

Housing Justice in Urban Regeneration from a Hierarchical Perspective: Practice and Reflection on the Case of Nanjing, China

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Abstract

This study explores housing justice in China's Urban Regeneration, specifically through the "Housing Justice-Spatial Hierarchy" framework in Nanjing's Xiaosongtao Lane project. Departing from Western paradigms, it emphasizes justice within China's state-led, collective-interest-oriented context, highlighting distinct challenges and practices. The research reveals how distributive, procedural, and recognition justice dynamically interact across urban, community, and building scales. Key findings include the efficacy of "one-household, one-policy" and "courtyard negotiation" for resident participation and refined governance. Xiaosongtao offers a unique "local solution" for historic urban areas, balancing preservation, residents' diverse needs, and economic viability. However, tensions persist, particularly regarding economic burdens for vulnerable groups and the depth of resident influence in core decisions.

Keywords: Housing Justice, Urban Regeneration, Spatial Layering, Hierarchical Analysis, Nanjing Xiaosongtao

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Formulation: Housing Justice Challenges in Urban Regeneration

Global urban development paradigms have shifted from high-speed outward expansion to the regeneration of existing urban stock, making community transformation a core contemporary issue. Following a period of rapid urbanisation, China has also entered an era focused on its existing building stock, where the effective regeneration of residential settlements and the enhancement of public well-being are crucial. Within this context, non-traditional historic districts, in particular, often face problems such as environmental degradation due to aging infrastructure, outdated facilities, and a lack of essential services. The regeneration of these areas involves navigating multiple demands, policy conflicts, and resource negotiations. More critically, urban regeneration profoundly impacts residents' life chances, social networks, and cultural memories, bringing housing justice to the forefront as a central concern. Inadequate regeneration methods frequently expose disadvantaged groups to risks of involuntary relocation, escalating living costs, and social network disruption, thereby exacerbating urban spatial inequality and revealing underlying structural injustices. These issues urgently demand a systematic and equitable response.

Existing research has addressed various dimensions of housing justice, including distribution, procedure, and recognition; however, these studies predominantly offer single-dimension analyses and lack an integrated perspective. Furthermore, few studies have systematically examined the spatial distribution and interaction mechanisms of these justice dimensions within the urban regeneration process. Urban regeneration is a complex practice characterised by the intertwining of multi-scale spatial dynamics and governance forces. Consequently, housing justice issues are transmitted and often distorted across multiple levels, including urban policy, community governance, and architectural design. For instance, land policies at the urban level influence the initial conditions for justice; negotiation mechanisms at the community level determine the scope for participation; and spatial design at the architectural level shapes daily living experiences. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the generative mechanisms of justice issues is difficult to achieve from a single level or through abstract principles alone.

This study posits that the realisation of housing justice is a spatial and hierarchical process. It requires concrete practical analysis to understand how different justice dimensions interact—synergizing or conflicting—at the distinct levels of the urban, community, and building. To this end, this research aims to construct and apply an analytical framework that integrates multidimensional justice perspectives with hierarchical analytical methods. Through an in-depth case study of the Xiaosongtao area in Nanjing, this study seeks to reveal the complex

mechanisms and practical logics of housing justice in the regeneration of China's non-traditional historical settlements. The objective is to provide both theoretical and practical insights for understanding and promoting housing justice in the context of urban regeneration..

2. Theoretical Perspectives and Analytical Framework

2.1 Justice in Urban Regeneration: Dimensions, Interactions, and Considerations in the Chinese Context

As a significant practice that reshapes urban space and social structures, the ethical implications of urban regeneration have garnered increasing academic attention. The regeneration process is not merely concerned with improvements to the physical environment; it also profoundly affects resource distribution, social power dynamics, and the well-being of residents. Research widely indicates that while regeneration can improve living environments, it may also produce inequitable outcomes such as involuntary relocation, the severance of social networks, the destruction of local culture, and even the "gentrification" affecting original inhabitants. In this context, positioning "Justice" at the core of urban regeneration research and practice has become a critical benchmark for evaluating the value and sustainability of regeneration projects. However, the central question, "What constitutes just regeneration?" continues to evolve in both theory and practice.

"Housing Justice," as a core component, presents unique characteristics in its conceptualisation and pathways to realisation within China's specific socio-cultural and institutional contexts. While Western Justice theories often emphasise individual rights, market mechanisms, and legal procedures, discussions of housing justice in China must be more deeply embedded in the state-led urban development model, the policy orientation towards "people's well-being" (民生), traditions of collectivism and community consultation, and the complex logic of property rights and resource allocation under the socialist market economy system. Therefore, building upon common justice dimensions such as distribution, procedure, and recognition, this section pays particular attention to the specific manifestations and challenges of these dimensions in China's urban regeneration practices. This approach aims to construct a more context-sensitive analytical framework for subsequent research.

2.1.1 Single-Dimension Focus: Distributive, Procedural, and Recognition Justice in Housing

Existing research on housing justice and justice often approaches the issue from distinct yet interrelated dimensions, with distributive justice, procedural justice, and recognition justice as three core perspectives. In the context of urban regeneration in China, the specific manifestations and focal points of these dimensions differ.

(1) Distributive Justice: Focusing on the Rational Allocation of Housing Resources and Opportunities

Distributive justice is foundational to housing justice research, centering on how the benefits and burdens of housing resources, related public services, and urban regeneration outcomes are equitably distributed among different social groups. This concerns not only "who gets what quality of housing" and the associated cost-benefit sharing but is also, in the Chinese context, closely linked to the state-led housing security system, the complexity of historical property rights (e.g., the coexistence of public, reformed, and private housing), and distinctive Chinese policy practices such as "resettlement before relocation".

A key focus of current research on distributive housing justice is the "adequacy and comprehensiveness of compensation," which extends beyond singular material criteria, revealing inherent complexities and challenges. Numerous studies demonstrate that focusing solely on explicit indicators like housing size and monetary compensation is insufficient to cover the full spectrum of losses residents incur due to relocation or community restructuring. Non-material losses—such as the disruption of social ties, dilution of cultural identity, and reduced spatial convenience—have emerged as crucial but often overlooked indicators of distributive justice. Their effective assessment and compensation pose a common challenge for academics and practitioners alike (Du et al., 2022).

Simultaneously, the "spatial dimension" of housing allocation has received increasing emphasis. This highlights the close connection between housing and location choices, access to quality public services (such as education, healthcare, and transportation), and the resultant development opportunities and social interaction spaces. The

aim is to promote the elimination of spatial segregation and opportunity deprivation arising from housing location disparities, fostering a more equitable allocation of urban resources (Feitosa et al., 2024). This requires housing allocation policies to transcend individual housing units and focus on equitable resource distribution and spatial inclusiveness for the entire community. Furthermore, the pathways and challenges of remedial allocation mechanisms (e.g., preferential rehousing rights, targeted subsidies) designed to redress historical injustices caused by discriminatory policies or unfair planning (such as the historical “redlining system”) for specific groups have also become an important frontier in distributional justice research (Thurber et al., 2024).

Despite considerable advances in distributional justice research, a persistent practical challenge is how to scientifically quantify and integrate multiple distributional factors (especially non-material socio-cultural factors). Another is ensuring that distributional outcomes genuinely benefit the most vulnerable groups within a complex market and policy environment, avoiding elite capture and the “egalitarian trap”.

(2) Procedural Justice: Ensuring Inclusiveness and Transparency in Housing Decision-Making Processes

Procedural justice focuses on the justice of housing-related policymaking, planning, and project implementation processes. It emphasises that all stakeholders, especially disadvantaged groups, should have equal opportunities for participation, full access to information, and the ability to exert substantial influence on decision-making (Healey, 1997). Its core lies in ensuring openness, transparency, and empowerment in the decision-making process, positing that a fair process is a necessary prerequisite for achieving a just outcome. In China, the practice of procedural justice is often associated with government-led multi-party consultation mechanisms, innovations in grassroots community governance (e.g., “courtyard consultation meetings” and “residents’ councils”), and the challenge of balancing efficiency with guaranteed participation.

