

THE SIMPLIFIED COURTYARD AND ITS PUBLIC SPACE IN NORTH CHINA'S SMALL CITIES: SIGNIFICANCE, THREATS, AND OPPORTUNITIES (1082)

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Abstract. This study defined as 'Simplified Courtyard' a type of urban house widely built in the 1970s-1990s in small cities in North China. Together with their public and semi-public spaces, Simplified Courtyards constituted the urban landscape characteristic of the early socialist era in small cities. In the rapid urban transformation of the past few decades, a large part of them was demolished and replaced with a *tabula rasa* approach. Taking the small city *Zhengding* as an example, this study investigated the Simplified Courtyard with respect to its public space, analysing its urban significance, threats, and opportunities for regeneration, to draw adequate attention to this unique but long-neglected urban component and contribute to their sustainable subsistence in the future.

Keywords: Simplified Courtyard, public space, urban regeneration

1. Introduction

Urban houses in small cities in North China in the late Qing Dynasty (late 19th century) followed the traditional courtyard type. The *Ma Family Courtyard* (马家大院, hereinafter called *Ma Courtyard*) in *Zhengding*, Hebei Province, was an example (Figure 1-a). It was in a north-south layout with three courtyards or three *jin* (进, one courtyard counts as one *jin* in Chinese architecture). On the south street frontage, beside the gate, two shops were facing the street. It can be generally categorised as a *Siheyuan*, meaning a courtyard (or a series of courtyards) surrounded by buildings on all four sides.

Ma Courtyard belonged to one of the wealthiest families back then, so it was one of the complete models of traditional courtyard houses in the region, and other models were its simplified variants (Figure 1-b). This simplification process already commenced in the Chinese imperial dynasties. First, the three *jin* of *Ma Courtyard* were cut by one or two *jin*, with the remaining courtyard(s) still in the layout of *Siheyuan*. Further simplification cut the buildings on the south, and one of or both the east and west wings, leaving the courtyard as *Sanheyuan* or *Qiangyuan* (三合院, 墙院, meaning courtyards with buildings surrounding on three or only one side). This simplification also happened to the buildings' structure and construction. *Ma Courtyard* was constructed in a mixed wood-brick structure supporting traditional gable roofs with complicated wooden trusses. But

the simplified variants usually used less expensive and easier-to-construct flat roofs, brick or raw earth walls, and rough wooden beams.

After the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, another simplification process took place in an effort to provide equal and economical housing for each family, which was part of the socialist ideal. Compared to the above-mentioned simplified variations that already happened in the imperial dynasties, this socialist simplification was more planned and unified. The new courtyard houses built in small cities in North China since the 1960s were all uniformly constructed with standard designs and easy-to-build techniques, ensuring only the most basic living conditions and leaving aside aesthetics or recreation purposes (Figure 1-c). The outcome was standardised courtyard houses with masonry structures, flat roofs, and little decoration, significantly simplified compared to the traditional models like the *Ma Courtyard*. Each of them consisted of only one small courtyard and one row of principal rooms on the north side. They were widely built in the 1970s–1990s and became the most common type of residence in small cities in North China. Here this paper refers to this new socialist type of courtyard house as *Simplified Courtyards*.

