

URBAN MICRO-RENOVATION BASED ON
ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: A CASE
STUDY OF YIFENGLI, HONGKOU DISTRICT,
SHANGHAI

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Abstract: After near four decades of the rapid development, a number of cities in China have made great achievement. While plenty of the brand-new places are created, many "old cities" are left behind in a shabby condition. Lilong, a typical cultural heritage of residential townhouse with the combination of Chinese and Western architecture styles, belongs to such one. In order to change the situation, Shanghai government has launched the movement to ameliorate inhabitants' living condition in Lilong since 2012. However, the satisfaction of residents is not very high though a considerable expenditure had been spent, partly because of lack of knowledge and experience on how to reach a successful participation. To deal with the issue, the authors engaged in a case study, the micro-renovation project of Yifengli of Hongkou District, Shanghai, with the action research methodology. The project could be divided into three stages of initiation, implementation and perfection. Stakeholders are engaged in the whole process, including the different groups of local residents with different attitudes, local government and university consultant team which takes the leading role. Through the interesting and inclusive involvement at every stage, stakeholders gathered together in identifying the problems, discussing the choice, evaluating the planning and design, taking action and reflecting and continuing to modify actions. The project has gone relatively smoothly although the different stakeholders presented divergent interests. The outcome is desirable beyond the expectation of inhabitants. The study argues that the action research methodology is a meaningful tool not only for bringing out the positive change in the urban built area renovation, but also for spurring the social cohesion.

Keywords: Community micro-renovation; Participatory action research; Residents autonomy

Introduction

Europe and the United States had experienced a large-scale urban renewal of the old city after the Second World War, which had led to some serious problems such as social isolation, community decline and cultural disintegration. In order to change the situation, urban renewal model has been shifted into people-oriented model to help community residents achieve self-dependence. In this context, many community planners got engaged in community participation to help residents find a path to develop. (Zhang, 2014).



After near four decades of the rapid development, a number of cities in China have made great achievement. While plenty of the brand-new places are created, many "old cities" are left behind in a shabby condition. In order to change the situation, cities also launched a large-scale reconstruction in the inner-city, which had caused a series of social problems. Although some good and viable methods in urban renovation have been created in Western countries, it is not clear if they are applicable to the context in China. One of the reasons is that the government focused more on the growth of economy and its efficiency rather than the social sustainability in the past. China's "urban renewal" has its own unique political, economic, cultural and regional characteristics (Zhai and Ng, 2009). In addition, the long-standing "top-down" renewal model has not been balanced with the "down-top" approach.

How to make the inhabitants' voices heard? Where to make the inhabitants' voices heard? Is it useful to let the inhabitants dominate in the renovation? They are the questions for the government and also for the inhabitants and the academic. The urban space is often shaped by elites while most of the residents who live there could only passively accept them and adapt to the changing. As a result, even though expenses were high for the projects of urban renewal, the satisfaction of residents is not very high. In the mean time, the concept of "public participation" has been introduced into the urban renovation in China, but it seems so difficult to implement. As for many inhabitants, they were used to the government's unilateral decision-making. Also, for the market, this method costs a lot of time and force, which means some projects were stuck in the quarrel and discussion among stakeholders. And with respect to the government, this is an inefficient method to some extent in transforming the urban development model from sprawling planning to quality planning. Even so, governments pay more and more attentions in advocating governance, stimulating social self-regulation and active interaction to support social vitality. From May 2016 on, the "Walking in Shanghai 2016: Micro-renovation Program for Community" was officially launched in Shanghai and the exploration of innovative methods for urban micro-renovation has become a hot topic.

This paper takes an example of the Lilong community micro-renovation, Yifengli of Hongkou District, in Shanghai in 2018. The Lilong is typical cultural heritage of residential townhouse with the combination of Chinese and Western architecture styles. With participatory action research methodology, the authors were engaged in the project, working as members of the design team on the one hand and as observers on the other hand to explore the link between knowledge and action through critical reflection (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). The project could be divided into three stages of initiation, implementation and perfection. Stakeholders were engaged in the whole process, including the local residents, the local government and the university consultant team which takes the leading role. Through the interesting and inclusive involvement at every stage, stakeholders had gathered together in identifying the problems, discussing the choices, evaluating the planning and design, taking action and reflecting for constant modification.