However, the practice of procedural justice in housing is fraught with tensions and dilemmas. Research commonly reveals a significant gap between ‘formal participation’ and ‘substantive impact’. Information asymmetries (e.g., professional jargon in planning schemes that is difficult for ordinary residents to understand), power imbalances (e.g., the dominant role of developers or government in agenda-setting and decision-making), and technological and cultural barriers often lead to the marginalisation of disadvantaged groups’ voices, reducing participation to a “formalism” devoid of substance (Shahrad et al., 2025). Therefore, enhancing procedural justice hinges on marginalised groups to transition from passive recipients to active negotiators. This includes not only improving their access to information and comprehension, and ensuring their bargaining power in multi-party negotiations, but also establishing effective channels for conflict resolution and grievance redress, as well as ensuring the possibility of power-sharing and co-decision-making at the institutional level (Wang & Xu, 2024).

Additionally, some studies have begun to focus on the role of emotions in participation (Cao et al., 2024) and the unique value of informal community networks and ‘bottom-up’ advocacy planning (Hewidy and Harsia, 2025) in compensating for the shortcomings of formal procedures. These informal approaches aim to promote substantive justice by lowering participation barriers while increasing the depth and trust involved in the process. The fundamental challenge for procedural justice research lies in how to strike a delicate balance between pursuing administrative efficiency and ensuring broad, deep participation; how to design decision-making mechanisms that accommodate a plurality of voices while effectively reaching consensus; and how to genuinely internalise the concept of procedural justice into daily governance practices.

(3) Recognition Justice: Respecting Identities, Cultures, and Experiences Related to Housing

Recognition justice is a relatively new but increasingly important dimension in housing justice theory. It moves beyond material distribution and procedural participation to focus on societal respect for and acknowledgment of the identities, cultural values, lived experiences, and deep connections of different groups—especially marginalised ones—to specific spaces. This serves as a means of resisting stigmatisation, symbolic violence, and exclusion from power (Honneth, 1995; Fraser, 2003). In China’s urban regeneration, recognition justice is particularly reflected in the protection of the overall character of historical districts and specific period architectural styles, the continuation of traditional neighborhood lifestyles and public interaction spaces, the incorporation of indig-

enous residents' "local knowledge" and collective memory, and respect for and responsiveness to collective sentiments associated with "unit" (单位) cultures and compound memories formed in specific historical periods.

In the housing field, the core research agenda for recognition justice exhibits rich connotations. First is the deep integration of cultural identity and spatial representation. Research emphasises that housing policy, planning, and design must transcend purely functionalist considerations to actively respond to residents' diverse cultural backgrounds and lifestyle needs. By demonstrating respect for the cultural practices, religious beliefs, and collective memories of specific groups in housing design and community building, their identity, dignity, and sense of belonging to the community can be ensured (Mosseray et al., 2025). Second is the practical exploration of historical memory and restorative recognition. In response to housing trauma caused by historically unjust policies (e.g., apartheid, forced evictions) affecting specific communities, recognition justice advocates for publicly acknowledging historical mistakes, establishing memorial mechanisms, and implementing compensatory or preferential resettlement policies to repair community trust and promote social reconciliation (Thurber et al., 2024). Third is the legitimisation of experiential knowledge and the establishment of epistemic justice. Recognition justice forcefully challenges the monopoly of expert discourse in housing decision-making, advocating that residents' "local knowledge" and real needs, based on long-term life experiences, be considered legitimate and valuable bases for decision-making. This promotes "knowledge justice" in planning and research.

However, in practice, research on recognition justice also faces significant challenges: how to translate the abstract principle of recognition into concrete policy tools and spatial intervention strategies; how to avoid the pitfalls of "symbolic recognition" and ensure that recognition is combined with practical resource redistribution and power restructuring; and how to effectively promote social cohesion while respecting cultural pluralism, thereby avoiding the potential "paradox of recognition".

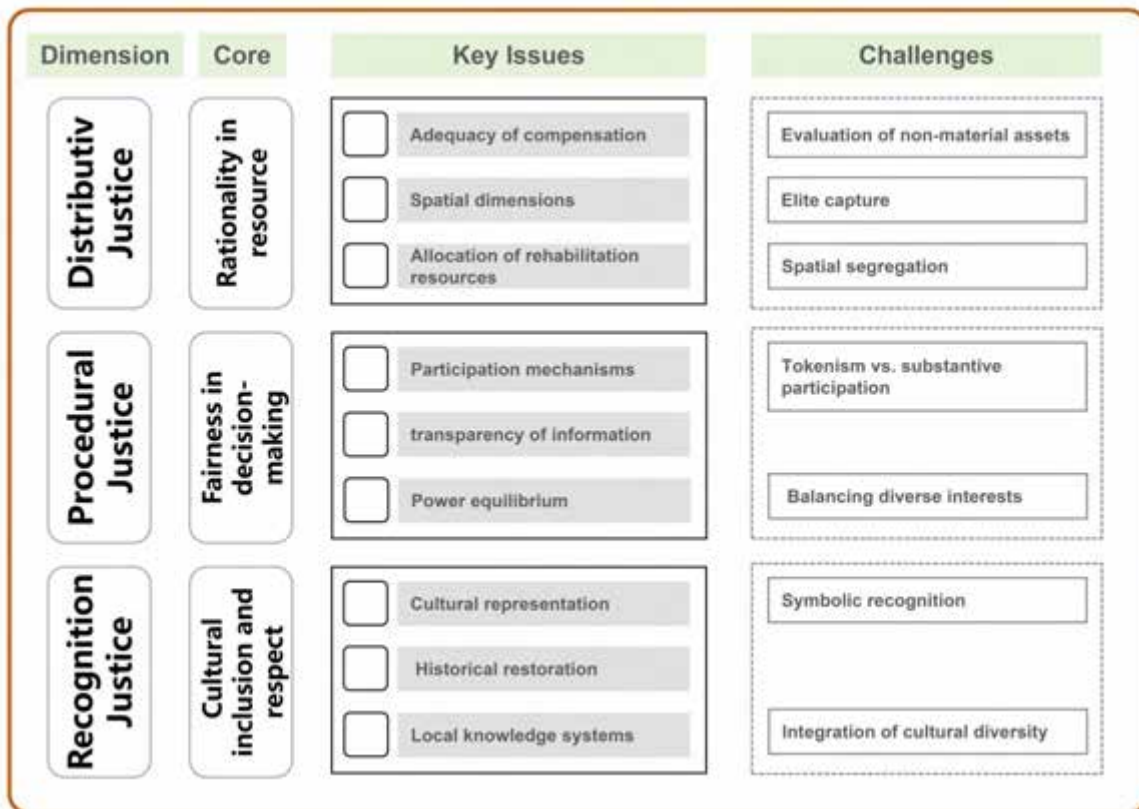


Figure1. Three Dimensions of Housing Justice

2.1.2 Integration of Multidimensional Perspectives: Towards Dynamic and Interactive Housing Justice

Given the inherent complexity and multifaceted nature of housing justice and justice, particularly in China's context of rapid development and profound transformation, the limitations of a one-dimensional analytical framework have become increasingly apparent. Consequently, a growing body of research advocates for adopting a multidimensional and integrated perspective, wherein distributive, procedural, and recognition justice are viewed as an organic, interrelated, and dynamically interacting whole.

Research indicates that justice in housing resource allocation is profoundly affected by the inclusiveness of housing decision-making processes; processes lacking full consultation or transparency tend to result in housing allocation programs that are more likely to deviate from justice goals, especially to the detriment of disadvantaged groups (Schmitt & Weck, 2024). Concurrently, the recognition of specific resident groups' identities and needs directly reshapes the pattern of allocation and spatial design of housing resources. For example, if the special needs of particular groups (recognition justice) can be incorporated into the planning, design, and allocation of housing resources (distributive justice) in subsidised housing or community regeneration projects, the dignity and quality of life for these groups can be significantly enhanced.

However, inherent tensions and conflicts often exist between different dimensions of justice in housing policy and practice. For instance, in urban regeneration involving housing demolition and resettlement, the pursuit of adequate procedural consultation and interest balancing may prolong project cycles, thereby affecting the immediate distributional justice for a segment of the population urgently needing transitional or resettlement housing (Johnson & Wang, 2024). Similarly, specialised housing design catering to the housing practices of specific cultural groups (recognition justice), while enhancing cultural sensitivity, might also affect the overall availability or inclusiveness of affordable housing due to increased costs (distributional justice). This potential conflict among multiple dimensions necessitates an understanding and practice of housing justice that transcends static standards and possesses the capacity for dynamic adjustment. This is especially crucial in the real-world context of urban regeneration in China, which is often characterised by tight schedules, intensive tasks, and extremely complex stakeholder interests.

