



## Living Heritage Conservation: from commodity-oriented renewal to culture-oriented and people-centred revival

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Living Heritage is characterized by ‘continuity’, in particular those historic places that are still a ‘living’ part of their community. In China, the mainstream of living heritage conservation is shifting from commodity-oriented renewal to culture-oriented and people-centred revival, which has obviously displayed in many planning practices. This paper centres on the connotation of living heritage and explores its applications approaches through two conservation practices in Nanjing, China. In the first project, the author conceived a brand-new way of protecting and revealing historic streets, named ‘Reflection Alley’. It treats the street as an open museum, utilizing current semi-dismantled remains, providing a stage for dialogues between history and modernity, endowing the historic legacy with a sustainable future. In the second project, a ‘Five-stakeholder Platform’ is set up to support the progressive revitalization of a historic district. Through in-depth community engagement, the design team have developed a three-phase planning guide helping locals to protect and repair their residences thus stimulating the vitality of community life. The paper provides solutions for the implementation of culture-oriented and people-centred revival through the interaction between tangible and intangible parts and the connections to community.

**Keywords:** Living heritage, Heritage conservation, Historic district, Culture-Oriented, People-Centred, Community engagement.

### Introduction

In China, the mainstream of living heritage conservation is shifting from commodity-oriented renewal to culture-oriented plus people-centred revival, which has obviously displayed in many planning practices. This paper will centre on the connotation of living heritage and explore its applications approaches through conservation practices. It firstly introduces the definition of living heritage and its characteristic and major elements, clarifying the relationship between tangible and intangible parts. Afterwards, the paper mentioned the extension and connotation of the concept of ‘cultural heritage’ over the last two decades through a series of authoritative documents issued by some typical international heritage protection and research organizations. Among them the shift of view in living heritage conservation practices is summarized by the author as ‘trends from commodity-oriented renewal to culture-oriented and people-centred revival’. Next, two design practices in Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu Province, China, are taken as examples to illustrate the implementation through the interaction between tangible and intangible parts and the connections to community. Both are innovative ideas and good trials to ameliorate conventional conservation approach. The paper concludes with thoughts on the positive significance of living heritage conservation, highlight on the continuous tracking and management to achieve long term sustainability, and expectation for the further exploration on the balance between commercial interests and original continuity of community.

### Living Heritage and its tangible and intangible continuity

Living Heritage is characterized by ‘continuity’, in particular those historic places that are still a ‘living’ part of their community<sup>1</sup>. Although we do not regard any heritage as ‘dead’, some heritage sites have been occupied by new functions after touristic, economic or social transformation like ‘museumification’. Diversity, continuity and community (three key elements of heritage) are largely overlooked during the process<sup>2</sup>. This kind of conventional conservation approach might indeed bring new vitality to the heritage to prevent isolation from current society, but it also means the connections between community and heritage have been suppressed or even

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<sup>1</sup> Wijesuriya, “Living Heritage: A summary,” ICCROM, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Wijesuriya, “Conservation in Context,” Edizioni Polistampa, 2010.



broken down to some extent<sup>3</sup>. The question that needs to be asked is whether local residents can still enjoy or benefit from the heritage places that have been converted into popular tourist attractions<sup>4</sup>.

Continuity does not mean invariance. It consists of several continuous elements, namely, original functions, community connections, cultural expressions and long-term care. In this context, changes are inevitable and should be embraced as a part of the continuity rather than reduction. Constant evolutions can occur to both tangible and intangible components, such as expansion of existing dwellings to better serve the growth of population, or old customs which have been altered or abandoned with the passage of a generation. Some long-term negative consequences are due to greater emphasis on the fabric and neglect of the living dimensions. From the perspective of sustainable development, the purpose of conservation is not to 'freeze them in time and space as material manifestations', but to ensure functional in the lives of communities<sup>5</sup>.

Tangible and intangible are a unity of opposites, so are tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage. Conventional conservation approach tends to separate them. For the former, especially the historic districts, the most important thing is to protect the texture of the old city formed hundreds of years ago, as well as the streets and alleys with friendly human scale. For the latter, the treasures are actually those real-life memories of the local residents as if had been integrated into their bone marrow and blood. In fact, communities do not compartmentalize heritage as tangible or intangible. It does not make sense to update the material space without considering human needs. Besides, without the tangible carriers like human beings, certain intangible heritages cannot be dependent and vice versa. Therefore, in this paper, the author hopes to integrate the perceived dichotomies through the interaction between tangible and intangible.

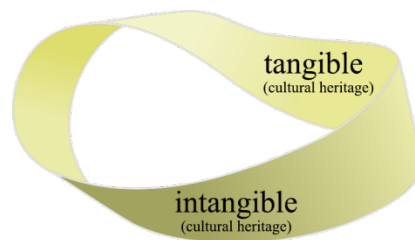


Figure 1: A unity of opposites: tangible (cultural heritage) and intangible (cultural heritage).

