

# Bridging History and Modernity: Multidimensional Analysis and Reflection on the Renewal of Xianyukou District, Beijing, China

REN Hongjin, LIU Zihan

(North China University of Technology, Beijing 100144, China)

**Abstract** With Xianyukou District in Beijing as the study object, scenario theory, urban restoration theory and organic renewal theory were used to carry out an in-depth analysis on the renovation and renewal projects within the district. Investigations were made to the typical cases such as Xianyukou Food Street, Sanlihe River System and its surrounding environment, and Caochang Hutong, revealing the successful experiences and existing problems in the renovation of historic areas. The results show that the key factors for the successful renewal of historic districts are multiple theoretical guidance, balanced protection and development, systematic thinking, community participation, and subsequent management. Based on the analysis results, strategies such as functional diversification, cultural revitalization, and community empowerment have been proposed, aiming to provide new ideas and methods for the sustainable development of historic districts.

**Keywords** Renovation of historic districts, Scenario theory, Urban restoration, Organic renewal, Community participation

**DOI** 10.16785/j.issn.1943-989x.2024.6.009

China's urban development is currently in a period of stock renewal, which has driven the renewal and revitalization of historic and cultural areas. As an important carrier of urban culture, the renewal of historic areas not only relates to the continuation of urban style, but also involves the inheritance of social memory and the maintenance of community vitality<sup>[1-2]</sup>. As one of the representatives of traditional hutong style areas, Xianyukou District in Beijing has accumulated valuable practical experience for the development and protection planning of historic and cultural areas through its renewal model. In this study, detailed analysis was made to the urban design theories used in the renovation and renewal process of Xianyukou District, with the aim to clarify its renewal and development context, so as to provide scientific and reasonable ideas and methods for the renewal of more historic areas, and promote the sustainable development of historic areas.

## 1 Introduction to urban design theory

In this study, there are mainly 3 theoretical framework involved: the scenario theory proposed by Terry Clark at the University of Chicago, which interprets spatial cultural connotations through 5 dimensions, namely, community, facilities, population, activities, and scenario values<sup>[3]</sup>; urban restoration theory, which emphasizes micro scale and gradual renewal, focusing on the protection of traditional styles

and humanistic care<sup>[4]</sup>; organic renewal proposed by Wu Liangyong, which emphasizes the unity of preserving historical heritage and meeting modern needs while maintaining the original scale<sup>[5]</sup>. These theories provide multidimensional guidance for the sustainable renewal of historic areas.

## 2 Introduction to basic information of Xianyukou District

Located in Xicheng District, Beijing, China, Xianyukou District starts from Xijiekou North Street in the east to Xisi North Street in the south, Xisi South Street in the west, and Xuanwumen Outer Street in the north (Fig.1). In the district, the area east of Qianmen East Street retains the traditional hutongs and alleys of the Ming and Qing dynasties relatively intact, and significantly influenced by the ancient Sanli River channel and terrain, it is a typical area mixed with residential and commercial functions. In the past 2 decades, the Beijing Municipal Government has implemented a zoning and renovation plan, focusing on the cultural heritage and environmental improvement of neighborhoods.

## 3 Case studies

The renewal practice of Xianyukou District focuses on 3 aspects: the construction of Xianyukou Food Street, the restoration of Sanlihe River system, and the organic renewal of Caochang Hutong. In addition to demonstrating diverse renewal concepts and methods, these

cases provide valuable experience for the renewal of historic areas, and also reveal problems and underlying causes, bringing inspiration for future practices.

## 3.1 Application of scenario theory in Xianyukou Food Street

The protection and urban design of Xianyukou Food Street in Qianmen area were led by Professor Ye Zurun from Beijing Institute of Construction Technology. The renovation plan was basically completed in 2007, and Xianyukou Street reopened for customers on May 8, 2011. In the application of scenario theory, specific scenes were formed through the combination of cultural facilities space (such as architectural space, green space), tourists, residents, and leisure and featured activities in a neighborhood, and each scene also contained specific cultural values and features of this area, which could attract interested groups to participate in, gather, and consume culture, thereby promoting the development of the area<sup>[6]</sup>.