From urban renewal to urban micro-renovation

The term "urban renovation" was presented in the first urban renewal seminar held in the Netherlands in August 1858. Since then, it has been discussed for more than a century. Scholars categorize it into the four stages since the second world war (Carmon, 1997; Ng, 1998; Ng & Tang, 2002a): Stage one, erased reconstruction from the Second World War to early 1960s; stage two,

neighborhood restoration from 1960s to late 1970s; stage three, economic recovery and public-private partnerships from 1980s to early 1990s; and stage four, Multi-partnership since the 1990s. Since the second stage, the idea of citizen participation in the urban renovation was gradually adopted. When it reached the third stage, the government began to encourage private developers to increase investment in urban reconstruction. However, just relying on market mechanisms could not achieve the desired effect of urban renovation because profit-seeking developers often considered less demands of local residents. Therefore, the new trend of urban renovation had gradually formed since 1990, encouraging the cooperation among “public, private, and community” (Zhai and Ng, 2009). The residents played a role from the passive to the active in public participation (Hughes & Carmichael, 1998).

Compared with the West countries, China starts urban renovation relatively late. China's urban 's renovation can be divided into four stages since 1978. In the first stage, the mode of large-scale demolition and reconstruction aimed at pursuing the largest return; In the second stage, the environmental aspect had been stressed but it still took the approach of the government-led and profit maximization; In the third stage, the “bottom-up” model had been emerging since 2000 while China had entered a period of the rapid urbanization and diversification of urban transformation. In the fourth phase, from 2010 to the present, urban renovation has been shifted to the “people centered” approach, improving the sustainability of urban development, upgrading the livability as a strategic direction, and creating a governance pattern of sharing and co-governing. (Liu and Xu, 2018). The "urban micro-renovation" is one of the key features in the fourth stage. A departure from past urban renewal, the word “micro” presents a rejection of the large-scale and massive production of the built space. Instead, it encourages the designer to engage with the community more deeply. As a “tiny” intervention, community micro-renovation can have a certain catalytic effect on urban development, and optimize urban space spontaneously and slowly (MA and YING, 2016). The urban micro-renovation advocates that residents should be the main driving force, and cultivates residents' sense of self-governing as the ultimate goal. As a result, residents should still have the capacity to maintain the community vibrancy even without the assistance of the government and the design team, in order to ensure the sustainable development of the community.

Community participatory praxis

Community participation is often asserted in theory as an important quality criterion for the intervention, but in practice it appears to be less well understood in China (Chiu, 2008). One of the reasons is that participating is a time-consuming and labor-intensive process. In many practical projects, both time and labor are costly for the “participatory transformation”, which makes it look like an illusory concept. Fortunately, the "community micro-renovation" proposal would change the situation. Planners and architects in China start to explore the new renovative model catering the transformation of the “run-down” community.

The community micro-renovation of the Lilong, “Yifengli”, is an attempt. From the beginning, both the government department and the design team have the aim of multi-party collaboration and deep participation. In order to put this aim into reality, we used participatory action research (PAR) as the research method. This methodology aims at making researchers as agents of transformation in the community. It has to be of immediate interest to the people in the studied community, involving them

in formulating the study problems and in finding solutions. It gives the local people opportunities for learning from the researchers. At the same time researchers learned a lot from the local people because people talk freely with people acquainted (Swantz, 2008).

