

## Participatory Community Planning and Collaborative Governance in the Post-Growth Era: A Case Study of the Nanning Love-U Garden Network in China

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### Abstract

Collaborative governance of community regeneration is the essential need of the community as living space, and also provides an effective path for community spatial governance. This paper combs the connotation of collaborative governance and the necessity of community collaborative governance. Through the analysis of three typical cases of Nanning Love U Garden, this paper summarizes three types of community garden co-construction modes: external empowering type, internal and external collaboration type and internal autonomy type, and discusses three optimized mechanisms of the collaborative governance: whole-process participatory co-construction mechanism, flexible cooperation and co-maintenance mechanism, and differentiated co-financing mechanism. It has certain reference significance for other cities in China to build community garden networks, promote collaborative governance of community regeneration and promote sustainable development of communities.

**Keywords:** Participatory Community Planning; Collaborative Governance; Public Engagement; Love-U Garden

### 1 Introduction

Many cities in the world today are facing the slowdown in economic growth, the reduction in fiscal revenue, and the resulting challenges in public space governance. With the slowdown in China's economic growth, urban construction has also entered the stock regeneration era from incremental development. Community planning and community regeneration based on the built environment require the engagement of multiple local actors and the collaborative governance of multiple departments. So, how can different collaborative governance models be used to stimulate community engagement for different types of communities? How can actors play the role of catalyst and driver in community collaboration and engagement? How to optimize the mechanism of participatory community planning and collaborative governance based on the existing institutional environment? However, current research mostly stays in macro-framework design and isolated case studies, lacking networked practice and continuous observation. Therefore, it is urgent to sort out the multiple models of collaborative governance and the optimisation of participatory community planning mechanisms in combination with long-term systematic spatial practice.

The "Love-U Garden" action in Nanning, China, which began in 2021, has built a rare city-level garden network. Empowered and accompanied by social organisations, the Clover Nature School, it encouraged residents to build and maintain spontaneously, innovated collaborative governance mechanisms, and ultimately became a model for the regeneration and governance of urban community green spaces. This study sorts out the concept of "collaborative governance", combines Habermas's "life world" theory, analyzes the co-construction model and mechanism optimisation of Nanning Love-U Garden, and attempts to provide practical references for the old communities' regeneration.

### 2 Background

#### 2.1 The connotation of "collaborative governance"

Collaborative governance is an administrative theory that has emerged since the 1990s. It still lacks a clear and unified definition. It is generally believed that collaborative governance originates from the intersection of synergy theory in natural science and governance theory in social science (Huang, 2023). Collaborative governance advocates that multiple governance subjects (including public departments, enterprises, social

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organisations and individuals) jointly participate in decision-making and jointly solve public problems based on the mutual dependence of resources and interests (Wikipedia, 2025). Collaborative governance can achieve more than any one sector could achieve on its own. The core of its theory is to emphasize the diversity and synergy of governance subjects, which contrasts with the monocentric governance power (Yu, 2013). The fields that use collaborative governance more frequently are political science and management, and most of them focus on the characteristics of collaborative governance as an alternative to managerialism and adversarial approaches. In the field of urban and rural planning, collaborative governance is also seen as an important tool to promote cross-regional and cross-departmental cooperation and to solve the difficulties in public service supply and social and economic development (Hu, 2014). At the same time, in recent years, the concept of “co-governance” has also been frequently used in China’s urban planning field, often in the form of “multi-party co-governance” or “co-construction, co-governance and sharing”, and its core is also to emphasize the diversity and coordination of spatial governance subjects. It can be said that the concept of “co-governance” in the field of urban and rural planning is basically equivalent to the connotation of “collaborative governance” in administrative science. In general, whether in the fields of political science, management science, or urban planning, scholars emphasize the differences between collaborative governance and traditional administrative management methods, but there are few studies that implement it in actual projects and put forward operational suggestions.

## 2.2 Community as “life world”

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas believes that modern society consists of two basic areas: life world and system (Finlayson, 2005). Life world refers to the ordinary world in which we live together with others. System is the accumulated structure and established instrumental behaviour type. The two have completely different rules, mechanisms and behaviour patterns, corresponding to communicative behaviour and instrumental behaviour respectively. Life world and communicative behaviour have the function of social integration, building consensus, preserving social significance, and carrying out social and cultural reproduction. System mainly includes two subsystems, money and power, whose main functions are to produce and circulate materials (products and services) and to systematically integrate behaviours. System is embedded in life world, but in fact it is parasitic on life world, so life world takes precedence over system (Habermas, 1990).