From an overall perspective, Xianyukou Street is mainly focused on the commercial function, and the street is constructed as a food and commercial pedestrian street with Beijing features. From the perspective of cultural facility space, after renovation, the whole street has a quaint and elegant architectural style, with a revival of old local brands and a gathering of time-honored ethnic catering brands (Fig.2). The traditional imagery of "fish" (in Chinese it reads 'yu', which symbolizes having surplus food

and wealth, indicating a life of abundance and prosperity) as an element runs through various facilities, such as brick carvings, manhole covers, urban furniture, and street lights, all featuring fish as the theme. The road surface is paved entirely with golden hemp lychee stone, with water-wave scale-shaped paving (Fig.3). The construction of facilities with specific themes in old Beijing has created a traditional folk and commercial atmosphere. During the research period, the block was also linked with the Beijing central axis to hold featured cultural activities, attracting numerous tourists for sightseeing and consumption. The green space is mainly decorated with scattered artificial greening such as potted plants and roadside trees, and the greening is not systematic.

In recent years, the operational problems of Xianyukou Food Street have become increasingly apparent, with the first and foremost being the singularity of functions. Over-reliance on commercial development weakens the original diversity and complexity of the neighborhood, and the rich community life is replaced by a single consumption behavior, making the area lose cultural resilience and vulnerable to economic fluctuations. The loss of cultural heritage and lifestyle brought about by this has gradually made this historic area lose its former vitality. In addition, the commercialization process has changed the original community structure, leading to a large number of native people migrating out, new immigrants being disconnected from the original community culture, and the common culture being replaced by commercial symbols. This disconnection is not only reflected in changes in population composition, but also in changes in lifestyle and values. The authenticity and sense of place of the area are gradually dissipating under the impact of consumerism. At the same time, the issue of cultural superficiality has become increasingly prominent. Although a large number of cultural elements are embedded in the design of the district, most remain at the symbolic level and lack exploration and display of the deep connotations of local culture. Such shallow cultural expression may attract tourists in the short term, but it is difficult to form lasting cultural attraction and cannot truly inherit and develop local culture. The uneven distribution of spatial vitality in the renewed plan also brings challenges: the prosperity of the main street contrasts sharply with the desolation of nearby hutongs, reflecting the lack of integrated and systematic thinking (Fig.4-5). Such imbalance not only affects the overall vitality of the area,

but also exacerbates the differentiation within the community, further weakening the organic development of the historic district.

The underlying reason for the problem lies in overemphasizing economic benefits and neglecting social and cultural values; insufficient community participation and insufficient attention to residents' voices; superficial understanding of culture, without delving deeply into the connotations of local culture; lack of a systematic perspective and failure to view the neighborhood as an organic whole.

To address these issues, scenario theory can be applied to enhance the vitality of Xianyukou Food Street: ① Diversify the functional layout, and introduce cultural exhibitions and community activities on the basis of preserving food features to enrich the connotation of the district; ② Enhance community and resident participation, encourage indigenous people to return, promote the participation of businesses and daily workers in community cultural construction, continue urban traditions, and maintain the uniqueness of the neighborhood; ③ Revitalize hutongs by organizing specific commercial and cultural activities to attract tourists and residents, and revive the vitality of hutongs; ④ Optimize the green layout to enhance the comfort and attractiveness of the neighborhood environment. These measures can promote the overall revitalization of Xianyukou District, making it a combination of historic heritage and modern vitality<sup>[7]</sup>.

### 3.2 Application of restoration theory in Sanlihe River system and surrounding cities

The Qianmen Sanli River is a drainage channel of the city moat of Beijing, which is formed along with the terrain, and a prosperous commercial district has been developed along the river<sup>[8]</sup>. As one of the key areas for the protection of Xianyukou District, Sanlihe area had problems such as poor living environment and insufficient green space. To this end, Beijing launched the overall planning of the Qianmen Sanlihe area in 2016 and completed the renovation in 2017.