The participants

- *Community residents.* There are 32 households, among which 13 are indigenous ones and 18 tenant ones. 73% indigenous residents are about 50 to 80 years old. They grew up in "Yifengli" from their birth and have deep feelings for this narrow alley. However, due to the aging of structures and facilities, some richer households who lived here in the past have moved out of the alley and rent the house to rural migrant workers. Some tenants have been living here for more than ten years.
- *The subdistrict office.* They are the dispatched officials with its jurisdiction in the area administrated by the street level government. In the "Yifengli" project, the role of the subdistrict officials is to provide supports as representatives of the government.
- *Neighborhood committee.* It is a grassroot mass "autonomous" organization in urban areas of mainland China, but it is still under the leadership of a higher-level government (The subdistrict government) and does not have the power to handle community affairs independently. In the "Yifengli" project, the neighborhood committee mainly takes the lead in project, organizing and coordinating, and applying for the renovation fund.
- *Design team,* it consists of professors and students from the College of Architecture and Urban Planning of Tongji University, as well as other universities. The members include an urban planning professor (China), a sociological professor (Canada) and an assistant professor of geography and architecture (Germany), and Chinese and foreign master students and undergraduates. In the "Yifengli" project, the main task of the design team is to stimulate the participation enthusiasm of residents, coordinate multi-party conflicts of interests, cultivate residents' sense of self-governance, organize workshops, and work with residents in transformation of the Lilong.

The process of participation

The project can be divided into three stages. Stakeholders are engaged in the whole process.

3.2.1 The stage of initiation

With the help of the local neighborhood committee had negotiated, the design team decided to use this project as a pilot for residents' participation, and then the model could be extended to the neighboring Lilong if it was successful. The subdistrict government could cooperate with other stakeholders, but play with no dominant role. In order to stimulate the enthusiasm of residents for the project, the design team organized three workshops. After each workshop, the team evaluated and reflected on the methods implemented and the gains in the process, and strived to improve them in the next workshop.

Workshop 1. Before the first workshop, the research team carried out the meeting including the representatives of the all stakeholders, and got the basic information of the requirement of deferent stakeholders. Based on the collections of the requirements, the team launched the workshop, and asked residents a series of questions, such as “Where do you feel the most needed to upgrade?”, “What kind of space do you want to live in?”, “Where are you inclined to retain?” and so on. Most of the residents’ answers are “No matter what transformation will be, they will accept it” or “No idea.” or “Reconstruction is useless. We are waiting for demolition (in order to get high compensation).” Residents' responses reflected that local residents did not have the awareness to protect their rights and were used to following government decisions.

In order to change the negative attitude of the residents, the design team initiated two small discussions. The first one was to let the residents choose the pictures they liked most for the vision of the renovation in their narrow lane. The team took out some of the pictures we had prepared, which depicted the future visions of the small neighborhood. The pictures were displayed in front of the residents, and our German professor, Ms. Iris, explained the intention to the residents in Chinese. Driven by curiosity and freshness, many residents came to watch. After the inspiration of the pictures, residents began to express their opinions, such as "I like the scene of this picture. It makes people feel happy.", "The scene of this picture is not suitable for our Lilong."(figure 1, 2) When their opinions were not the same or when a certain opinion conflicted with the others, they would debate and discuss till reached a consensus. After the discussion, we put pictures of the façade of Yifengli on the wall and encouraged residents to pin up their favorite pictures to the corresponding place of the façade on the wall. In this process, the designer simply recorded the opinions and ideas of the residents and did not interfere with their choices and preferences of the residents.

The second discussion was called ‘PARK’, which means P-preserve, A-add, R-remove, K-keep. The discussion was organized by the sociology professor of our team. The rule was for residents to write down their own opinions on the sticky notes and paste them to the corresponding positions of “P, A, R, K”. Unexpectedly, the activity did not go well because the residents did not will to pick up the pen and write their own ideas and paste them on the wall.



Figure 1, 2 Inspiration of the pictures in the first workshop Source: Made by the author

After the end of workshop 1, we evaluated both discussions. The first discussion was successful to inspire residents' interest and gained a high level of participation. Using pictures to convey intent is more easily. Through the discussions of residents, the demands and conflicts among stakeholder were more stressed, and in fact, residents themselves actively sought solutions. Its shortcoming was that it could not be systematically responded, and key issues might be overlooked in free discussions. Due to

the influence of the pictures, the imaginative space was limited and the residents' suggestions were limited to what they saw. The second discussion failed. The reason should be that this method is more suitable for experts, elites, or groups with higher education levels and professional knowledge. Most of the participants in this workshop are elderly people aged 50 or 60, and they were not sure to make decision by themselves.