Drawing on concepts from the Capability Approach and the Dynamic Justice Framework (DJF) (Weghorst et al, 2024), studies suggest that achieving housing justice requires attention to the differing core demands of various groups at different life stages or in specific housing situations, and the corresponding adjustment of policy priorities and resource allocation strategies (Kimhur, 2022). Therefore, understanding and promoting housing justice and justice in urban regeneration requires moving beyond static judgments of a single dimension towards a dynamic, interactive, and integrated view of justice. This obliges researchers and practitioners to focus not only on "what to share" and "how to share" (distributive justice), and "who participates" and "how to participate" (procedural justice), but also on "who is seen" and "whose values are respected" (recognition justice). It also requires an in-depth analysis of how these three dimensions shape each other, interact, and collectively determine the final housing justice outcome within specific social, economic, and institutional contexts.

2.2 Hierarchical Analytical Perspectives: Understanding Systemic Justice Challenges (Space-Specific)

Urban regeneration is not a singular, homogenous intervention but a systematic project involving different spatial scales, multiple actors, and complex socio-economic relationships. The complexity of housing justice, one of its core issues, stems not only from the intertwined influence of multiple justice dimensions but also from its inherent spatial attributes and multi-scale characteristics. Housing inequities often manifest uniquely at different spatial levels (e.g., regions, cities, neighborhoods, and individual building units). The interactions and shaping influences of policies, resources, power, and the built environment across these levels form complex causal chains and influence mechanisms (Harvey, 1973; Lefebvre, 1991). Thus, a systematic understanding of, and effective intervention in, housing justice requires moving beyond single-scale or "de-spatialised" approaches to an analytical perspective that can endogenously accommodate and resolve this spatial complexity.

2.2.1 Theoretical Origins and Practical Necessity of Hierarchical Analysis

Adopting a hierarchical perspective to analyze housing justice issues is rooted in a profound understanding of

the interaction between space and social relations, and it resonates with the complex governance realities of China's urban regeneration practices.

(1). Theoretical Origins: Space as a Container and Shaper of Social Relations

Theoretically, urban space is not a homogenised backdrop but is structured by different levels of power relations, institutional arrangements, and social interactions (Lefebvre, 1991). Housing, as a key social resource and spatial entity, sees its distribution, access, and experience deeply embedded in these multi-level spatial structures. From national-scale laws and regulations, to urban-scale planning controls, to community-scale governance rules, down to building-scale spatial design, each tier embodies specific resource allocation logics, power mechanisms, and spatial production processes. These collectively shape residents' housing opportunities, experiences, and even their socio-economic status. Hierarchical analysis provides an effective framework for decoupling and systematically examining these key processes and elements that operate at different, interrelated spatial scales to influence housing justice (Brenner, 2001). It prompts us to operationalise abstract justice principles in concrete spatial contexts, asking: "Where does injustice occur?", "Who benefits or suffers at what spatial scale?", and "How do interventions at different spatial scales affect the overall pattern of justice?".

(2). Practical Necessity: The Hierarchical Governance Characteristics of Urban Regeneration in China

In practice, China's urban regeneration is characterised by a distinctive hierarchical governance model that combines top-down policy transmission with bottom-up feedback and consultation (Wang et al., 2021). Macro-guidelines at the national level (e.g., the principle of "Retain, Renovation, Demolition and Donstruction" – must be translated into specific local policies and planning indicators by provincial, municipal, and district governments (urban level). The implementation of these policies and indicators necessitates complex negotiations and interactions with community organisations, development agencies, and local residents on specific project sites (community level). The final outcomes of regeneration are then materialised in the form of concrete architectural space and living quality (building level).

The challenges of housing justice therefore manifest differently at various levels:

At the urban level, it may involve the uneven regional distribution of subsidised housing and the concentration or exclusion of high-quality public resources.

At the community level, it may relate to procedural injustices in demolition and resettlement processes, lack of participation in public space creation, or the disruption of social networks due to regeneration.

At the building level, it may concern the universality and inclusiveness of housing design, variations in spatial quality, or the neglect of specific groups' needs.

A single-scale analysis, whether focusing on macro policies or micro practices, can hardly capture the transmission, distortion, and cumulative effects of justice issues across these different spatial levels, risking what Brenner (2001) terms "scale blindness". As Swyngedouw (2004) points out, the "cross-scale reconfiguration" (rescaling) between local actions and broader scale contexts is key to understanding contemporary urban governance. Thus, adopting a hierarchical analytical perspective can more clearly reveal how housing justice issues are constructed, amplified, or mitigated within the particular governance structure of urban regeneration in China.

2.2.2 Hierarchy in This Study: Focusing on Policy-Governance-Space Interactions

Based on the aforementioned emphasis on the spatiality of housing justice, and drawing upon common practices in urban geography, planning, and governance studies, this research focuses its analysis of housing justice in urban regeneration on the following three core, interrelated levels that effectively reflect mechanisms of spatial influence:

- **Urban Level:** Encompasses macro policies, strategic planning, and resource allocation rules led by national and local governments. This level influences the initial allocation of housing resources, regional equalisation of

opportunities, and the establishment of fair starting points for projects. The focus is on how land policy, housing supply structure, infrastructure accessibility planning, and the designation of historical and cultural preservation zones shape the urban's overall housing justice ecology.

• **Community Level:** Involves meso-level governance, consultation, interest coordination, and environmental improvement within the scope of a specific project or land parcel. This includes local government, community organisations, residents, development entities, and other stakeholders. It serves as a key arena for the implementation of macro-policies, multi-interest negotiations, and the realisation of procedural justice. The focus is on how program development, resident participation mechanisms, demolition and resettlement negotiations, community public space and amenities, and social network maintenance affect the experience of justice within the community.

• **Building Level:** Relates to micro-physical space, architectural design, technology application, and their direct impact on residents' daily living experience and the degree to which diversified needs are met. This is the direct carrier for the materialisation of justice concepts and individual perception. The focus is on how justice and empowerment at the micro-level are reflected in unit typology, spatial quality, public area design, material choices, spatial adaptability, and residents' autonomy in design and use.

