This deals essentially with the surface and is generally the responsibility of the city for its improvement and maintenance. Quick and low-cost interventions are possible in the lanes, and reinforce street community for mutual support. This is important as the lane community is intended as the key driver for improvement. The terminology ‘lane’ is more appropriate than street, since they are very narrow and handle mainly pedestrian traffic.

- “Facade” is the other clearly different element with potentially different actors in conservation. As the lane, it is highly visible and reinforces the sense of community when improved. The strategy that was explored was how to involve the homeowner by offering a cost sharing arrangement. A 30/70% split in costs was tested, and exceeded expectations.

- “House” relates to improvement of the interior of the house. A strategy of improving one house per lane initially served as a model for residents to follow, while also providing education opportunities, for example, skill training and a focus of training visits.

Fig.5 Framework Symbols for the CAP workshop
Source: GTZ Team/ iYET
The framework provided:

- Manageable elements to facilitate implementation, recognizing the varied actors, funding possibilities, and interests
- A parallel to community groups for effective support.
- Recognizable entities are clearly defined, very visible and public

Before the workshop disposable cameras were distributed to selected families in each lane. There were asked to record what they determined as ‘good historical’ elements and ‘non-historical’ elements. This photographs were the starting point for the assembled workshop.

**Task 1: Develop Awareness of Old City**

About 30 residents and 20 representatives from the various interested institutions (OCO, Urban Planning Bureau, Construction Bureau, YFCC, neighborhood committee and iYET) attended the workshop.

On the first day of the workshop, the following questions were the drivers of the discussions:

- “What would you be proud to show visiting relatives or tourists?”
- “What would you want to pass on to your children?”

The purpose was to:

- build awareness, and a common understanding of what are historical elements and what are considered not historical;
- understand elements according to future planning and implementation.

The discussions were summarized to determine a common shared understanding and highlight issues.

The residents’ then placed their photographs in the 3-level framework to structure their inputs. This made clear and very visible the historical and non-historical elements, and determined the elements requiring detailed design improvements for compliance with historical areas (Fig. 6a).

**Task 2: Consider priorities and cost**

The next task was to:

- understand concerns from different perspectives: family and city;
- understand the relative importance of concerns;
- relate concerns to costs to determine budgeting needs in implementation;
- determine concerns that are the same and easy to implement, and concerns that are very different and require negotiation.

A 3 x 3 matrix was used to structure the derived policy agreements to facilitate compliance (Fig. 6b).

**Task 3: Do field survey of problems and issues**
On the second day, a lane survey was undertaken. The purpose was to update data on the street and the surface situation for the preparation of a detailed inventory.

**Task 4: Prepare street community inventory**

This stage provided the basic information for implementation for the lane and facade. Families identified elements and their location on a large-scale plan. Elements by type, location, and number were marked so they became directly transferable for detailed technical plan development.

**Task 5: Analyze Issues**

On the third day, all the workshop participants discussed the issues to be addressed, recommended what should be done, who should be responsible, what the financial resource could be, and which policies should support them (Fig. 6c).

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(a) 

![Image](image_url)
Fig. 6 Residents and officials discussed and made joint decisions in the participatory workshops

Source: GTZ Project Team/ iYET (2006)
‘Post-CAP’ – After the Workshop

A timeline for implementation of the pilot area was developed by the professional support team. Upgrading Guidelines were proposed and served as the basis for the pilot neighbourhood improvement. The guidelines were further refined and summarized into an easy to understand format (‘Phased Upgrading Decision Matrix’, see Fig. 7) which is intended as the model for the whole old city. The guideline is a simple, visual matrix intended to have clear, transparent models which are understood by residents and professionals alike during an upgrading process. They provide a template for upgrading standards which also determine associated costs. A long-term advantage is that residents will have models to follow as their income circumstances change and their desire and capacity to improve their houses could be met. Wasteful removal of inappropriate improvements is avoided, following the agreed goals expressed in the matrix shared by residents and government alike.