To summarize this experience, in the next workshop, the design team should consider the followings. (1) Activities with mutual discussion will be easier to attract residents to participate; (2) The professional team should create some guides for residents to discuss; (3) the acceptant degree of knowledge by the residents will be considered in advance.

Workshop 2. In order to encourage more residents to participate in the inter-activity, the second workshop was held on the site of Yifengli three weeks later. The team brought the paperboard and plastic model of “Yifengli”, the drawings of the design based on the opinions collected in the first workshop and the projector equipment on site. The drawings were posted on the wall which depicted the blueprint of the lilong for the future. Attracted by these interesting stuffs, the residents brought small chairs from home to join in the “strange” workshop. When the residents saw their ideas appearing on the plan, they were so excited. And they had a strong sense that their community would change better because of them. At the moment, the residents had more new ideas. As the priority of the actions were discussed (figure 3, 4), the residents raised more new suggestions and problems related to their daily life, such as the drainage, the night lighting, and the public space occupation by the scooters. Residents ranked the priority in terms of the intensity of their willingness to solve the specific issues. This method could inspire the local residents who know the space most personally to tell the design team what they really needed.

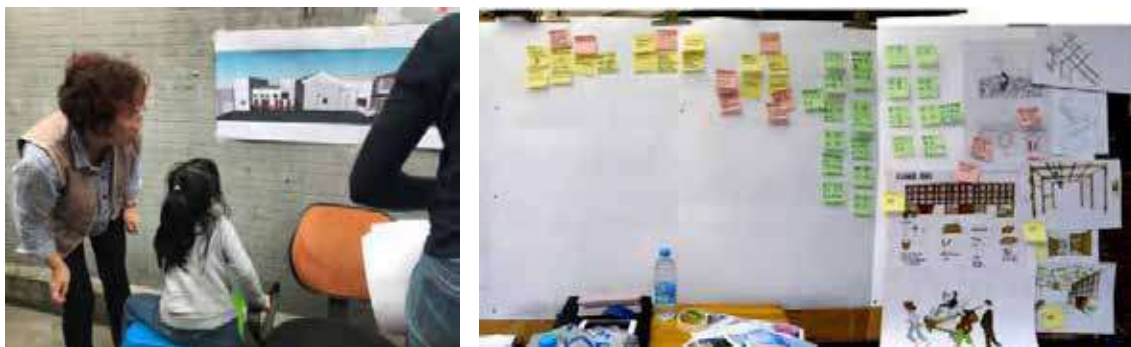


Figure 3, 4 Checking the design and ranking the priority by the local residents Source: Made by the author

For the evaluation of the second workshop, the authors believe that it is an effective improvement of workshop 1. The reasons are as follows: (1) Holding workshops in the Lilong has greatly promoted the enthusiasm of residents to participate and interact. It is an inclusive way, regardless of gender, age, affiliation and local or migrant tenant, that all can participate in it; (2) The method of sorting problems is effective, especially the key issues are obviously picked out. It helps designers having a clear direction and focus as they prepare the subsequent design decisions; (3) The sense of autonomy has increased. It can be proved by the enthusiasm and participation extent of the residents. Residents' sense of self-governance is not absent. Instead, it can be gradually cultivated; (4) But in this workshop, the authors also found a problem that the tenants did not participate. There are distinct attitudes between the local residents and the tenants. The indigenous residents believe that tenants will never

care the environment as they do. Tenants think that they are not part of the local (due to the difference of the household registrations). Therefore, they do not have the right of decision. So, they voluntarily withdraw from the participating groups.

Workshop 3. It held a month later. This workshop was divided into a meeting with the government and a joint meeting with residents in Lilong. It was interesting that the feedbacks for the transformation plan from the two groups were quite different. The government stressed to beautify the decoration of the space of Yifengli and not support the renovation of the water sinks located in the small lane. Because the sinks “misappropriated” the public space, it should not be encouraged. In the joint meeting with the residents, they preferred to renovate the water sinks because they needed to use it every day and the “kitchen” was too small to put the sink inside. Also, the beautification part is not the most important. To coordinate the issue, the design team took a mid-way after discussing with the two groups again, which means not to replace the water sinks with brand-new ones, but refurbish them based on the current situation (figure 5, 6). And many issues had been solved by the coordination.