Community space is a typical life world, in which money and power are difficult to play a leading role, and the consciousness of “living community” based on daily life collaboration becomes the spiritual foundation of community cohesion (Liu, 2023). At the same time, community space is a typical public space that requires space governance and public services. Therefore, the governance of community space needs to obey the underlying logic of the life world - communicative rationality, which means respecting the diversity of communicative subjects in the community and the right to equal dialogue, so as to reach a consensus and form an orderly social structure. Therefore, “cooperative governance” is the essential requirement of community governance.

Collaborative governance is applied to the community space level, emphasizing the equal consultation and participation of all stakeholders in spatial renewal, which is different from traditional unitary management and bureaucratic management. Since China’s community planning has not yet been included in the statutory planning system, the existing collaborative governance research on community renewal mainly focuses on macro, top-down framework design and academic discussion, lacking micro, bottom-up model induction and governance mechanism optimisation. Nanning Love-U Garden is a rare city-level community garden network in China. This article will study three cases from the perspective of collaborative governance to summarize its collaborative governance model and mechanism.

## 2.3 From Laoyou council to Love-U Garden

Nanning City officially launched the regeneration of old residential communities in 2019, and proposed a plan to complete the regeneration of old residential communities built before the end of 2000 by the end of 2025, involving about 1,270 residential communities and about 165,000 residential units. However, the regeneration of old residential communities in Nanning faces four major problems: 1) Low participation, and local residents lack subject awareness; 2) Difficult communication and coordination, diverse residents’ needs, some residents are unwilling to give up vested interests, and it is difficult to reach a consensus; 3) Difficulty in raising funds, the demand for old regeneration funds is large, and in addition to government investment, residents also need to crowdfund part of the funds, which is difficult to raise; 4) Difficulty in management, the number of old residential communities is large, and most of them do not have property management and property committees, and lack

effective management mechanisms.

Therefore, the Nanning Municipal Government purchased services and introduced a professional team to establish the "Laoyou-council", and refined and formulated the "Twelve Rules of Laoyou-council" to standardize the work process and build a long-term community management mechanism. The functions of the Laoyou-council are to train community and council representatives, collect regeneration intentions, determine regeneration plans, collect personal contributions, coordinate regeneration conflicts, and supervise construction quality. As of April 2024, Nanning has established 1,024 Laoyou Councils, elected 6,723 Laoyou-councils' representatives, held 2,832 special consultation meetings on the regeneration of old residential communities, and solved more than 16,000 community regeneration issues. The Laoyou Councils allows residents to express their different opinions, promotes the community to reach a consensus, and gradually solves the difficulties of old residential community regeneration (Housing and Urban-Rural Development Department, 2020).

After the regeneration of old residential communities, on the one hand, the management team needs new forms of participation to mobilize residents more widely and promote the depth of participation in public affairs; on the other hand, the government hopes to promote the "Laoyou-council plus" working method and give full play to its long-term effect; in addition, the regeneration of old residential communities and the work results of the Laoyou-council also need to be presented in a more "visual" way to increase residents' sense of gain and satisfaction. Therefore, the municipal government and the Luobo team invited the Shanghai Clover Nature School team to mobilize residents to build community gardens in the communities that have completed the regeneration, called Love-U gardens.

### 3 Love-U Garden project

Love-U gardens are small community gardens in Nanning City, which are guided by the Nanning Housing and Urban-Rural Development Bureau, hosted by the Nanning Urban Renewal and Property Management Guidance Centre, and invited by the third-party professional team Shanghai Clover Nature School to empower and accompany the community during the regeneration of old residential areas in Nanning. It encourages residents to participate in the construction and maintenance of the gardens. Through the Laoyou Councils, discussions are held, and empowerment training is conducted by professional organisations. It aims to activate idle space, cultivate public spirit, and point to sustainable development (Clover Nature School, 2021).

#### The goals of Nanning Love-U gardens are as follows:

- 1) Improve physical space. Based on a survey of 155 communities in Nanning, a participatory design method of co-creation and construction with residents is used in front of and behind the doors of apartment buildings to realize the implementation of 1,000 community gardens of 3 to 5 square meters, improving the living environment of the community.
- 2) Cultivate a community of flower lovers. Through participatory design and construction, the team incubates a community of flower lovers locally, provides professional planting skills, cultivates a self-organized team of flower lovers, and encourages flower lovers to discuss, build and share together.
- 3) Activate autonomous action. Laoyou Garden has created a scene where everyone can discuss and work together to transform the public space, and has fostered the community's ability to reach consensus and act collaboratively. This ability helps to stimulate residents' sense of subjectivity and their enthusiasm for future participation in public affairs.