In support of the house upgrading, a ‘Rapid House Assessment’ procedure was followed to provide residents with information of renovation needs and a cost estimation to allow an informed decision. Representatives from each lane were selected as contact persons to assist in the implementation standards as agree in the workshop.

| Yangzhou Old City, Phased Upgrading Decision Matrix (PUD Matrix) |
|---------------------------------|---------------|-----------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Target                          | Wall material | Door      | Window     | Awning      | Air conditioner | Roof        | Solar Heater | Rain pipe | Electricity |
| Transition                      |               |           |            | no awning   | no AC        |             | Flat-plate   |           |             |
| Inappropriate                   |               |           |            |             |              |             | solar water  |            |             |

Fig. 7 The ‘Phased Upgrading Decision Matrix’ – Facade Level
Source: GTZ Project Team

Achievements of the workshop
The “Community Action Planning” approach and the supporting activities in Yangzhou have proved to be successful:

- Communities participated enthusiastically; residents were very active in expressing their opinions and provided a direct reference for community improvement;
- Communities became more aware of the issues of planning and implementation and recognized the different improvement issues of the lane, facade and house;
- A common understanding was achieved among the various actors;
- Residents were able to make better informed decisions in choosing among alternatives and structuring ideas;
- Residents prepared an action plan to organize short and medium term improvements in their housing environment, to help organize their scarce resources for maximum benefit.

After the workshop the results were presented to the municipal government. The deputy mayor and the directors of different bureaus as well as other government officials embraced enthusiastically the outcome of the workshops, and praised the contributions of the residents. As a result, the master plan for the pilot area was revised and updated with the desires and suggestions by the residents.

Fig. 7 A renovated house with modern kitchen and toilet in the pilot area, before and after renovation,
Source: GTZ Project Team
Fig.8 The result: young members of the family will come back to live together with their parents, now that their house is renovated with more living space, toilet and kitchen.
Source: GTZ Project Team

Fig.9 Improved open space: illegal extensions are demolished and space for enhanced community interaction is now available.
Source: GTZ Project Team
A ‘Mini-CAP’ for open space improvement

In the following months after the workshop, about 40 houses have been renovated. A ‘Mini-CAP’ for the improvement of a lane in the neighborhood was carried out. The lane community determined an improvement plan, and selected and located the plants, street furnitures (tables and chairs) and other improvements in their lane. The initial planning and discussions were again in a workshop format on-site in the lane, which was followed by two days of implementation by the lane community.
Fig. 10 Poster summarizing steps of the ‘Mini-CAP’ for open space improvement

Source: Reinhard Goethert (2007)
Major achievements and further development

The upgrading of the pilot neighborhood is in progress. The infrastructure and open space of the other lanes have been also improved. It is hoped that the majority of the original residents will now stay within this neighborhood, now that their living conditions are being improved.

With the successful test of neighborhood improvement with community participation, a participatory model has been developed of the rehabilitation of the traditional neighborhoods in Yangzhou. The model is now becoming further detailed, computerized and will be disseminated throughout the Old City. Community Action Planning will continue to play a very important role in the mobilization and information exchange between the government and residents in urban conservation.

The Mayor of Yangzhou and the directors from the different bureaus have accepted the concept of participation. They have argued for its further development and application through the entire Old City, and potentially as a model for all China. A five-year extension of the programme is being discussed, after which the approach could be incorporated into standard government planning policies.

Many local and national newspapers reported on the neighborhood upgrading activities and the workshops in the Old City of Yangzhou. This widespread publicity has lead to a discussion about participation in old city conservation in other cities in China, as they are faced with similar issues of balancing development with their historic legacy.

Notes
1 The average monthly income per capita is 821RMB based on “Yangzhou Statistic Yearbook of 2004”. But according to a sample survey by GTZ and the Yangzhou Urban Planning & Design Research Institute, over 50% families in this area have a lower average income.


References
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