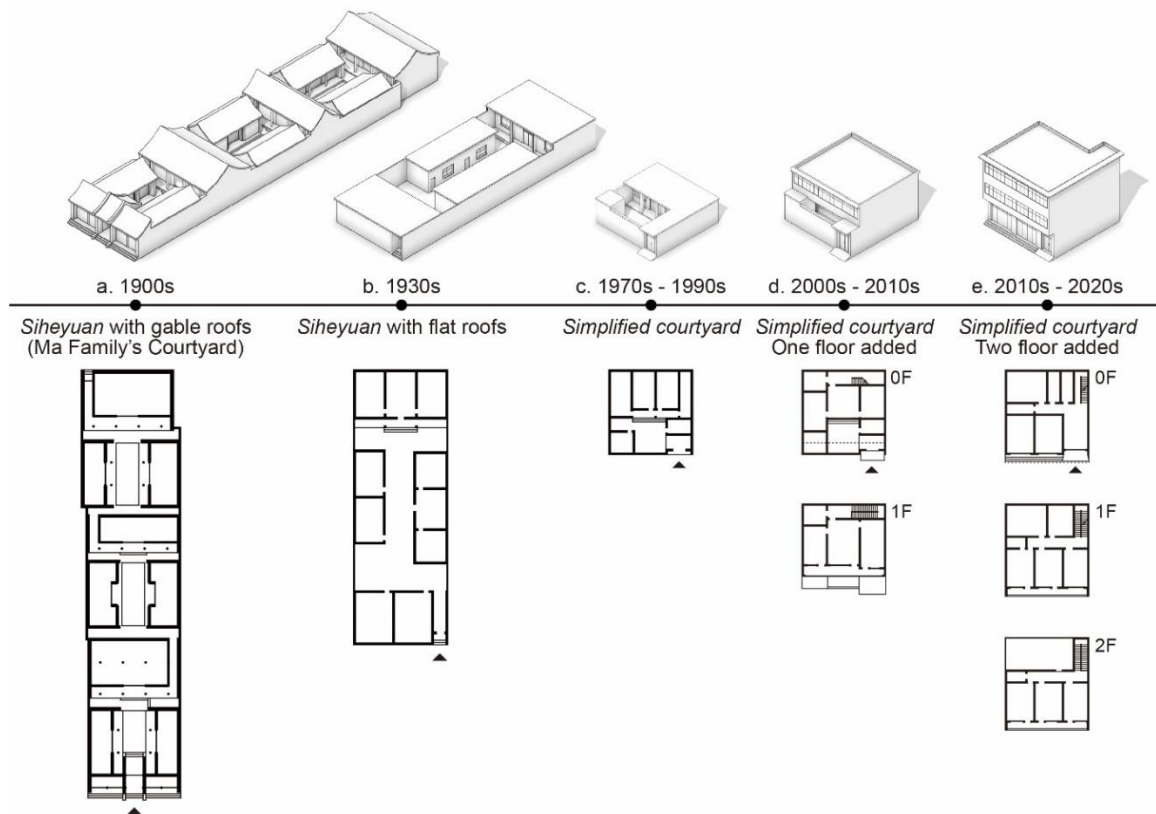


Figure 1. The evolution of courtyard houses in *Zhengding*; phase c is the Simplified Courtyard

Despite being simplified, these new houses stuck to basic *Fengshui* principles¹ conforming to local living habits. So, they were all oriented orthogonally north-south, with all the main rooms' entrances always facing the south. This uniform orientation created a back-to-front pattern and a unique, neat, high-density urban texture (Figure 2).

2. The Public Space of the Simplified Courtyard Community and Its Significance

2.1 The Hierarchical Space System



Figure 2. The hierarchy of urban spaces in *Taipingjie* Community in *Zhengding*, the situation of 2020

¹ *Fengshui* (风水), also called Chinese Geomancy, is a set of principles derived from the ancient Chinese understanding of the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. It would be referenced for determining the sites, orientations, heights, etc., for settlements, residences, palaces, temples, and all other human dwellings, based on observing the area's geographical and meteorological situation, particularly on the composition of nearby mountains and waters.

Like in the traditional *hutong* (胡同) neighbourhoods², the urban spaces in the Simplified Courtyards community also presented a hierarchical structure, from public to semi-public and finally to private spaces of courtyards. Take the *Taipingjie* community in *Zhengding* as an example. As is shown in Figure 2, each row of the Simplified Courtyards opens its gates directly to one narrowest alley, which then connects to wider perpendicular alleys of a higher level. To be clear, the narrowest alleys will be denoted as *rib alleys* and the wider ones as *backbone alleys*. There is an even higher level of alleys, broader and longer, which directly connect the urban roads peripheral to the community. These widest alleys will be called *axis alleys* here.

Generally, the *rib alley* is less used for public activities; some were even closed by residents with fences and gates because it is psychologically regarded as semi-public or collective spaces shared exclusively by the families living along it. The *backbone alleys* are more commonly used for public activities since they are psychologically seen as collectively shared by all the families within the community. *Axis alleys* are the most public ones, where community events like *Lahui* (腊会)³ take place (Zhang and Zhang, 2011). In everyday situations, these axis alleys would even be used as urban roads through the community.

2.2 Significance of the Simplified Courtyard and Its Public Space

Despite the fact that many of them have been demolished today, Simplified Courtyards in small cities have unique and irreplaceable significance. On the typo-morphological aspects, the Simplified Courtyard community inherited the *hutong's* urban structure consisting of orthogonal and fishbone-like alleys that connect rows of courtyard houses. This structure endows Simplified Courtyard communities with a relationship between private courtyard spaces, semi-public alley spaces, and public spaces that is identical to that of *hutong* neighbourhoods, where all these categories of spaces are associated in an osmotic and fluid way (Collotti, 2019). This unique urban form preserved a precious piece of historical layered morphology (Pezzetti, 2019) in the increasingly monotonous urban landscape of contemporary China (Liu and Pezzetti, 2022), which usually consists of constant high-rise apartment buildings in gated communities. If all Simplified Courtyards were erased or replaced, the small cities would have nothing physically local and historical left, except for a few monuments lonely scattered among the intimidating high-rises.