As of October 2023, Clover House has assisted in the construction of 1,020 Love-U gardens in 92 communities in Nanning. (Figure 1) According to the location and size of the garden, it can be divided into gate gardens, roof gardens, building gardens, central gardens and street gardens. A large number of gardens of different types have formed a city-level green public engagement network, fully mobilizing residents of different ages and classes to participate in it, and reconstructing the relationship between residents and the community and society.



Figure 1 Nanning Love-U Garden Network

## 4 Analysis

The co-construction of Nanning Love-U Garden is a process of tapping community resources, linking participating entities, multi-party collaborative actions, and establishing a long-term mechanism. It can be divided into three progressive stages: the first stage is external empowerment, with community R as a typical representative. Due to the weak local participation foundation and public awareness, the construction of Love-U Garden relies more on external empowerment, and social organisation plays the role of project leader. The second stage is internal and external collaboration, with community J as a typical representative. With the development of the work, citizens began to accept the concept of the community garden, and external forces such as social organisations, universities, and social actors began to intervene to achieve internal and external collaboration. The social organisation gradually changed from a leader to a co-builder. The third stage is internal autonomy, with community N as a typical representative. With the further enhancement of public awareness and internal motivation, professional teams retreated behind the scenes and turned into technical supporters, and local residents began to autonomously co-fund, realizing conscious initiation, spontaneous construction, and self-management. This study will select three typical cases to illustrate three different co-construction models.

### 4.1 External empowering type

As the community with the largest number of Love-U gardens and flower lovers in Jiangnan District, community R was built in 1999. It is the first batch of housing estates in Nanning City and the first community built by Ronghe Group as a real estate developer. The property management quality is good. Most of the owners were middle and high-income groups at that time, with a high average quality. In 2019, community R was included in the first batch of old community regeneration in Nanning City. In 2022, the external empowering team, a social organisation named the Clover Nature School began to build the first batch of Love-U gardens in community R.

#### 4.1.1 Construction of the benchmark

In the early stage of the construction of the Love-U gardens, there were few responses and slow progress because residents did not understand the concept of the community garden. The Children's Garden in the first phase of community R is a turning point in the construction of the Love-U gardens in the community. The backyard of Teacher Qin's children's picture book library in the community is full of construction waste and has serious rat infestation. He hoped that with the help of the Love-U Garden project, the green space downstairs will be transformed into a public rest space for neighbors and a venue for nature education. Through the demonstration

and leadership of a external professional team, the construction of the Children's Garden has attracted the attention and participation of other residents. In response to residents' questions about the publicness of the garden, the team patiently explained that all Love-U gardens cannot be closed to ensure that all the residents can share them, and that each garden requires at least three flower lovers to sign in order to gain support. In the end, the Children's Garden received unanimous praise from residents and triggered a wave of applications for Love-U gardens in the community (Figures 2 and 3).



Figures 2 Children's Garden



Figures 3 Public engagement

#### 4.1.2 Spread of gardens

The benchmark effect has driven the discussion and dissemination of public issues. With the continuous empowerment of the external team, the community action of the Love-U Garden has spread with the help of the social network. Due to the limited number of applications, the team had to raise the standard. Each garden requires 20 residents to sign in order to obtain project support. The growth and spread of the garden are reflected in three aspects: 1) The cost of a single Love-U Garden is limited. The team encourages some flower lovers to crowdfund and purchase more beautiful and durable rest tables and chairs and other garden facilities, which are used as references in other gardens. 2) The team provides professional guidance to assist residents in expanding garden design and improving garden quality. 3) Residents who have not applied for the project are encouraged to learn from the experience of the Love-U Garden and improve their own gardens downstairs. By April 2023, community R has completed the construction of 228 Love-U gardens, cultivated 370 flower lovers, and built a systematic garden space network and a social network of flower lovers of all ages.

#### 4.1.3 Negotiation of responsibilities

After the guidance and coordination of the external team, the residents and the property management company reached a consensus on the maintenance of the Love-U gardens: the property company equipped the core flower lovers with the public faucet key, the flower lovers were responsible for daily watering and maintenance, and the property company was responsible for the bottom and provided professional support. After the garden was built, there were also neighborhood conflicts. Some Love-U gardens added hard paving and seats due to the needs of socializing and resting, and other residents complained that the project reduced the greening rate of the community. Under the guidance of the professional team, the flower lovers quickly drafted and collectively signed an application to retain the existing Love-U Garden, which was supported by the government and finally successfully protected the achievements of the Love-U gardens. The Love-U gardens have become the common property of the community.