It is luck for the design team that most of the various contradictions among stakeholders had been exposed before implementation. Although the interests of the two parties are different, their visions is unified. The participatory renovation method provides a platform for communicating between different parties and a suitable way to find solutions to problems.



Figure 5, 6 The image of the sink before and after Source: Made by the author

The stage of implementation

Another one month later, the construction phase was initiated with a symbolic ceremony, in which the honors were given to the active participants to thank their work, especially to the students from Tongji university. The job of the implementation consisted of two parts. One part was the repair work by construction workers, encompassing repairing underground drainage ditches, replacing the dilapidated canopies, renovating water sinks, reorganizing the crisscross electric wire and so on. The other was mainly the facade beautification, done by residents and designers.

In order to achieve the effect of the universal participation among residents, the design team usually held small events on weekends to attract residents to participate. The most important was the graffiti. No matter the children or the elderly, all aged people participated in making the graffiti on the wall. That was a really enjoyable moment. Some of the elderly ladies were scared to brush the wall because they were afraid to ruined the graffiti. After the design team encouraged and taught them repeatedly, they finally made it and were thrilled. One of the residents who was good at drawing took the leading

role in the color preparation, the outlines of the figures drawn on the wall and the filling inside of the outlines with colors for the graffiti. During the period, the residents served the students dinners if they stayed there later for the refurbishing work. Since the figures of the graffiti were chosen by the residents and reflected their past life and a common memory (figure 8), the residents liked them very much. These graffiti are portrayals of the scenes of residents playing in Yifengli in 1960~1990, embedded the stories of Yifengli for near half a century.



Figure 7, 8 The image of the graffiti during the painting and after source:7.made by Yifengli resident CHEN Debao; 8. made by the author

Through the public participation, the talents of the residents were stimulated on the one hand and the cost of renovation were reduced on the other hand. What is more, it makes the results more meaningful for the psychological aspect and the future maintenance aspect. Residents will be more careful of taking their new “living room”. Besides, the communication and trust among residents, the design team and government were promoted, and naturally community cohesion is stronger than before.

The stage of perfection

After the completion of the construction, the renovation project came to an end. In order to empower the residents to be more self-dependent, including maintaining the Lilong, making minor new improvements, after the design team and the government withdrew, the design team taught the skills to the residents in fixing the graffiti and repairing the newly renovated sink and so on. The “Longtang Convention” was also formulated with each household signing on it, and was written and pasted on the walls to encourage the residents to protect their neighborhood.

After four months of the frequent interaction, designers and residents have established good emotional relationship. The young students and the elderly residents become good friends.

Conclusion

Though the thesis just briefed the process of the renovation of Yifengli, the dilemmas and contradictions encountered in the renovation reflect that participation in practice is far more complicated than that discussed in the theoretical world. However, in the process of construction,

through continuous evaluation of the participative effect and self-reflection of the designers themselves, the experience gained is conducive to the next step. The project has gone relatively smoothly although the different stakeholders presented divergent interests. The outcome is desirable beyond the expectation of inhabitants. A higher level of work efficiency can be achieved through a deeper understanding of residents' neighborhood relationships, their knowledge background, and the living conditions and demands. Finding a capable person in the community is an important gene for maintaining the sustainable development of the community and promoting residents' autonomy. It is necessary for designers to reach out to the community and take some roots in the community, thereby building trust between designers and residents. During the cooperation, designers and residents could be able to learn from each other. The study argues that the participatory action research methodology is a meaningful tool, not only for bringing out the positive change in urban built area renovation, but also for spurring the social cohesion. Participatory action research also has political connotations. It makes invisible people visible so that there is a chance to solve their problems. It increases awareness and makes authority conscious of the people's right (Swantz, 2008). Due to the co-existing between success and conflict, happiness and dilemmas, more research is needed for exploring the potential and limitations of community micro-renovation practice.

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