The renovation adopted the concept of "urban and ecological restoration", focusing on small-scale restoration of street and alley textures, avoiding large-scale demolition and construction, and preserving the original building structure and hutong culture. Efforts were made to retain native people through environmental improvement in hutongs, infrastructure upgrades, residential housing renovation, and community quality improvements. The restoration of ancient

river channels was combined with historical materials and the texture of hutongs to plan water systems, and the self-purification capacity of water quality was improved through sponge city design. The integration of green landscape and historical building system not only protected historical elements, but also added high-quality green space, successfully transforming it into a vibrant scene that attracted residents and tourists.

The renovated Sanlihe area has regained vitality, but there are also some issues in its subsequent maintenance and management. Research has found that the personal belongings of surrounding residents can occupy some public spaces in their daily lives, affecting their image and sense of use. The small animals such as chickens and geese in the district have enriched the diversity of the Sanlihe River ecosystem (Fig.6). However, from the perspective of environmental behavior, if there is a lack of professional management and animal living space, animals occupying human activity space (e.g. some people are afraid of birds) will not only reduce the attractiveness of the district, but also destroy the beauty of the environment (Fig.7).

There are still many local guild halls with distinctive architectural features around the Sanlihe River System, which have a strong cultural heritage of guilds. However, some guild halls have been idle or severely damaged, and there is an urgent need for overall planning and activation to protect their historical authenticity (Table 1). The analysis on the urban dual restoration theory shows that the vitality of the Sanlihe River System and surrounding guild buildings can be enhanced in the following aspects: ① Establishing a long-term mechanism for ecological management. By drawing on the practice of the "river chief system", a management team composed of government, experts, and community representatives can be established to regularly monitor and maintain the water system. At the same time, it should also strengthen ecological education to enhance residents' environmental awareness and encourage them to participate in water system protection. ② Integrating cultural resources: the water systems and historical buildings are linked to create cultural tourism routes. A water culture museum can be established in the guild halls to showcase the historical changes of the Sanli River, and cultural exhibition stations can be set up on the riverbank to tell relevant historical stories and folk legends. ③ Activating the functions of the guild halls: the structure of the guild hall can be restored to make it endow

with new functions while preserving its historical features, such as cultural exhibitions and artistic performances, and related activities can be held regularly to attract tourists and residents, so as to restore the vitality of the guild hall. ④ Enhancing community participation: it can encourage residents to participate in the activities and

management of the guild hall, and the guild hall can be used as an education and dissemination center for local history and culture, achieving cultural inheritance and community building.

### 3.3 Application of organic renewal concept in Caochang Hutong

Caochang Hutong is located in the eastern

part of Xianyukou District, with a unique texture formed by the ancient Sanli River System. With an area covering 533 traditional courtyards, the district was renovated in the similar way as the Ju'er Hutong renovation project<sup>[5]</sup>, using the concept of organic renewal to implement the renovation. The renewal work aimed to enhance the quality of living by improving facilities such as hygiene, kitchen, and heating, while preserving the historical landscape. It also continued the features of the hutongs through greening and paving design. However, after the restoration, there were issues such as debris accumulation and detachment of the exterior facade, indicating that the subsequent management and maintenance mechanism still needed to be improved to ensure a sustained balance between historical style and modern functionality.

Based on the theory of organic renewal, it is recommended to enhance the vitality of Caochang Hutong from 3 aspects: firstly, establish a courtyard management committee to cultivate community autonomy and obtain professional guidance and support from the government; secondly, create cultural atmosphere and enhance residents' sense of identity through activities such as traditional craft workshops and history lectures; thirdly, hold community activities such as neighborhood festivals and moderately integrate commercial formats to