#### 4.2 Internal and external collaboration type

Community J is the only large-scale Love-U Garden in Xingning District and also the community with the largest number of flower lovers in Xingning District. The community was built in 1999 and is one of the first batch of high-rise residential communities in Nanning. It consists of 4 high-rise buildings surrounding a central garden. However, due to its age, the greening design cannot meet the living needs of residents, and poor maintenance has caused some green spaces to become barren.

#### 4.2.1 Space exploration

The construction of Love-U gardens adheres to the concept of companionship construction and gradual regeneration. In May 2022, the external team entered the community J. At the beginning, because residents, the community owners committee and the property management had low acceptance, the professional external team chose a messy corner next to the fitness area as the startup project. There are three reasons for this decision. Firstly, the difference between before and after is obvious. Secondly, it was close to the activity areas for children and the elderly. And thirdly, it was close to the residents' fitness area. As the project progressed, residents turned from bystanders to participants and put forward more demands for garden renovation. On the technical level, professional teams, social organisations and local residents jointly explored sustainable garden design, tried to grow local edible plants, experimented with kitchen waste composting technology, and used idle old items to make simple rainwater collection device system.



**Figures 4** Love-U Garden in community J



**Figures 5** Rainwater collection device system

#### 4.2.2 Collaborative construction

The construction of the Love-U gardens attracted the participation of many partners. The environmental protection social organisation held 8 edible garden course trainings, which assisted the implementation of the garden and attracted other local participants. As a semi-open community, this community is also a playground for children from the nearby vegetable market. The destructive behaviour of outside children caused dissatisfaction among the children in the community. But when they participated in the Love-U Garden construction, the barriers gradually disappeared, and the previous opposition turned into concerted action. Guangxi Academy of Arts led residents to complete the construction of the Travel Garden and the Windmill Garden using on-site waste. The social organisation "Little Volunteers" collaborated with community children to upgrade rainwater collection devices, create stone paintings, and realize the implementation of the Colorful Garden and the Bubble Garden. From May to August in 2022, Community J cultivated 88 flower lovers and completed 64 Love-U gardens, including one large garden.

#### 4.2.3 Continuous community action

During the design and construction process, residents put forward more practical suggestions, such as the installation of seats and irrigation facilities, and continued to negotiate and co-create in the maintenance of the garden. The Edible Garden designed a compost tower, but after it was built, residents thought its shape was unlucky and had a peculiar smell, and asked to remove it. After communication, the external team decided to dismantle the compost tower and transform the materials into round planting boxes, named "Bubble Garden", and the residents who originally opposed it also happily participated in the construction. After the overall completion of the garden, the co-construction team launched a guide training program to cultivate concept disseminators and community connectors for the community garden. At the end of August, Community J held the "Cooling Party", which not only spread the concept of the Love-U Garden, but also enhanced the residents' sense of community identity and cohesion.

### 4.3 Internal autonomy type

Community N, located in Qingxiu District, was built in 2003. It was once one of the highest-quality residential communities in Nanning at that time and was rated as an “advanced greening unit”. However, over the past 20 years, due to poor operation and management of the community, the facilities have aged and it was listed as a “poor” community by the Nanning Housing and Urban-Rural Development Bureau in 2022. After several years of hard work by the community owners, a temporary owners’ meeting was finally established in 2023, and the original property company was replaced by a state-owned property company under a commission system. Therefore, community N has a good foundation for community autonomy and public engagement.

#### 4.3.1 Leverage of crowdfunding

In 2023, the Love-U Garden project team launched the Love-U Garden Seed Fund Plan, providing a menu-style material package to encourage the community to raise funds to build a small community garden. After the active introduction of property management company, a design workshop was organized in the community in July of the same year. More than 10 flower lovers discussed the garden plan with the designer to determine the site selection and bill of materials. Flower lovers began to spontaneously crowdfund funds based on the material package. After a building invested five material packages, residents not only raised about 30,000 yuan in construction funds, but also actively contacted nearby auto repair shops to use recycled tires to make garden scenery, and finally transformed the garden area to 30 square meters (Figure 6). As of the beginning of 2024, community N has invested a total of 30 material packages and successfully mobilized owners to raise a total of 70,300 yuan.



