

Progressively Develop People-centered Urban Transformation: Regenerate Livable, Attractive, Satisfying ‘Urban Villages’

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Abstract: This paper explores how to better develop a people-centered urban renewal project in the context of Shenzhen’s urban villages. In the beginning, this paper explains the background of the emergence of urban villages in Shenzhen and other major cities. Under this context, the participatory observation method is used to analyze the common problems in the renovation of urban villages in Shenzhen, and the housing affordability problem of the original residents for the newly constructed apartments is raised. Presenting the Nantou Ancient City in Shenzhen as positive empirical evidence, this paper explores two recommendations, starting with an emphasis on protective renovation to avoid a short-term boost in housing prices. Following discussion of urban renewal construction projects should not be limited to architectural space. Instead, inclusive community building is still the key to maintaining the former residents and attracting more young people. The condensed conclusion highlights the unity of these two viewpoints and reemphasizes the importance of people-centered development in urban villages.

Keywords: urban renewal, urban villages, renovation, people-centered development

1. Introduction

Urban renewal has become an essential part of the ongoing urban development during the urban transformation in China. In the past decades, massive agricultural land has been used for urban development, profoundly impacting the country’s economy and regional urban-rural relationships [1-2]. Usable land resources available for urban construction thus become very limited and scarce in some of the major cities in China, especially in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. In order to promote new investments, sustain further growth and accommodate more citizens, urban redevelopment has been adopted as an important way to provide additional accessible urban development space.

The transformation of urban villages is one of the cases which typically happens in the urban regeneration process in China. With the rapid development of the city, the former rural land has now become the urban area or even the core developing area of the city. By purchasing the villagers’ homestead and the village collective houses on it at a high price, the village will be transformed according to the newly adapted urban development plan, so as to obtain redevelopment profits and government tax to achieve a win-win situation. However, this situation ignores that urban

development is ultimately people-oriented. Especially today, when China's birth rate dropped to 0.67% last year, young people, as an effective force for urban development, should benefit from it [3].

According to research, existing policies related to the reconstruction of urban villages mainly follow a direction of "demolish-rebuild" without sufficiently considering the mechanisms behind their social and environmental aspects. In the long term, such urban redevelopment orientation will be an obstacle to the achievement of sustainable development goals [4]. The present urban renewal changes not only the physical and social surroundings but also the social networks within neighborhoods [5]. This may finally lead to the departure of original residents, apart from the difficulty in affording the high housing rent.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 uses the example of Baishizhou to illustrate the situation that most of the original tenants have left due to demolition, and the unaffordable rent of the new houses that sprung up after renovation. Section 3 provides another urban renewal project, Nantou Ancient City, to show how to develop a successfully transformed urban village. Finally, it concludes that urban renewal should always be people-oriented.

2. Existing Problems

Taking Baishizhou, the largest old renovation project in Shenzhen, as an example, its development cycle will last for 20 years. According to the research data in 2015, 2,527 rental houses were squeezed into the 0.6 km² of land in Baishizhou before the renovation, with about 140,000 people living there, of which 120,000 are migrants (mostly young people who have just arrived in Shenzhen). At present, it has become China Resources City, with a total area of 0.63 km², a total construction area of 2.8 km², including 2.2 km² of residential buildings, and the height of the highest floor reaches 300 m, as shown in Figure 1. In contrast, Figure 2 shows the original appearance of Baishizhou.



Figure 1: Appearance of Baishizhou after renovation [6].



Figure 2: Appearance of Baishizhou Before renovation [7].

With such a high floor area ratio, if the average household is 90 m² and three people live there, the number of residents is about 70,000, only half of the former settled population. Although the city has

a new look after the transformation, the negative effect of the rapid rising in housing prices has greatly increased the burden on the original residents. Before the renovation, the rent of the rental house was basically maintained at 2,500-3,000 RMB/month for two bedrooms apartment. After the renovation, taking the Runfu project in China Resources City as an example, the minimum rent for two bedrooms apartment was 16,000 RMB/month, which is shown in Figure 3. The surrounding house price is even more than 130,000 RMB/m² (see Figure 4).

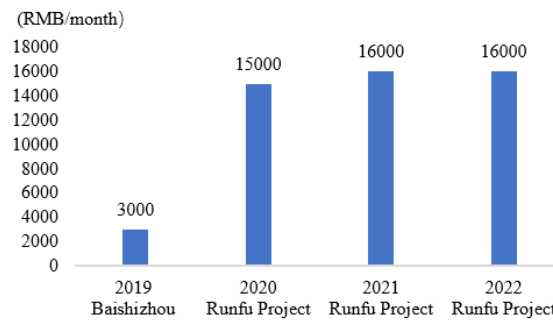


Figure 3: Housing rent trend in Baishizhou area before and after renovation.

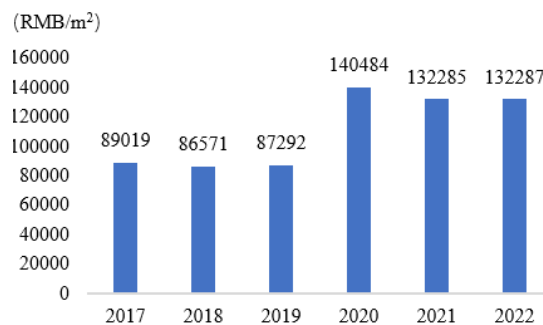


Figure 4: Housing price trend in Baishizhou area before and after renovation.