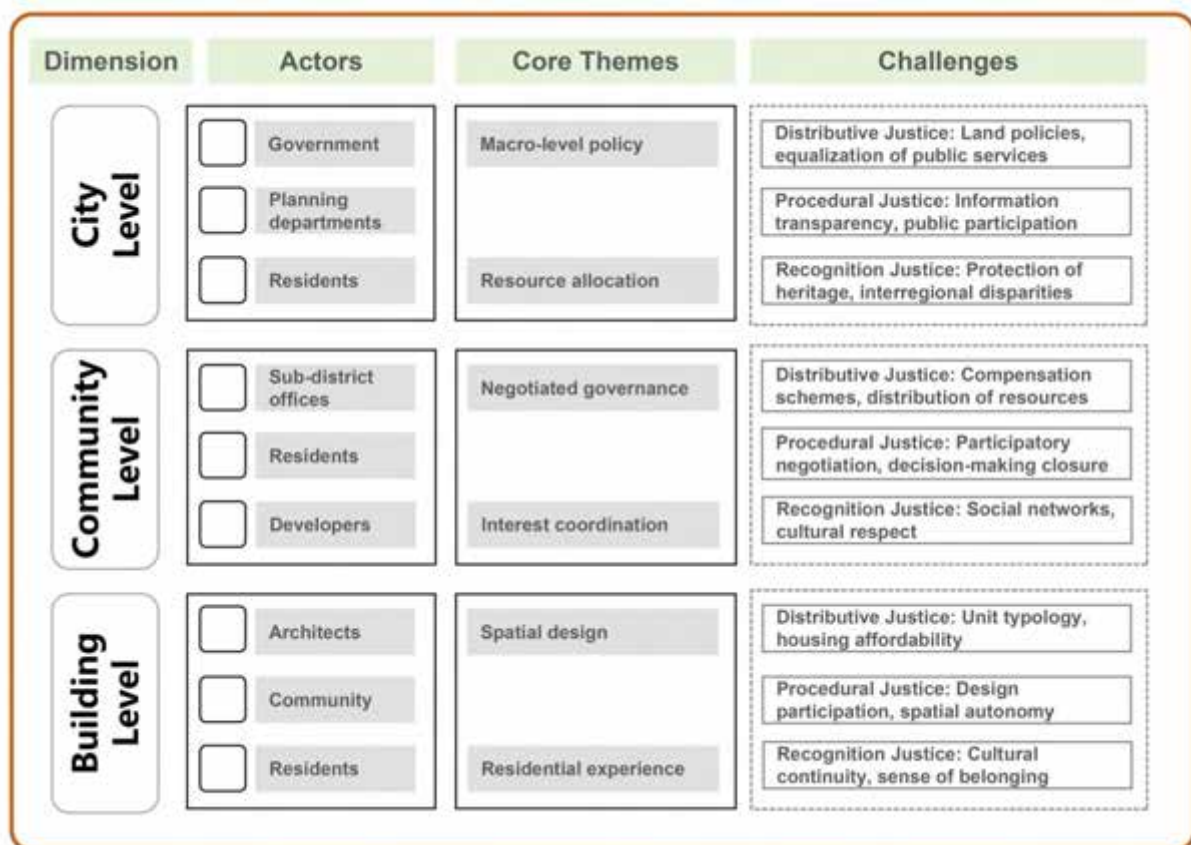


Figure2.Three Dimensions of Urban Spatial Analysis

2.3 Analytical Framework: Integrating Housing Justice Dimensions and a Tiered Perspective

To combine the understanding of core housing justice dimensions (Section 2.1) with the hierarchical approach to analysis (Section 2.2), and to construct a specific analytical tool for subsequent case studies, this study proposes the "Hierarchical Framework for Housing Justice" (see Table 1).

Table 1: Hierarchical Framework for Housing Justice

Level of Analysis	Key Actors	Key Arenas	Focus Areas	Distributive Justice	Procedural Justice	Recognition Justice
Urban	Government ; Urban Master Plan	Macro Policies & Regulations	Structural resource allocation; justice in policy starting points; Legitimacy of macro-rules	- Justice in resource allocation - Public service equalisation - Fair cost and benefit distribution	- Transparency of decision-making information - Early public participation - Monitoring of policy implementation	- Recognition of historical/cultural values - Consideration of regional/group differences
Community	Street/Neighborhood administration, Residents, Community planners	Consultation platforms, Project programs	Meso-governance processes; Mechanisms for interest harmonisation; Effectiveness of community participation	- Justice of entitlement programs - Community resource sharing - Balance in interest negotiations	- Inclusivity of consultation platforms - Justice of consultation rules - Constraints on community decision-making	- Maintenance of social networks - Respect for lifestyles/cultures - Atmosphere of trust and cooperation
Building	Designers, Builders, Residents (users)	Architectural spaces	Micro-spatial quality; Living experience; User empowerment	- Guarantee of living space - Spatial quality and efficiency - Housing affordability	- Participation in design process - Autonomy in space use - Transparency of technical information	- Meeting diverse needs - Spatial expression of identity/culture - Guarantee of residential dignity

This framework is the central methodological tool of this study. Its core purpose is to systematically “locate” and “dissect” housing justice issues in urban regeneration. It systematically couples the core dimensions of housing justice (distributive, procedural, and implicitly, recognition justice) with the three core analytical levels of urban regeneration (urban, community, and building). The aim is to reveal the specific manifestations of housing justice issues at different spatial scales, as well as their intrinsic correlations and transmission mechanisms.

3. Case Study: Hierarchical Housing Justice Practices in the Regeneration of Xiaosongtao, Nanjing

This study selects the urban regeneration project of Xiaosongtao in Nanjing as a representative case to analyze the mechanisms and complexities of housing justice in the regeneration of non-traditional historical settlements in China, applying the hierarchical housing justice framework developed previously. Located in the core of Nanjing’s old urban, the Xiaosongtao project is a typical case that combines historical and cultural values with pressing challenges related to residents’ livelihoods. Its regeneration process spans multiple levels, from macro-policy guidance to micro-spatial implementation, and involves dynamic interactions among the government, residents, planners, developers, and other actors. This provides a rich empirical basis for examining the impacts of different practice layers on housing justice.

3.1 Research Design and Case Overview

3.1.1 Selection and Application of Research Methods

This study employs a combination of case study methodology and spatial analysis to explore housing justice practices in the regeneration of non-traditional historical settlements through multi-dimensional empirical analysis. Based on field research, the study utilises in-depth interviews (with residents, planners, government officials, and other key actors), participatory observation (e.g., of community councils, consultation mechanisms), and analysis of planning texts and spatial data (e.g., planning indicators, architectural designs) to systematically collect empirical data across social, spatial, and economic dimensions. The case study focuses on policy, governance, and spatial interactions at the “urban-community-building” levels, integrating methods such as spatial morphology comparisons and functional layout optimisation analysis, to dissect the specific practices of hous-

ing justice within the hierarchical framework as demonstrated by Xiaosongtao's "localised response".



Figure3. Aerial View of the Xiaosongtao Lane Site before Urban Regeneration

3.1.2 Case Overview

The Nanjing Xiaosongtao Lane Regeneration Project is situated in the core area of Nanjing's old urban, covering approximately 10,100 square meters. The buildings primarily consist of high-density, ground-floor brick and wood structure lilong-style residences from the Republican Era (1912-1949). Some buildings possess historical and cultural value. However, the overall living environment required significant improvement, facing issues such as aging infrastructure, insufficient public services, diverse and complex property ownership (including historical private houses, early housing reform units, and tenants, with a notably aging population of property owners), and certain safety risks. (See Figure X for the location and pre-regeneration condition of the case study area).

In 2020, guided by Nanjing Municipality's "Guiding Opinions on Urban Regeneration of Residential Lots," which advocates a principle of "retain, renovation, demolition and construction" ("留改拆建") applied differentially, the Xiaosongtao site commenced its regeneration. It was positioned as a pilot project to explore an "organic regeneration" path characterised by "government guidance, market operation, and multi-stakeholder participation". The Xiaosongtao case reflects common characteristics of current urban regeneration in China, especially in historical urban areas:



Figure4. Surrounding Conditions of the Project **Figure5.** Aerial View after Update

- **Market-oriented operation under government guidance:** The project is guided by the government (with urban, district, and street-level linkage) in planning, policy support, and overall supervision. Simultaneously, a state-owned platform company (Nanjing Historic Urban Area Protection and Construction Group Co., Ltd.) was introduced as the primary implementation body, exploring market-oriented mechanisms in old urban regeneration (Chen et al., 2025).

- **Complex property rights structure and diversified social demands:** The historical diversity of housing property rights, coupled with social networks and neighborhood sentiments formed by original residents over time, made interest coordination and social relations maintenance crucial aspects of the regeneration process.

• **Policy orientation of “people-oriented” and “prioritizing livelihood improvement”:** In the current stage of urban development, the transformation of non-traditional historical settlements is accorded significant importance for improving public well-being. Upgrading living conditions and safeguarding residents’ rights and interests became key objectives of project implementation.

• **In-depth participation of grassroots governance and construction of consultation mechanisms:** Project promotion relied on the deep involvement of the grassroots governance system (street and community administrations), seeking to build consensus and ensure smooth implementation through a multi-party consultation platform.

Therefore, the regeneration practice in Xiaosongtao represents an important local endeavor to balance multiple goals—historical preservation, livelihood improvement, and economic feasibility—and to explore pathways for achieving housing justice within China’s specific institutional and cultural context. Its strategic choices and practical effects offer valuable references for understanding similar regeneration projects.

3.2 The Urban Hierarchy: Reconciling Justice in a Macro Framework

Urban-level planning and policies established the macro framework, basic principles for resource allocation, and value orientation for the regeneration of Xiaosongtao Lane. These had a guiding influence on subsequent paths and specific measures to achieve housing justice at the community and building levels.