² *Hutong* (胡同) is a type of urban neighbourhood commonly found in North China cities. They were especially typical in the Ming and Qing Dynasties (14th–19th centuries). It is characterized by its hierarchical alley system, consisting of *hutong* (the narrowest alleys), minor streets and major streets.

³ *Lahui* (腊会) is a celebration event that take place on the Chinese New Year (in some regions it happen in the 15th day after the New Year) in North China cities.

Concerning the social and cultural aspects, Simplified Courtyards' significance is even more prominent and valuable. In gated apartment communities, the stack of apartments in high-rise buildings deprived the residents of chances of frequent communication, resulting in an indifferent acquaintanceship between neighbours. In contrast, the Simplified Courtyard community, with its compact layout and the osmotic relationship between the private and the public, encourages communication and interaction. It is capable of creating a cooperative and self-governing social structure within each community. Today, such a social structure is retained, at least partly, in the remaining Simplified Courtyard communities, which is utterly significant in preserving the collective memory and sustaining a robust local identity of the residents, and further helping to preserve the identity of the whole city.

Wars, social unrest, and poverty in 20th-century China, as well as the subsequent dramatic urban transformation in the economic boom, have erased too much unique urban fabric, leaving cities nowadays increasingly homogeneous to each other. Under such circumstances, the Simplified Courtyard community, with its morphological, social, and cultural significance, becomes even more valuable and deserves to be studied and saved.

3. The Weakness and Threats of Simplified Courtyard Community

Simplified Courtyards were widely constructed in the 1970s–1990s. Taking *Zhengding* as an example, by the end of the 20th century, almost all residences in *Zhengding* were Simplified Courtyards. Now, although partly replaced by gated apartment communities, the Simplified Courtyard remains the primary type of residence in small North China cities like *Zhengding* (Figure 3). Another small city in the region, *Dingzhou*, is currently in the same situation. In other smaller cities or towns with less real estate development in the past decades, like *Yuxian* and *Shengfang*⁴, the Simplified Courtyard still covers almost the whole urban central areas.

⁴ *Dingzhou*, *Yuxian* and *Shengfang* are all located in the northern part of Hebei Province in North China, the same province where *Zhengding* is.