From this point of view, people who used to live in such urban villages and those who now live in the transformed “urban villages” are completely different groups of people, and the former lower-income and younger groups have gradually moved away. In our survey data, a total of five young people left due to reasons such as demolition, rising rent, and continuous construction in the surrounding area. Among them are young people who have just graduated and come to Shenzhen, as well as professionals who have worked in Shenzhen for about five years. Some of them even plan to leave Shenzhen and return to their hometowns to find opportunities. How can young people be retained? They are the main force of future urban development.

3. Solutions

During the investigation, an urban renewal project was found, whose transformation concept and final effect are refreshing. It is Nantou Ancient City in Shenzhen. Taking Boyu, a rental property owned and operated by the householder after the renovation of Nantou Ancient City, as an example, since its operating in September 2020, the average rent has been 3,567.04 RMB/month for the year of 2020, 3,873.69 RMB/month for the year of 2021, and 4,194.85 RMB/month for the year of 2022, basically maintained at an annual increase of 8%, which is within the acceptable range of tenants (see Figure 5). Through investigation and the interview with Dean Qian of the Wancheng Design Institute, who presided over the renovation work, the following measures are summarized.

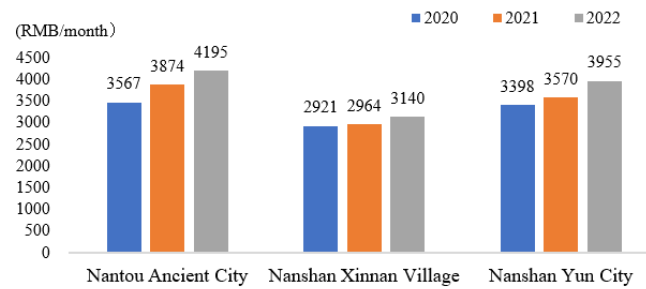


Figure 5: The apartment rent comparison of Boyu in Nantou Ancient City and its surroundings.

3.1. Protective Redevelopment

Controlling on carrying out large-scale demolition and construction to avoid short-term surges in housing prices, as well as choosing protective reconstruction in areas where conditions permit.

The ancient city of Nantou used to be the site of military institutions in the Tang Dynasty. The historic defense area layout in the coastal areas of Hong Kong and Shenzhen, witnessing the 1700-year history of Shenzhen from the Dongjin Dynasty. Therefore, the village has its own history and cultural value for protective development. In the phase transformation process, the main streets in the north and south were renovated first, and some stores were retained, but the business format was updated. The reason why not all the buildings were changed was that the quality of the buildings and the environment could be improved, and at the same time, it could attract some people to stay, hoping that the new people and the original people could coexist harmoniously and fairly here, as seen in Figure 6. Our random visits to merchants in the ancient city also proved the positive effect of this type of transformation. Ms. Mary is a young woman who opened a grocery store in the ancient city. She left earlier because of the dirty environment of the village, but she came back two years ago to open a small shop and live in the ancient city. Mary's answer reassured us that the residents who left are now returning, especially young people who are willing to come to work and live in the ancient city, which shows that the transformation of the ancient city has formed a certain attraction for them.



Figure 6: Comparison of the state of Nantou ancient city before and after renovation: (A) before renovation; (B) after renovation [8].

3.2. Community Building

Urban regeneration is not limited to its physical space, but also needs to create a community atmosphere through the organization and content planning of activities, so as to gather people and make them develop simultaneously with the city.

The ancient city of Nantou has attracted many creative, cultural, and design companies. The former garment factory was transformed into an office space and named “IF” factory by the homonym switch between Chinese and English (see Figure 7 and Figure 8). The vast majority of companies that have settled in belong to this type. The shops on the commercial street are mostly filled with cultural and creative products shops, characteristic street shops, fashion and creative-themed shops, exhibition halls, and other emerging formats. It has become a cultural and creative center where fashionistas, trendsetters, and young people are willing to gather, communicate, and engage in activities. In fact, it also undertakes and carries forward the important role of Nantou Ancient City in cultural inheritance, education publicity, and community autonomy.



Figure 7: Appearance of the IF garment factory in Nantou Ancient City before renovation [9].



Figure 8: Appearance of the IF garment factory in Nantou Ancient City after renovation during the biennial exhibition [9].

In an interview with Dahai, who is in charge of the curation and event planning of the ancient city, he told us that various exhibitions and activities are often held in the ancient city, in the form of book fairs, painting exhibitions, photography exhibitions, food culture exhibitions, etc., and the content mainly focuses on architecture, design, art, culture and other aspects. It is precisely because of the transformation of the ancient city, while forming the design industry cluster effect, it has brought a more diverse and rich creative population to the ancient city.

“Maybe it’s the overall atmosphere in the ancient city, the so-called sense of community.” This is the answer when interviewing Mr. Ni, who lived and worked in the ancient city, and asking him why he chose the ancient city to make his home. This sense of community was felt when stepping into the ancient city for the first time, when visiting exhibitions, when interviewing residents and businesses, and when sitting down in coffee shops in the ancient city. After several years of operation, a group

of young people who are interested in creative culture, architectural design, art installations, etc. have gradually gathered here. They have become active members of the ancient city, the main and new force of community construction, and the disseminators of the ancient city culture. Such ancient cities, in turn, attract more young people, thus forming a state of “self-growth”, which should be attributed to the success of the urban renewal project.

4. Conclusion

People-centered transformation is the core value of urban village regeneration. Rather than simply focusing on the physical creation of architectural space, it is necessary to pay more attention to people's feelings and experiences and to help more people live a better life through the urban renewal project. Only in this way can people and the city live symbiotically, and can urban villages be truly reborn and have multiple possibilities for future development.

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