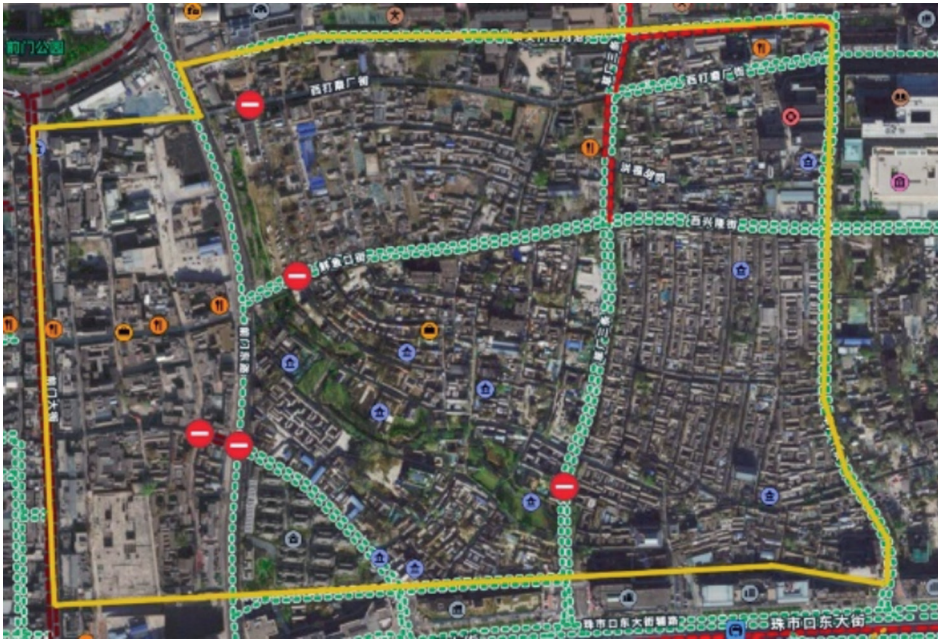


Fig.1 Scope of Xianyukou District



Fig.2 Street view of Xianyukou Food Street



Fig.3 "Fish" element paving



Fig.4 Street view of Hutong near the main street

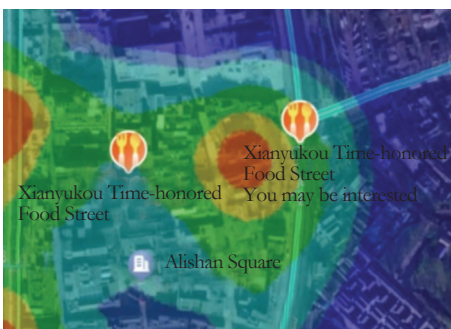


Fig.5 Population heat map of the main street and surrounding areas



Fig.6 Footpath of Sanlihe River system



Fig.7 Current situation inside Fengcheng Guild Hall

**Table 1 Current situation of some guilds around the Sanlihe River system**

Name	Architectural attribution	Current status	Future status	Address
Changchun Villa	Guild hall	Office	Exhibition center	No.33 Changxiang Toutiaoroad
Jiangxi Xinjian Guild Hall	Guild hall	Unoccupied (compound occupied by many households)	Unknown	No.35 Changxiang Toutiaoroad
Anhui Jiangxian Guild Hall	Guild hall	Unoccupied (newly-built)	Unknown	No.60 Changxiang Toutiaoroad
Fujian Tingzhou South Guild Hall	Guild hall	Unoccupied (newly-built)	Unknown	No.62 Changxiang Toutiaoroad
Fengcheng Guild Hall	Guild hall	Unoccupied (newly-built)	Unknown	No.62 Changxiang Toutiaoroad

achieve organic renewal of functions under the premise of protecting residential functions.

#### 4 Summary and reflection

The renewal practice of Xianyukou District provides valuable experiences and inspiration, revealing how to seek a balance between historical protection and modern development.

Firstly, the renewal should adhere to integrity and systematicity, organically combining factors such as material space, social structure, economic activities, cultural heritage, to achieve coordinated development between the district and surrounding areas, as well as the city as a whole. Only by taking a holistic perspective can the comprehensive rejuvenation be achieved.