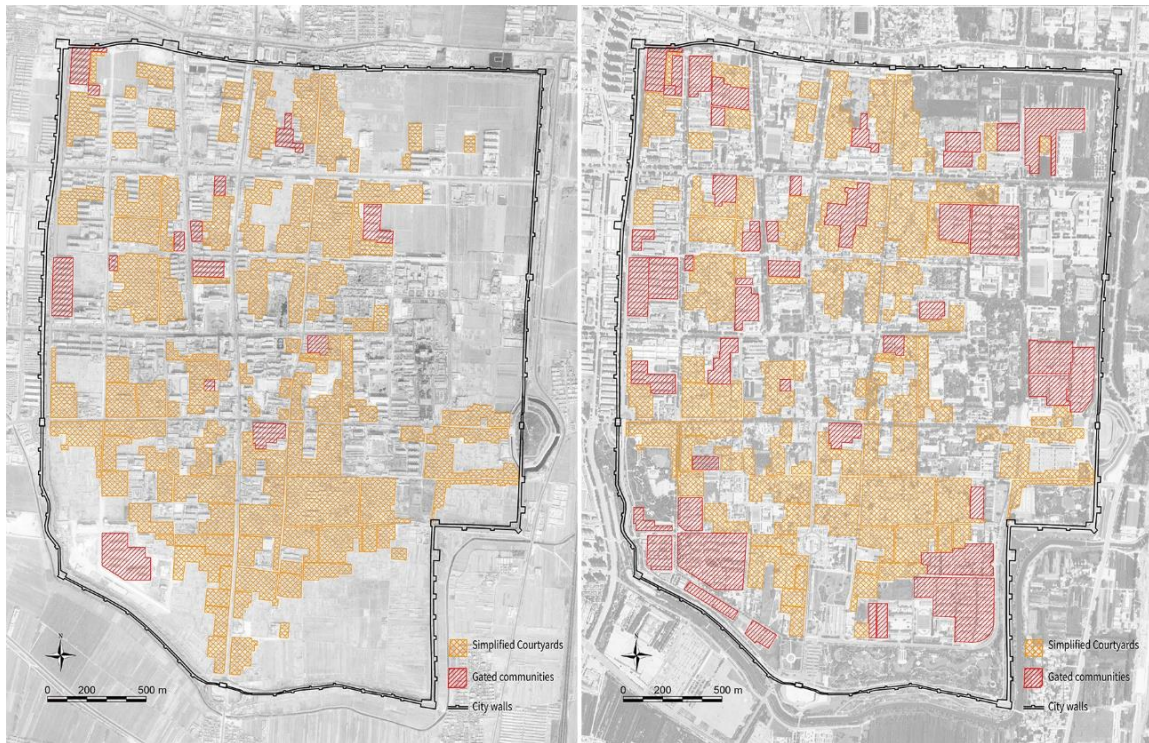


Figure 3. Simplified Courtyard community (orange hatch) and gated community (red hatch) in *Zhengding*, a comparison between the situation of 2002 (left) and 2022 (right).

Nevertheless, the Simplified Courtyard was never the perfect urban house since they were products in a very poor era of China with the purpose of only meeting the very basic living demands. Due to the limited funding and resources back then, these residences were not of high quality and were subject to easy deterioration if not properly maintained. In recent decades, especially in the 21st century, these early-built Simplified Courtyards were enclosed in the city centre as the city grew. Several factors proposed new demands on these old and average-quality buildings, the first of which was the ever-growing urban population (Chen et al., 2009). Their initial composition and construction had to be altered, significantly impacting the public spaces between these courtyards.

3.1 The Densification of Simplified Courtyards

A densification process thus took place. It first happened on the urban scale during the last few decades of the 20th century. Taking the central blocks of *Zhengding* as an example, the comparison between the built-up area in 1966 and 2002 clearly illustrates that (Figure 4) Simplified Courtyards filled up almost all the initial farmlands and vacant spaces. The meandering pedestrian lanes between farmlands were straightened and widened to facilitate vehicular traffic, significantly altering the overall urban structure.