Figure 6. Framework of Urban-Level Justice Dimensions and Spatial Practices

3.2.1 Resource Allocation under the “Retain, Renovation, Demolition, and Construction” Approach: Balancing Historic Preservation Priorities with Distributional Justice

Facing challenges of high protection requirements and limited development space in neighborhoods with historical elements, Nanjing’s municipal policies of “organic regeneration” and “retain, renovation, demolition and construction” provided a somewhat flexible guiding framework for resource allocation to Xiaosongtao at the urban level. This aimed to balance the rigid constraints of historical landscape protection with residents’ urgent needs for improved living conditions. The Nanjing Xiaosongtao Unit (NJZCA030) Detailed Control Plan explicitly mandated the preservation of existing street texture, scale, and interface of Xiaosongtao Lane, listing several buildings for retain, repair, or reconstruction. This urban-level consideration of recognition justice for the historical lineage controlled the overall development intensity of the site through planning controls (e.g., setting a cap on the floor area ratio for new residential sites).

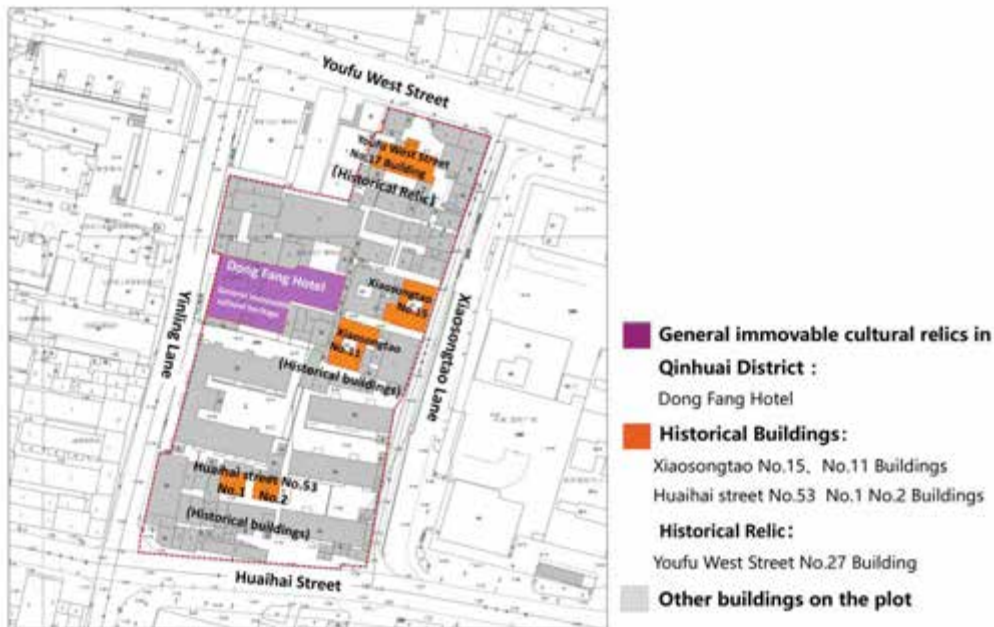


Figure7. Historical Elements of Xiaosongtao Lane Site

This “conservation-first” strategy reflects respect for the urban’s historical fabric. Concurrently, the plan permitted a moderate increase in development intensity on suitable sites (e.g., the floor area ratio of some mixed commercial and residential sites was slightly higher than that of purely residential sites). Floor area ratios for different sites were set distinctively, aiming to provide a degree of economic support for the district’s overall regeneration and reserve space for improving indigenous inhabitants’ living conditions and public service facilities. For example, the floor area ratio for new residential sites (e.g., NJCa03019-11) was controlled at ≤ 2.0 to ensure harmony with the surrounding historical environment, while for some mixed commercial/residential sites in better locations with relatively less impact on the landscape (e.g., NJCa03019-26), it was set at ≤ 2.6 .

A key aspect of resource allocation justice at the urban level is how to effectively allocate resources under limited planning conditions, balancing investment in historic landscape conservation with satisfying residents’ diverse housing needs. This includes avoiding situations where an overemphasis on low-density protection renders regeneration projects economically unviable, potentially transferring excessive renovation costs to original residents. This requires careful, fine-grained consideration. Decisions at this level also cascade down, affecting the design of compensation and resettlement programs (distributive justice) at the community level and the extent of spatial improvements at the building level. (Reference to floor area ratio adjustment in the Nanjing Xiaosongtao Unit (NJZCA030) Detailed Control Plan).



Figure 8. Comparison before and after Adjustment of Plot Ratio in the Previous Plan
Nanjing Xiaosongtao Unit (NJZCA030) Detailed Control Plan

3.2.2 Refined Governance Procedures under the “Organic Regeneration” Framework: Policy-Led Construction of Procedural Justice

The regeneration of Xiaosongtao Lane adhered to the “organic regeneration” concept promoted by the urban of Nanjing, emphasizing a shift from “large-scale demolition and construction” to “refined management”. The urban-level policy framework (e.g., the “Guidelines for Urban Regeneration of Residential Lots”) established general principles of “government-led, market-operated, public participation, and professional collaboration.” This laid a systematic foundation for the Xiaosongtao project to conduct multi-stakeholder consultations at the community level, fostering procedural justice.

In the planning approval process, designating the project as a “Model Old Neighborhood” and emphasizing “fine-tuned regeneration” encouraged the full consideration and incorporation of views from street and community administrations, residents, property rights units, and professional teams (e.g., architects, planners) in the design and implementation of the specific plan. In the Xiaosongtao project, the architectural team played a “full-process role from pre-planning, planning and design to post-implementation management” and undertook “community building and public participation” work. This reflects urban-level procedural recognition and support for professional engagement in grassroots consultation. This procedural design, combining “top-down” policy guidance with “bottom-up” practical exploration, aimed to enhance the scientific basis, democratic nature, and local adaptability of regeneration decision-making, thereby promoting justice at the procedural level.

3.2.3 Value-Oriented Revitalisation of Historical Lineage: Incorporating Residents’ Life Imprints in Recognition Justice

At the urban level, the regeneration of Xiaosongtao not only pursued the retain of physical form but also strove to integrate the urban’s historical narrative with the imprints of residents’ lives. This reflects a recognition of local identity and residents’ emotional connection to place, contributing to recognition justice.



Figure9. Remodeling of 27 Youfu West Street

The plan's "maximum preservation" of Xiaosongtao Lane's existing street texture, scale, and interface, and the "in-situ preservation and restoration" of historical buildings such as No. 27 Youfu West Street (as shown in Figure 9), are direct manifestations of the urban's recognition of its historical and cultural value. Furthermore, the orientation of urban regeneration was not to "museumise" historic districts but to reintegrate them into contemporary urban life through functional implantation and spatial revitalisation. For example, at the urban planning level, some preserved buildings were permitted to introduce cultural, creative, or small-scale commercial functions related to community life, provided their appearance was maintained. This aimed to restore neighborhood vitality and provide residents with new spaces for interaction and experience. This strategy sought to protect historical "symbols" while recognizing residents' rights to be present and use the space as "subjects of life". The urban's advocacy for an "efficient space and open architecture concept," and design guidelines such as "solving the diversified living space needs of special-needs households by raising the floor height," also reflect concern for residents' specific living needs and quality of life improvement.

However, a critical consideration for the urban in pursuing recognition justice is how to acknowledge historical and cultural values while ensuring that regeneration outcomes benefit the original community and avoid the negative effects of "gentrification".

3.3 The Community Level: Shaping Justice in Consultative Governance

The community level is the key arena where urban regeneration policies are translated into concrete practices and where multiple interests engage in direct dialogue and negotiation. In the regeneration process of Xiaosongtao Lane, community-level governance practices actively responded to and attempted to resolve complex housing justice challenges across the three dimensions—distribution, procedure, and recognition—by constructing a multi-party consultation platform, exploring refined interest adjustment programs, and focusing on the maintenance of social and cultural capital.



Figure10.Framework of Community-Level Justice Dimensions and Spatial Practices

3.3.1 “One Household, One Policy” and Multiple Choices: Exploring Distributional Justice in Refined Compensation and Resettlement

Facing the complexity of housing ownership and diverse resident demands in the Xiaosongtao area, community-level regeneration governance did not adopt a “one-size-fits-all” approach to compensation and resettlement. Instead, it actively explored and practiced a “one household, one policy” (一户一策) fine-tuned program for rights and interests, striving to achieve more targeted distributive justice.