Figures 6 Love-U Garden in community N



Figures 6 Star Garden

#### 4.3.2 Links of actions

The Star Garden is the first Love-U Garden in community N. It was initiated by an enthusiastic flower lover and built in advance (Figure 7). Driven by the pioneers, the community ushered in an unprecedented self-organized construction. In the end, a total of 22 Love-U gardens were applied for and built, with more than 200 residents participating. In the early stage of garden construction, there were also cases of tools and plants being lost, but some flower lovers took the initiative to provide help between the gardens. On one hand, it stimulated the public awareness of other residents. Everyone began to share plants and tools and help each other. Some white collars also participated in the construction until late at night after get off work; on the other hand, the construction action built a neighborhood network. The flower lovers’ dinner after the construction made neighbors who had not communicated with each other become familiar with each other. The property company also actively supported and participated in the construction of the garden, and carried out daily cleaning and maintenance of the garden, becoming a part of the life community.

#### 4.3.3 Co-creation of festivals

Love-U gardens in community N introduced digital community participation tools. Flower lovers used WeChat applet to record the process of garden construction, which not only preserved precious construction memories, but also became a platform for daily communication, sharing poetry creation and life details of the subsequent garden growth. While Love-U gardens improved daily rest space, they also inspired more public communication behaviours.

Some residents took the initiative to take out tea sets and invite neighbors to share and maintain. The owners spontaneously organised a community garden festival and invited the government, property management and professional teams to celebrate together. Flower lovers wrote lyrics to connect the names of all gardens and sang them on the spot.

Through the construction of Love-U gardens, the relationship in the community N has become more harmonious, and the sense of belonging and identity of the community has been further strengthened, becoming an “urban utopia” in the mouths of residents.

## 5. Conclusion

The three models of Love-U gardens summarized in this article each have their own applicability. The external empowering type mainly relies on the guidance, demonstration and long-term empowerment of professional institutions. It is suitable for communities with both aging infrastructure and population, weak public participation foundation, and scarce social resources. However, its limitation is that it requires high capabilities and investment from professional institutions. The internal and external collaboration type mainly relies on external diverse social forces for collaboration and co-creation. It is suitable for communities with relatively rich social resources, rich community age structure, and strong participation potential. Its limitation is that it requires high resource integration capabilities of the community, and it is necessary to improve the later maintenance and co-management mechanism of the garden. The internal autonomy type mainly relies on the endogenous power of the community and the self-driving force of residents. It is suitable for communities with a good public engagement foundation, relatively complete infrastructure, and strong community self-organizing ability. Its limitation is that it requires high community autonomous management capabilities and the coordination of owners.

The concept of collaborative governance is introduced throughout the entire process of Love-U gardens. In the planning and design stage, Laoyou-councils' meetings are held to summarize the real needs of residents. In the construction stage, designers plant plants with residents to stimulate residents' physical participation. In the maintenance and management stage, the external team guides internal residents and other parties to clarify responsibilities, co-create a long-term maintenance mechanism, and determine different maintenance models for gardens of different sizes. The external team accompanies the entire process, hoping to use Love-U gardens as a starting point to allow the community to generate more internal spontaneous public actions.

For the application of different community garden construction models, the specific operational suggestions are as follows: 1) The external empowering type should further promote the construction of the entire process. Through the construction of an integrated mechanism of planning, construction, management and operation, the dual improvement of “material” and “non-material” in old communities can be achieved. 2) The internal and external collaboration type should actively link the participation of all age groups, create an all-age friendly participation path by linking multiple resources, cultivate a self-organized team of flower lovers, and promote the sustainable growth of community gardens. 3) The internal autonomy type should focus on encouraging multi-channel fund raising, introducing social forces to create inclusive projects, leveraging residents' independent co-funding and self-empowerment, and achieving continuous construction and long-term operation and maintenance.

As a city-level community garden network construction practice, Nanning Love-U Garden is also a social experiment in community space collaborative governance based on community deliberation. The Love-U gardens not only improve the living environment of old residential areas, but also reshape local social interactivity through public engagement, enhance residents' subjectivity and sense of belonging, mend and repair community social networks, and promote the formation of community consciousness, becoming the finishing touch of Nanning old residential area regeneration. At the same time, the practice of Nanning Love-U gardens also has certain theoretical guidance and practical reference significance for other Chinese cities to create community garden networks, promote collaborative governance of community regeneration, and promote sustainable development of urban communities.

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