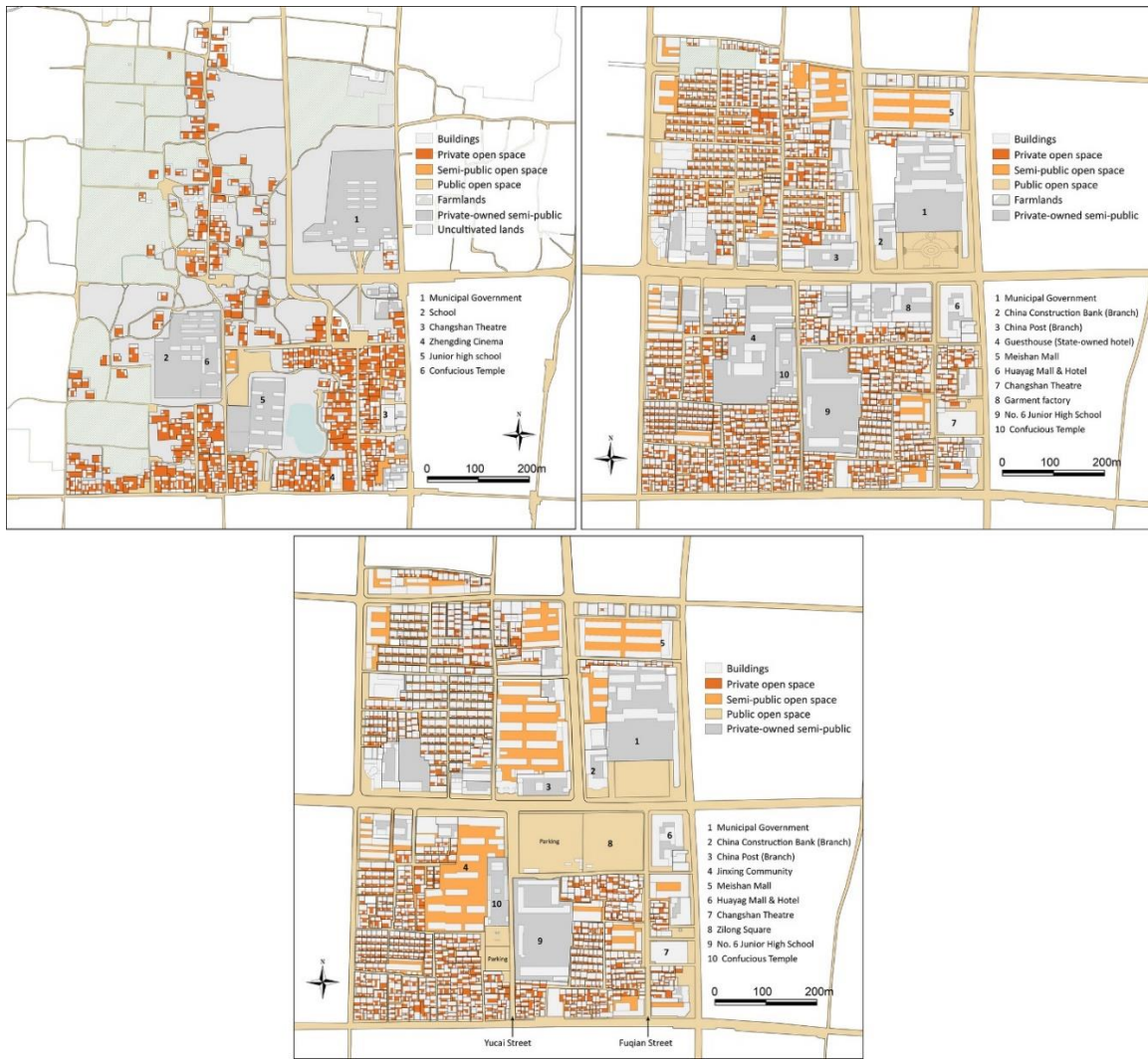


Figure 4. The open spaces in the central area of *Zhengding*, a comparison between the situation in 1966 (top left), 2002 (top right), and 2020 (bottom).

Later, between 2002 and 2020, the densification turned to the volume of the single building. As shown in Figure 4, the urban structure remained roughly unchanged in this period, but a closer observation would unfold that the volume of each Simplified Courtyard house increased after residents added extra floors to their old houses to accommodate more family members. These houses were initially designed for 3-6 people; now, they could fit doubled, even tripled, inhabitants.

Figure 1-c and 1-d illustrate this second phase of densification on the building volume. Since the homestead of each courtyard house was fixed, residents had to turn to the vertical dimension for more living space. Usually, one or two storeys were added (Figure 1-d), with the front (southern) part protruding and covering half of the courtyard. But the traditional layout where major rooms all facing south were kept, and the main

entrance remained on the southeast corner, the same as the traditional models in North China. In some cases, residents would have a terrace on the top storey to keep an open space for private outdoor activities like drying clothes or daily leisure.

Later in the 2010s, further densification happened to those Simplified Courtyards along the axis alleys, in which a front store was added (Figure 1-e). They left nearly half of their ground floors dedicated to potential commercial activities, occupying the initial courtyard. The gate for the family members remained on the southeast as always. The added storeys usually protruded and cantilevered over the alleys to gain more living spaces. These houses would also leave an open terrace on the top floor, generally taking half the floor or only the northwest corner. Although they no longer have any real courtyards, this paper will keep referring to them as Simplified Courtyards to describe them better.

3.2 Impacts of Densification on Outdoor Spaces

The densification process increased the indoor living spaces of these houses, but meanwhile, it significantly affected the outdoor spaces in Simplified Courtyard communities. On the one hand, private outdoor spaces *per capita* decreased significantly, even down to zero in many cases, leaving little possibility for private outdoor activities. On the other hand, however, the quality of semi-public spaces in the rib alleys also deteriorated, where the ‘overflowing’ private life (Genovese and Li, 2017) used to take place. The rib alleys were designed in a comfortable proportion defined by single-floor façades. But they now become deep and suffocating ‘valleys’ with no adequate sunlight and vision as the height of façades doubled or even tripled (Figure 5), making it uncomfortable and unsafe for many daily activities.



Figure 5. Comparison between the alley section before (left) and after (right) the densification of Simplified Courtyards

Therefore, with both the former private and semi-public spaces deteriorated, residents’ daily outdoor activities are ‘squeezed’ out of the Simplified Courtyard community to the large public squares or parks. But the squares and parks are not enough. After all, though modern entertainment and leisure activities in urban China would demand some large-scale public spaces, there is still an essential part of daily outdoor activities that

requires a certain sense of privacy and security (Dong, 2017; Zhuang, 2020), such as children's playing, gossiping, board games, resting, etc. The Simplified Courtyard community at present apparently is not able to provide such spaces, and the residents have to go to the large public spaces and compromise their needs for privacy and security.