For residents with different property rights (e.g., private housing, early housing reform units, tenants), family structures (e.g., elderly families, multigenerational families, single youths), and affordability levels, the community working group, in collaboration with a professional team, provided over 50 options (Aliprantis et al., 2023). These included monetary compensation, off-site resettlement, and in-situ rehousing (with various unit types and appropriate area improvements). This “menu-style” program design granted residents a degree of autonomy in choice, avoiding the sense of being “averaged out” or “deprived” that a single standard might cause. For instance, elderly residents with a strong desire for in-situ living were given priority for on-site relocation with suitable age-friendly modifications. Families needing improved living space were offered the possibility of increasing their area within policy limits, supplemented by a reasonable cost-sharing mechanism.

In formulating compensation standards, beyond statutory assessment procedures, the community level also attempted to introduce more flexible value recognition methods. For example, considerations included the property’s locational value, historical contributions (for some early residents), and potential non-material losses from relocation (e.g., operational losses, disruption of social networks). This aimed to align the compensation scheme more closely with residents’ actual experiences and reasonable expectations.

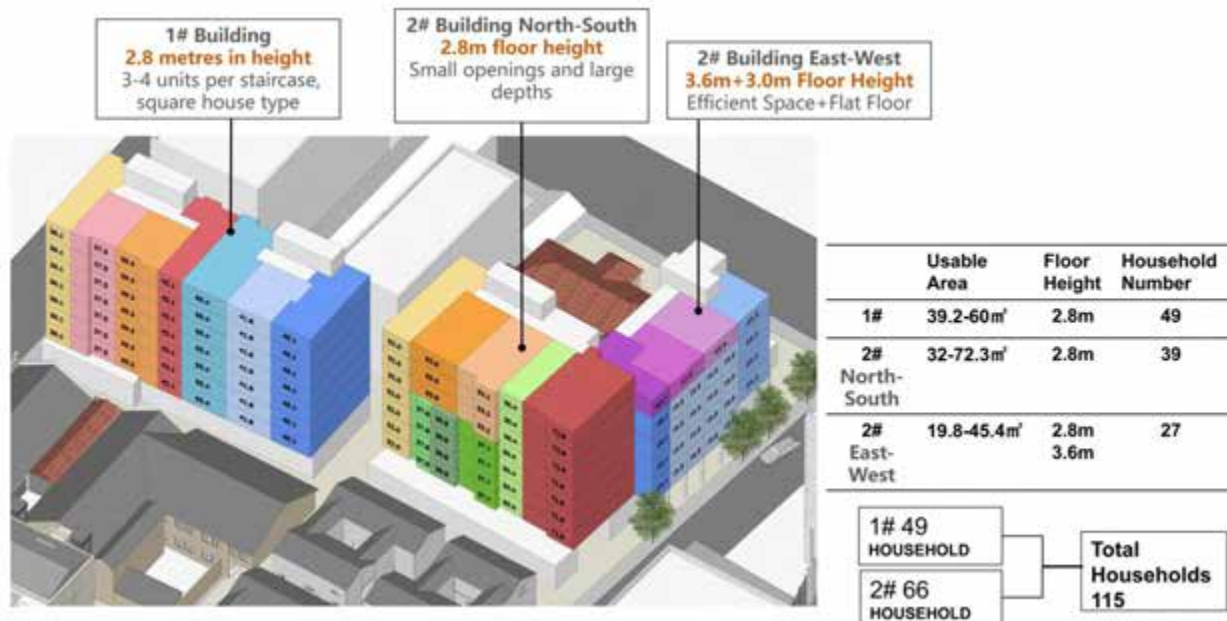


Figure11. Resettlement Housing Program Table

This refined “one household(Bao et al., 2024), one policy” approach, while increasing governance costs and negotiation difficulty, was centered on recognizing individual differences and striving for more substantive distributional justice through differentiated resource allocation. The project’s ultimate achievement of 100% sign-up from property-owning households reflects the efforts of all parties to reach an allocation acceptable to the majority of then-current residents through negotiation.

3.3.2 “Courtyard Consultations” and Professional Empowerment: Building Procedural Mechanisms for Inclusive Participation

At the community level, the Xiaosongtao Project emphasised constructing a multi-level, multi-form consultation platform to ensure procedural justice. This highlighted active interaction and continuous consultation among multiple actors, including residents, community managers (street and neighborhood committees), representatives of the implementing body, and professionals (architects, planners).

In addition to district-level policy briefings and resident representative meetings, more targeted consultation activities were conducted in “courtyard” or building-based consultation meetings. According to statistics, since the project’s inception, over 28 formal courtyard consultation meetings were held to discuss program interpretation, express demands, and mediate conflicts.



Figure12. Consultative Meeting

These small-scale consultation units, organised and coordinated by community managers, ensured effective information transmission and orderly progress of consultations. Representatives of the implementing body directly participated in dialogues, explaining program details and policy boundaries to residents and listening to feedback. Faced with complex planning programs and policy provisions, ordinary residents often experience an information disadvantage. Against this backdrop, the architectural team actively assumed multiple roles—as interpreters of policy, translators of technical language, and facilitators of multi-party communication—thereby enhancing inclusive participation. They “established close contact with residents to understand their living habits and transformation needs,” explained the program in an accessible manner, assisted residents in articulating their needs, and fed representative needs and reasonable suggestions back into the design and decision-making processes.

As the most direct stakeholders, residents’ opinions and demands were the starting point and core content of the consultation. For example, repeated discussions and revisions on issues such as the relocation transition period, details of compensation standards, and types of return housing allowed residents’ reasonable demands to be reflected in program optimisation (Zhang & Wang, 2024). The deep engagement and interactive learning of all actors throughout the project led to dynamic adjustments in the planning and design program. This iterative consultation process reflects the program’s adjustment and adaptation under pressure, enhancing decision-making flexibility and responsiveness to on-the-ground needs.

By constructing this small-scale, multi-round, professionally empowered consultation mechanism with multiple actors, community governance in Xiaosongtao endeavored to break down information barriers and balance power relations. It enabled more residents to substantively participate in regeneration decisions closely related to their interests, thereby promoting procedural justice and providing practical support for establishing “a more inclusive, transparent, and substantively influential consultative governance platform”.

3.3.3 “Neighborhood Living Rooms” and the Continuity of Memory: Practices for Reinventing Community Identity and Recognition Justice

Beyond physical space improvement, Xiaosongtao’s regeneration practice also carefully responded to residents’ valuation of original social networks, local culture, and emotional identity at the planning and design level. It was committed to laying the groundwork for recognition justice (at the community level) and fostering a sense of community identity in the community’s future (Rahimi & Alavi, 2024).

During conceptual iterations, the project team recognised that the core of organic urban regeneration lies in the relative stability of property rights, considered key to maintaining the texture, spatial appearance, and “local vibrancy” (烟火气) of the old urban. Therefore, while respecting existing property rights, the regeneration program focused on enhancing the community’s public nature and cultural identity through spatial design.

In response to the lack of public space in non-traditional historical settlements, the regeneration plan consciously incorporated shared spaces such as “neighborhood living rooms,” “shared courtyards,” and community activity rooms. These are envisioned as future carriers for residents’ interaction and cultural inheritance. The plan’s concepts of preserving and repairing public facilities that carry collective memories, incorporating local cultural elements into new spaces, and considering the continuation of original neighborhood relationships in resettlement all reflect a forward-looking acknowledgment of the community’s history and its residents’ emotions. These community-building planning ideas, centered on respecting residents’ original lifestyles, community belonging, and the sense of life carried by stable property rights, aimed to further enhance the community’s social resilience post-regeneration. Whether these planned shared spaces and community-building concepts can effectively activate neighborhood interactions and gain acceptance from residents in the future will be an important test of the degree of recognition justice achieved and remains to be seen in subsequent practice.

3.4 Architectural Hierarchies: Materializing Spatial Empowerment and Justice

The building level is the material carrier for the final realisation of housing justice concepts, directly related to residents’ daily life experience, living quality, and identity. The regeneration practice in Nanjing’s Xiaosongtao Lane, through refined spatial utilisation, inclusive design participation, and skillful translation of local cultural veins in micro architectural space design, actively explored effective paths to achieve housing justice and improve quality of life within the historical texture. It also attempted to respond to the specific housing needs of disadvantaged groups in its design.