Secondly, the dynamic balance between protection and development is key. Historical preservation should not just “freeze” traditions, but inject new functions and vitality through organic renewal, while preserving historical features, to adapt to modern needs. Taking Caochang Hutong as an example, the project retains the traditional courtyard layout while improving infrastructure, achieving the integration of tradition and modernity. Community participation is the core of successful renewal. Residents are not only residents of the neighborhood, but also the main body of renewal. An effective participation mechanism can enable residents to influence decision-making, enhance community belonging, and maintain renewed vitality.

In addition, improving resident’ community management capabilities and encouraging their

active participation in daily management and cultural development can help maintain the sustained vitality of the neighborhood. In terms of cultural inheritance and innovation, renewal should not only protect tangible heritage, but also attach importance to the inheritance of intangible culture, organically combining traditional culture with modern life, and making the neighborhood a living cultural carrier. At the same time, guided by sustainable development, the renewal project should take into account the ecological, economic, and social needs, explore innovative economic models and management mechanisms, and ensure long-term development. The introduction of multifunctionality is crucial. The renewal practice of Xianyukou shows that a single commercial function can lead to imbalanced development. Therefore, future renewal projects should focus on diversifying functions, adding elements such as culture, education, and community services, and restoring the comprehensive living space of the neighborhood. Long-term management mechanisms are equally important, including community autonomy and intelligent management, to ensure the long-term vitality of the district.

In summary, the renewal practice of Xianyukou demonstrates the complexity and potential path of historical district renewal. It is expected to find a balance between historical preservation and modern needs through scientific planning, meticulous management, and resident participation, which can make historic districts a link between the past, present, and future, injecting lasting urban vitality.

#### References

- [1] Ruan, Y. S., Sun, M. (2001). The study on some issues related to the conservation and planning for the historic streets and areas in China. *City Planning View*, (10), 25-32.
- [2] Zhang, S. (2021). The idea and path of establishing the mechanism for preserving the urban living heritage: Shanghai’s experience and challenges in historic townscape preservation. *Urban Planning Forum*, (6), 100-108.
- [3] Xu, X. S., Zhao, T. & Terry, N. C. et al. (2012). Scenario theory: Exploration and inspiration of cultural dynamics in regional development. *Foreign Social Sciences*, 3: 101-106.
- [4] Xu, Q. (2022). *Research on enhancing the vitality of traditional street and lane spaces from the perspective of “urban restoration”*. (Master’s thesis) Retrieved from China National Knowledge Infrastructure
- [5] Wu, L. Y. (1994). *The old city of Beijing and its Ju’er Hutong neighborhood*. China Architecture & Building Press.
- [6] Liao, C. H., Ming, Q. Z. (2015). Tourism development and protection of urban historical blocks. *Urban Problems*, 4, 17-22.
- [7] Huang, Q., Wang, D. L. (2018). Cultural-led urban regeneration: the theoretical framework, practices and implications. *Urban Development studies*, 25(10), 68-74.
- [8] Ma, X. F., Ma, Q. Y. (2024). Research on the spatial form evolution of Sanlihe area of Xianyukou District under the influence of water system. *Journal of Beijing Institute of Civil Engineering&Architecture*, 40(2), 80-87.

(Continued from P50)

- pujing space in Quanzhou. *Cities and Towns Construction in Guangxi*, (7), 26-28.
- [5] Lu, M., Tang, Y. Q. & Tao, Z. M. (2016). Study on the resident’s collective memory in historic district based on cognitive map: A case study of the Changzhou Qingguo Historic District.

*Modern Urban Research*, (3), 127-132.

- [6] Ma, X. (2013). On the construction of public space in residential area. *Tourism Overview (Second Half of the Month)*, (8), 305-306.
- [7] Xu, T., Bai, G. (2023). Preliminary study on environmental design of community public space based on environmental psychological needs:

A case study of public space reconstruction of Wuzhan community. *Art and Design*, (3), 61-64.

- [8] Yuan, S. H., Jiao, W. J. & Chen, K. (2024). Micro-renewal strategy of old urban communities: A case study of Minjianyuan community. *Modern Business Trade Industry*, (4), 250-253.