Such facts have made these residences less appealing, especially compared to gated communities that can ensure a certain degree of privacy and security. So, the remaining Simplified Courtyards are exposed to the threats of the real estate industry, which has been attempting to replace Simplified Courtyards with gated communities. Such a replacement happened in the central blocks of *Zhengding*: the gated community called *Hengfeng Cuiting* replaced dozens of Simplified Courtyards between 2002 and 2020 (Figure 4).

It is undeniable that the Simplified Courtyard community is not all inferior to gated communities. For example, the Simplified Courtyards can provide much larger *per capita* living space; the house exclusively belonging to one family can avoid disturbances like noises from neighbours; the remaining pieces of private open spaces (the half-covered courtyard or the rooftop terrace), though tiny, are unattainable in gated communities. However, despite all these advantages, their public space, which is deteriorated and not able to accommodate residents' outdoor life, still constitutes a fatal weakness and exposes these significant communities to the threats of demolition and replacement.

4. Opportunities

The typical approach to old residences, including Simplified Courtyards, in the past two decades in China was to define them as 'urban villages' and replace them with new apartment-building communities. Such unsustainable practices have inevitably erased any possible historical traces and led to enormous waste. It should not be imposed again on the Simplified Courtyard communities. But on the other hand, it is not wise to advocate any static, rigid conservation of such old residences, for it will be simply the other extreme and isolate the old communities from the dynamically developing city. What is urgently needed is a sustainable enhancement that could endow the Simplified Courtyard communities with better living conditions while preserving their cultural and historical features.

As concluded above, public space is the most urgent and crucial issue for enhancing Simplified Courtyard communities. As long as the public space is properly enhanced, these old communities could become even more desirable than new apartment communities, thus ensuring their sustainable and dynamic existence in the living city.

In fact, the local governments of small North China cities have been trying to improve the Simplified Courtyard communities, but mostly focusing the deficiencies on functional aspects. Lots of investments have been made in recent years to upgrade the

infrastructure of these communities, such as electricity, drainage, pavement, and other facilities. However, the significant issue of producing adequate public space remained neglected.

Professional planners have been aware of the significance of Simplified Courtyards in the small cities. Taking *Zhengding* as the example, in the *Urban and Rural Master Plan of Zhengding, Hebei Province (2014-2030)* (河北省正定县城乡总体规划(2014-2030))⁵, the residential areas within the ancient city walls of *Zhengding* were designated as ‘Old-city Residential Land’, which is identified with a higher value than the ordinary ‘Class II Residential Land’ (Figure 6). This categorisation recognised the morphological and cultural significance of the residences within the old city but was too generic. A few years later, the *Zhengding Historical and Cultural City Preservation Plan (2019-2035)* (正定历史文化名城保护规划(2019-2035))⁶ recognised the value of different residence types much more in detail. This specific plan classified most of the Simplified Courtyards as ‘General Landscape Buildings Cat. II’ (Figure 7). Some of them, which have not been overly modified or densified, were even classified as ‘Traditional Landscape Buildings’, meaning that they were critical for preserving the historic urban landscape of the city.