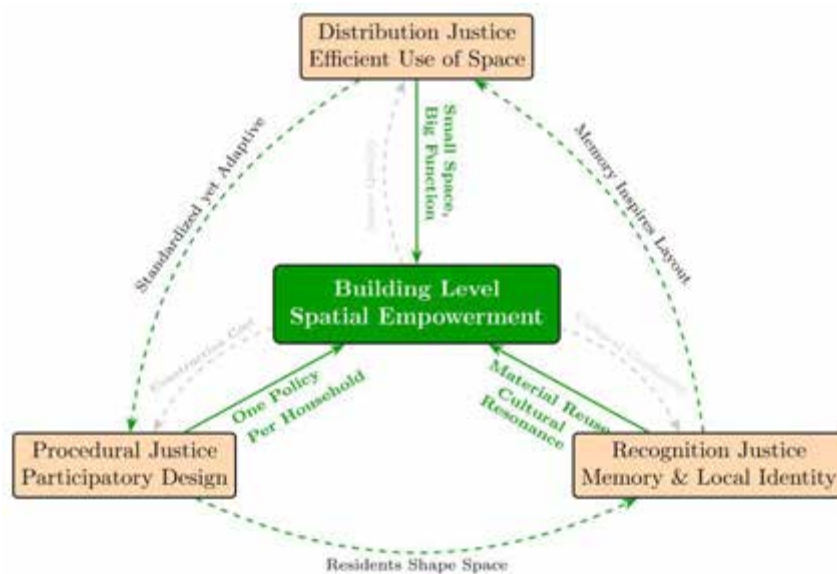


Figure13.Framework of Building-Level Justice Dimensions and Spatial Practices

3.4.1 Balancing “Livability” and “Economy”: Efficient Use of Small Spaces and Quality Assurance

Facing the reality that original housing in the Xiaosongtao area was generally small and partially dysfunctional, the architectural-level regeneration design was committed to maximizing residents’ basic living needs through efficient utilisation and quality assurance within limited space, while also considering the economics of regeneration costs.

One of the design highlights was the adoption of the 3.6-meter-height “high-efficiency unit design” in some units of the new Building 2. Designers expanded usable space within standard floor areas (e.g., approximately 40-60 square meters) using techniques like staggered floors, partial mezzanine levels (e.g., raised sleeping or storage

areas), integrated furniture, and vertical storage. For example, a standard one-bedroom unit was optimised into a more functional one-bedroom plus multifunctional area, or designed to accommodate more family members within the same area, responding to situations where some original residents had larger households and limited living space.



Figure14. Partial Floor Plan

On the basis of ensuring structural safety, the regeneration design emphasised improving basic living qualities such as lighting, ventilation, sound insulation, and thermal insulation, seeking to achieve independent, hygienic, and functional kitchen and bathroom facilities. For example, technical measures like rationally designing window-to-wall ratios, adopting energy-saving window and door materials, and installing additional external wall insulation were used to improve the living comfort of the original old housing. These designs aimed to safeguard basic living functions and enhance spatial quality while endeavoring to control construction costs, seeking a better balance between livability and affordability, thereby responding to distributive justice requirements at the micro-level.

3.4.2 Co-creative Design and Individualised Adaptation: Exploring Procedural Justice with Resident Participation

To ensure that renewed housing could effectively support residents' diverse lifestyles and practical needs, Xiaosongtao Lane actively introduced resident participation mechanisms into the architectural design and renovation process. This gave residents a certain degree of influence on design and autonomy in spatial adjustment, especially for rehousing relocated households, and focused on providing diversified unit type programs.

Through various forms of household interviews and discussions, the design team gained an in-depth under-

standing of the specific housing needs of different families (including the elderly, disabled, and other disadvantaged groups). Guided by the “one household, one policy” principle, these needs were transformed into specific spatial solutions (Nourian et al., 2023), which in itself constituted an important practice of procedural justice at the architectural level. Consequently, for the two new multi-story residential buildings on the Xiaosongtao site, the design team planned nearly a dozen unit types, ranging from 19 square meters (sufficient for basic living) to over 70 square meters (relatively generous). This diversified “menu” of unit types was designed to maximise the match with different family structures, population sizes, and the actual conditions of original living spaces.

In addition to providing a series of well-designed standard unit options, the project also granted residents a degree of influence and autonomy in their own living space arrangements, offering flexibility between standardised design and individual needs. For instance, residents were allowed to choose from pre-designed options for interior decoration materials and the configuration of some non-load-bearing walls, or to make limited personalised adjustments, provided safety and overall appearance were maintained. This “bottom-up” feedback mechanism enhanced the local adaptability of the design program. The architectural regeneration process in Xiaosongtao Lane thus transformed from a unilateral “provision” by designers to a process where residents became design participants with a certain degree of voice, enhancing the adaptability of the final space and residents' sense of identity.

3.4.3 Translation of “Old and New Symbiosis” and “Memory of Place”: Recognizing Local Identity in Architectural Discourse

While pursuing modern residential functions, the architectural regeneration of Xiaosongtao Lane also attached great importance to respecting and translating the local historical lineage and memory of place (Thaler et al., 2025). It strove to embody the recognition of residents' identity and local characteristics in the architectural vocabulary of new or renovated buildings.

Building components with historical value from the area (such as old bricks, tiles, stone slabs, and wooden beams) were, where conditions permitted, collected, restored, and reused, skillfully integrated into the design of new buildings or landscapes. This “new life for old materials” approach perpetuated the historical memory of the place at a material level, enabling residents to feel a familiar “old flavor” in the new environment—a recognition of their emotional memory and cultural roots. Notably, the renovation and reuse design for No. 15 Xiaosongtao retained its courtyard layout and original structure and façade, focusing on public reuse of the space and allowing for various functions, including community service facilities, knowledge-based creative industries, and cultural consumption venues.



Figure15. Patio space before #15 remodel vs #15 Remodeled Patio Space

In terms of forms, materials, and colors of newly built or reconstructed buildings, the project focused on drawing inspiration from traditional Nanjing dwellings, modernizing their translation and expression. This attempted to create a spatial environment that not only met modern living needs but also evoked place memory, carried local

culture, and strengthened residents' identity. For example, design elements like roof forms, courtyard layouts, and door and window styles drew on traditional features but utilised new materials and techniques to achieve both "spirit and form" rather than simple retro imitation. These designs responded to residents' deep-seated emotional needs and sense of cultural belonging, representing a concrete expression of recognition justice at the architectural level. For long-time elderly residents, retaining familiar architectural elements and spatial ambience was particularly important to help them establish continuity and a sense of belonging in their new living environment. However, whether this translation of culture and memory can be understood and recognised by all residents, especially the younger generation or newly relocated individuals, needs reinforcement through community activities and cultural heritage initiatives.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the theoretical perspective and hierarchical analytical framework of housing justice and justice, this study conducted an in-depth case study of the Xiaosongtao Lane urban regeneration project in Nanjing. The aim was to reveal the specific manifestations, internal correlations, and realisation mechanisms of housing justice at different spatial levels in the regeneration of non-traditional historical settlements in China. This chapter synthesises the preceding analysis, discusses the main findings, theoretical contributions, and practical implications of the study, and points out its limitations and future research directions.

4.1 Key Findings: Characteristics of Housing Justice Practices under Tiered Interaction

The regeneration practice of Xiaosongtao Lane vividly demonstrates that housing justice in urban regeneration is not a static, single-dimension goal. Instead, it is a complex process where the three core dimensions—distribution, procedure, and recognition—are dynamically interwoven and interact across the three spatial tiers of the urban, community, and building.