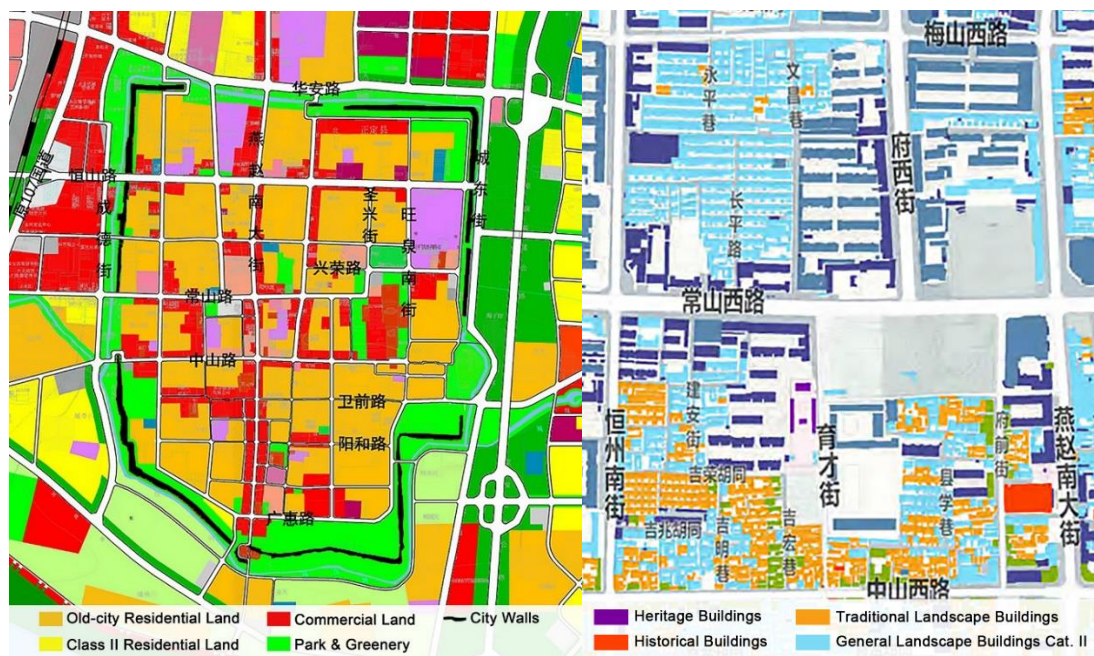


Figure 6. (left) *Urban and Rural Master Plan of Zhengding, Hebei Province (2014-2030)*, showing the area within the city walls

Figure 7. (right) *Zhengding Historical and Cultural City Preservation Plan (2019-2035)*, showing the central area of *Zhengding*

⁵ Compiled by *China Academy of Urban Planning and Design* in November, 2014.

⁶ Compiled by *Shanghai Tongji Urban Planning and Design Institute Co., Ltd.* in 2020.

Although this recognition and efforts from the professionals and the government have provided a good foundation and opportunity for enhancing the public space in Simplified Courtyard communities, the above beautiful envision is still restrained by the tough reality: in a small city like *Zhengding*, the lack of funding and professional design is preventing the urban planning authority from making effective and proper plans on public space. In major metropolitan cities, such as *Wuhan*, the municipal government has sufficient funds to invite professional teams to do detailed planning regarding public space, such as the *Plan of Micro Public Space in Wuhan* (Dong et al., 2018), which undoubtedly contributes to the systematic enhancement of urban public spaces there. However, in *Zhengding*, the limited funding is only enough to compile more macroscopic master plans. Currently, among the various urban planning documents officially published by the *Zhengding* local government, there is no specific planning concerning public space. Considering that *Zhengding's* economic conditions are better than most other small cities in the region, other small cities are even less likely to plan and design urban public spaces in a detailed and professional manner.

In the face of such restrains, the regeneration project of *Xiaoxihu* (小西湖) in *Nanjing* has provided some valuable inspiration. This project did not adopt the approach of large-scale demolition and construction like the urban projects of the past decades in China. Instead, the design teams proposed a 'small-scale, incremental' model (Dong and Han, 2022; Li et al., 2022), which meant dividing the entire *Xiaoxihu* community into several 'planning control units' (规划管控单元) based on the property parcels, each of which was further divided into several 'micro-regeneration implementation units' (微更新实施单元). Accordingly, the whole regeneration project was divided into multiple small sub-projects, each of which would not require a large investment or long duration. Private sector investment was also encouraged to take part. On top of this division, the project established some overall design principles and guidelines for the entire community and then some specific strategies targeting each planning control unit, involving their boundaries, traffic routes, open spaces, public facilities, etc.

This 'small-scale, incremental' model ensured a unified design goal for the entire project while reducing the difficulty of implementing each sub-project and improving the overall feasibility. But this model inevitably lengthens the entire project's duration, which seems inconsistent with China's urban construction habits of the past decades, in which the government and professionals were more concerned with efficiency and preferred to regard existing urban areas as a *tabula rasa* in a demolition-construction approach.

But now, after two decades of miraculous economic growth, Chinese society has entered a so-called 'New Normal'⁷ characterised by lower speed and the pursuit of quality. Some

⁷ The concept of 'New Normal' was first proposed by Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee, in 2014 to describe China's socio-economic development goals in the coming decades, i.e., to shift from pursuing high speed to high quality. The shift from high to medium

socio-economic tendencies in the ‘New Normal’ offer opportunities to enhance the quantity and quality of public spaces in small historic cities by drawing on the slow regeneration model of ‘small-scale, incremental’.

First, China’s urban population growth is slowing down. This is the inevitable result of China’s urbanisation rate reaching a certain level⁸. According to World Bank data, China’s urban population growth rate has declined from a high level of 4–5.5 percent per year in the 1980s–1990s to only 1.8 percent in 2021. And the urban population growth rate in North China is lower than that in the southern areas. The problems of overcrowding and inadequate urban facilities caused by excessive urban population growth in previous decades have subsided. Cities no longer need high rates of urban construction to meet the rapidly increasing urban population.