1. The Transmission of Power and Resources Between Levels Shapes the Boundaries and Paths for Realizing Justice:

- (1) **Top-down Impacts:** urban-level macro-policies and plans (e.g., prioritizing historic preservation, controlling floor area ratios) directly set the "ceiling" for resource allocation at the community level and the scope of negotiable issues. For example, the urban's justice-oriented approach to recognizing historical contexts limited development intensity through planning controls. While this protected the landscape, it also increased pressure on the project's economic balance, which in turn posed challenges for distributional justice in compensation and resettlement standards at the community level, and constrained possibilities for large-scale spatial upgrading at the building level. Similarly, the urban-level procedural framework of "government-led (Liu et al., 2025), professional collaboration" provided a legitimizing basis for community-level consultation and participation, but also limited the substantive boundaries of its deliberations.
- (2) **Bottom-up Feedback and Adaptation (Limited):** Although Xiaosongtao was a pilot project, residents' demands and consultation outcomes at the community level (e.g., strong demand for a "one household, one policy" program, modifications to specific unit designs) did have a substantial impact on the dynamic adjustment of the project's program. For instance, residents' demands for high-efficiency unit designs and barrier-free facilities, collected through multiple rounds of "courtyard consultations" at the community level (procedural justice), directly influenced design plans at the building level (distributive and recognition justice), enhancing the local adaptability of the finalised space. However, whether this feedback can be institutionalised and upwardly influence policymaking for subsequent similar projects at the urban level remains to be seen.
- (3) **Synergy and Conflict Between Levels:** Refined governance mechanisms at the community level (e.g., the in-depth involvement of community planners and architects) effectively promoted residents' participation depth and voice (procedural justice) in the architectural design process, bridging the gap between professional expertise and residents' needs. Simultaneously, however, the pursuit of a high degree of personalisation and quality enhancement at the architectural level (e.g., diversified unit types and reuse of old materials

under the “one household, one policy” approach) significantly increased coordination difficulty at the community level and the overall economic costs of the project (a challenge to distributive justice).

2. Uniqueness of the “Localised Response”

- (1) **Connotation and Practical Characteristics of “Justice” in the Chinese Context:** Unlike Western societies, which typically focus more on individual rights protection and market-driven procedural justice, the practice of “justice” demonstrated by Xiaosongtao is more profoundly marked by China’s national conditions. Firstly, government leadership and a focus on public well-being are distinctive features. The government consistently played a central role in goal-setting, resource input, and process regulation, with enhancing people’s livelihoods and maintaining social stability as important value orientations. This often prioritised considerations of distributional justice (such as refined rehousing through “one household, one policy,” and high-efficiency unit design to meet actual housing needs), striving to achieve “tangible and perceived justice outcomes”. Secondly, traditions of collective bargaining and community-based governance continue to play an important role in China’s grassroots governance(Li & Wang, 2023). Mechanisms like “courtyard consultations” reflect efforts to balance individual interests within a collective framework, emphasizing community consultation to resolve conflicts and build consensus, which contrasts with Western models that often emphasise more atomised individual participation. Thirdly, the dynamic balance between efficiency and justice is a common challenge for urban regeneration in China. Xiaosongtao’s pursuit of a 100% signing rate reflects both respect for and absorption of individual demands, as well as grassroots governance’s consideration of efficiency and overall project progress.
- (2) **Differences in Justice Issues Compared to Western Urban Regeneration:** In Western urban regeneration, vigilance against gentrification, correction of market failures, and protection of ethnic minority and marginalised groups’ rights are often the focus of justice discussions. In the Xiaosongtao case, although it also faced issues of resettling disadvantaged groups and community identity, the core conflicts and resolution paths are more characteristic of the Chinese context. For example, the complexity of historical property rights issues (intertwining public, reformed, and private housing) is rarely seen in Western cities, making the starting point and program design for distributional justice extremely complex. Additionally, China’s policy of “preservation, renovation, demolition and construction” in regeneration, as well as the trade-offs between historical and cultural preservation and modern residential function enhancement, are unique. While the West often emphasises interest regulation through strict legal frameworks and market mechanisms, China relies more on government administrative control, policy guidance, and negotiation and mediation approaches reflecting local practices.
- (3) **Characteristic Justice Issues in the Historical Dimension:** Situated in a historic district, Xiaosongtao’s justice challenges are naturally overlaid with a historical dimension. The first is balancing historical and cultural heritage preservation with residents’ modern needs. A core feature is how to meet residents’ needs for more comfortable and modern living spaces (distributive justice) through design innovations like “high-efficiency unit designs,” while preserving historical features (a manifestation of recognition justice). Secondly, it involves recognizing “local knowledge” and residents’ historical sentiments. Xiaosongtao’s attempts to “revitalise old materials” and perpetuate place memory reflect respect for the cultural ties and emotional belonging that residents formed with a particular space over time. Thirdly, it pertains to maintaining historically formed neighborhood relationships. Considering “group relocation” in the resettlement process and attempting to continue social networks of acquaintances also reflects Chinese society’s emphasis on “relationships” and community harmony in regeneration(Gao & Bai, 2024). These historical considerations enriched the connotation of justice and raised higher requirements for regeneration strategies and methods.

4.2. Theoretical and Practical Insights

- (1) **Theoretical Contributions:**Through the empirical analysis of the Xiaosongtao case, this study validates and deepens the analytical framework for housing justice that integrates three levels (“urban-community-build-

ing”) and three dimensions (“distribution-procedure-recognition”). It explains the complex interaction and transmission mechanisms among various levels and dimensions of justice, providing a theoretical tool for understanding housing justice beyond a one-sided perspective. Concurrently, applying justice theory to the specific context of urban regeneration in China reveals its theoretical explanatory power and on-the-ground practice characteristics. It highlights the localised features of housing justice’s realisation paths, core contradictions, and evaluation criteria within China’s specific institutional background—characterised by strong government dominance, complex historical property rights structures, policy logics oriented towards “public well-being” and “harmony and stability,” and a grassroots governance culture emphasizing collective bargaining. This contributes empirical evidence for developing a more inclusive and locally adapted justice theory for urban regeneration and echoes the literature’s call for attention to specific justice practices in the Chinese context.

- (2) **Practical Implications:** The Xiaosongtao project offers multiple insights for the regeneration of historic residential areas: For Policymakers: Recognise the systemic and hierarchical nature of housing justice in regeneration. Grant localities and communities greater practical flexibility under macro policy frameworks, establish smooth upward and downward feedback mechanisms, and seek a dynamic balance among multiple goals. For Planners and Architects: Integrate justice concepts throughout the entire design process. Assume multiple roles as spatial designers, technical supporters, and communication facilitators, respecting professional judgment while fully incorporating residents’ “local knowledge”. For Community Managers and Implementation Agents: Strive to build more inclusive, transparent, and influential platforms for consultation and governance. Fully harness the enthusiasm of multiple actors, emphasise procedural justice and the universality of outcomes, and pay attention to the integration and sustainable development of the renewed community.

4.3 Dilemmas and Challenge

The urban regeneration experience in Xiaosongtao, while offering valuable insights, also highlighted several persistent dilemmas and challenges inherent in striving for housing equity. Rigid urban-level historic preservation mandates, coupled with the financial pressures of project self-balancing, constrained the potential for enhancing distributional justice; “premium” improvements, necessary for some upgrades, remained a significant financial burden for certain households in need. Furthermore, while the “one household, one policy” approach aimed for tailored solutions, questions persist regarding its capacity to ensure substantive “equivalence” across diverse programs. In terms of procedural justice, although consultative mechanisms were established, residents’ substantive influence was often confined to specific aspects of the project, seldom extending to core decision-making processes. Finally, the long-term realization of recognition justice—manifested in the sustained, effective use of community shared spaces and the genuine establishment of cultural identity—hinges on continuous, subsequent investment in community building and governance, the enduring effects of which are yet to be determined.

To address these limitations and to further advance the understanding of housing justice in urban regeneration, future research could be pursued along several key avenues. Firstly, conducting cross-case comparative studies is crucial to test the broader applicability of the analytical framework and to identify context-specific variables influencing equity outcomes. Secondly, undertaking long-term tracking and comprehensive post-renewal assessments will be vital to understand the far-reaching impacts of renewal interventions on housing equity and community well-being. Thirdly, there is a need to explore innovative mechanisms for promoting justice, including the study of effective pathways to enhance housing justice by integrating emerging governance tools and participatory approaches. Such research will be instrumental in developing more robust strategies for creating fairer, more inclusive, and sustainable living environments in the ongoing process of urban transformation..

In summary, the regeneration practice of Nanjing’s Xiaosongtao Lane is a valuable attempt to explore housing justice in historical urban areas in China during a specific period. Its experience demonstrates that realizing housing justice is a process of multi-party participation, dynamic adaptation, and continuous improvement.

This requires ongoing exploration and optimisation of strategies based on respecting history, prioritizing public well-being, and balancing interests. Future urban regeneration practice and academic research should continue to deepen the understanding of housing justice's complexity. Particularly in China's unique socio-cultural and institutional context, the focus should be on how to construct more locally adapted paths to justice realisation, with a view to jointly promoting the creation of fairer, more inclusive, and more sustainable living environments.

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