Second, the slower economic growth in the New Normal has also reduced and slowed real estate development and construction projects. The large-scale demolition-construction model associated with high economic growth has thus lost its support. On the contrary, ‘stock planning’ (存量规划) has become the keyword in China’s urban sector, which refers to ‘planning for urban development mainly by re-vitalising, optimising, and upgrading the stock of land while keeping the total area of construction land unchanged and urban space unexpanded’. The ‘small-scale, incremental’ urban regeneration model is clearly in line with the needs of ‘stock planning’.

Third, in terms of policies, at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2022, a key national policy conference held every five years, identified urban regeneration as one of the key tasks for China’s urban development in the next five years⁹, which will drive urban regeneration to replace the demolition-construction as the primary development approach in China’s cities in the future.

In addition, in recent years, Chinese society has been paying more and more attention to

economic growth rates is considered the most important feature of the ‘new normal’. China’s annual GDP growth rate remained above 9 percent for almost all of the 20 years from 1991 to 2011, reaching a peak of 14 percent in 2007. After the ‘new normal’ was proposed, the annual GDP growth rate gradually decreased to about 5 percent in 2019. (Data source: World Bank Open Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CN>)

⁸ The percentage of urban population in China has grown from 16 percent in 1960 to over 63 percent in 2021, which was higher than the world average and the East Asian average. (Data source: World Bank Open Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=1W-CN-Z4>)

⁹ Original texts in the *Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*: ‘...we will improve urban planning, construction, and governance and move faster to change the development models of super-large and mega cities. We will carry out urban renewal projects and improve urban infrastructure to build livable, resilient, and smart cities.’ See: http://wb.beijing.gov.cn/home/zwxx/djgz/202210/t20221027_2846141.html

the revival of traditional Chinese urban cultures. Suppose the era of dramatic change and the rupture of cultural traditions in 20th-century China can be compared to the Dark Ages in Medieval Europe; Then today's China seems to have just entered a Chinese version of the Renaissance. Old traditions have been broken, and new features are still to be established. In the process of establishing the new features, the potential of the old tradition is increasingly recognised and will inevitably be interpreted in contemporary society. Simplified Courtyards, as an embodiment of traditional urban culture in North China, is likely to enjoy more attention in this Chinese version of the Renaissance and get the opportunity to be enhanced.

5. Summary and Outlook

The Simplified Courtyard is a type of residential building widely built in small North China cities in the 1970s–1990s. It is a simplified variant of the Chinese traditional courtyard houses, characterised by their standardised design and easy-to-construct building techniques that are able to equally provide each family with a place to live in the poor economic conditions back then. Most of them remained today. The Simplified Courtyard communities have retained the hierarchical system and the osmotic relationship between public and private spaces, which helps these communities to preserve a traditional cooperative and self-governing social structure. Their unique and characteristic urban form and social structure are of great significance in small North China cities today.

But due to the rapid urban growth in the past two decades, the Simplified Courtyards were significantly densified with extra storeys by the residents. This transformation has deprived the alley space of its comfortable spatial proportions and forced residents to conduct their daily outdoor activities outside the community in the large parks or squares. The Simplified Courtyard communities thus lost vitality and appeal and were exposed to threats by the real estate industry to replace them with gated apartment communities.

To ensure the sustainable existence of the Simplified Courtyard communities in contemporary small North China cities, enhancing the public space within them is key. To this end, the 'small scale, incremental' model proposed in the *Xiaoxihu* project has offered valuable inspiration. The recognition from the local government and the professionals, as well as many socio-economic tendencies in the so-called 'New Normal', provide opportunities for the enhancement of these old communities.

As for the specific enhancement strategies in the future, the historical models of public spaces in Chinese courtyard communities should be a necessary reference. Historical public space types and qualities are naturally endowed with local characteristics and cultural identities through the long process of interacting with the natural and human environment of the city. Interpreting them in the public spaces of contemporary Simplified Courtyard communities can potentially increase the vitality by bringing

residents' outdoor activities back while not sabotaging the morphological, social and cultural significance of the Simplified Courtyard community. The qualities of traditional hutong in North China cities, as well as its evolution in socialist China, might contain some useful aspects for Simplified Courtyard communities. The specific strategies and approaches call for further detailed research, for which this paper expects to draw more attention and lay a solid basis.

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