### Culture-oriented and people-centred trends

As mentioned before, compared to the success in economic factors, much more attention should be paid to exploring new conservation and management approaches and decision-making processes, based on the continuity of both tangible and intangible elements, to enhance the sustainability of living heritage in communities. The author defines the shift of view in living heritage conservation practices as 'trends from commodity-oriented renewal to culture-oriented and people-centred revival'.

Over the last two decades, the extension and connotation of the concept of 'cultural heritage' have been continuously enriched internationally. In 2001, UNESCO adopted *The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*<sup>6</sup>, on the basis of which new heritage types were emerged, such as cultural landscapes and cultural routes. In 2003, ICCROM launched a programme on Living Heritage Sites to emphasize the living dimensions of heritage sites<sup>7</sup>. In the same year, *The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*<sup>8</sup> was adopted by UNESCO. *The Declaration on the Conservation of Historic Urban Landscapes* was announced in 2005, revised and final adopted in 2011 as a good trial to reconnect the different cultural traditions with socio-economic dynamics that are present in any contemporary city. In 2015, ICCROM developed a community participation programme for promoting '*the People-Centred Approach to Conservation*'.

The change of protection scope in China also shows the similar trends from static objects to living remains, from material elements to a combination of material and non-material elements. The emphasis on living continuity protection of historic districts is also in line with the international concept of sustainable development. Though the current understanding of 'authenticity' has not yet reached a rational attitude, the early blind pursuit of 'modernization' has been largely corrected in China. It is gratifying to note that behaviors like forced demolition

<sup>3</sup> Webber, Tauvinga, "Domboshava Rock Painting Site," 3-10.

<sup>4</sup> Court, Wijesuriya, "People-Centred Approaches," ICCROM, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Wijesuriya, "Living Heritage: A summary," ICCROM, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, "UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity."

<sup>7</sup> Wijesuriya, "Conservation in Context," Edizioni Polistampa, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia, "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage."



of shabby ancient houses or construction of fake antique commercial streets has gradually been abandoned these years. To avoid large-scale demolition and construction, attempts have been made to explore small-scale, progressive and organic renewal approaches.

On one hand, these trends are closely related to the increasing importance of culture as a kind of soft power. Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on Oct. 18, 2017. Xi stressed that cultural confidence represents a fundamental and profound force that sustains the development of a country and a nation. He called for a culture that is sound and people-oriented, that both promotes socialist material wellbeing and raises socialist cultural-ethical standards<sup>9</sup>.

Regarding to the protection of cultural heritage, Xi Jinping pointed out that, 'To meet the people's new aspirations for a better life, we must provide them with rich intellectual nourishment. We will strengthen protection and utilization of cultural relics, and better preserve and carry forward our cultural heritage.' He put forward a vision to let those treasures come alive, for instance, the cultural relics collected in the forbidden palace, the heritages displayed on the vast land, and the characters written in ancient books<sup>10</sup>.

On the other hand, the reason lies in the continuously strengthened bottom-up civil coordinating forces. The implementation of urban planning is a process of 'game and distribution' of the interests of administrative power, civil coordination and market forces<sup>11</sup>. The improvement of the overall quality of citizens contributes to higher attention to public space, public life, and public events. The requirements of most people are usually found in the debate, so as to make a city dynamic and harmonious. This might also be one of the passive reasons for people-centred trend.

This trend is even more pronounced in cities with higher levels of citizen culture, one of which is Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu Province, China. There are nearly fifty colleges and universities in Nanjing, second only to Beijing and Shanghai, together with numerous scientific research institutes and troops. Meanwhile the total population of Nanjing is far below Beijing or Shanghai. Some cutting-edge living heritage protection projects have also emerged under this circumstance in Nanjing. Two practices the author participated in are taken as examples below to illustrate how the culture-oriented and people-centred trends can be implemented through the interaction between tangible and intangible parts.

### **Project 1: conserve intangible heritage in a tangible way**

In the 'Reflection Alley' project, our planning and design team conceived a brand new way of protecting and revealing historic streets. It treats the street as an open museum, utilizing current semi-dismantled remains to provide a stage for dialogues between history and modernity, and endows the historic legacy with a sustainable future.

#### **Core issue of Pingshi Street**

This is a conceptual design proposal for an existing historic street, 'Pingshi Street'. The site is located in the old town of Nanjing, a city recognized as one of the Four Great Ancient Capitals of China, and it is now the second largest city in the East China region<sup>12</sup>.

As a thousand-year-old ancient street, 'Pingshi Street' is actually an alley compared to our current urban scale. In the past, the street was a fusion of culture and business, with many traditional food shops and leather workshops on both sides, most of which are two-story old wooden houses.

In general, streets are often not as 'lucky' as buildings to get a priority, considering more complex interest entanglements and higher renovation costs. For example, Ganxi's Mansion nearby, commonly known as "the ninety-nine and a half rooms" built two hundred years ago, has been restructured into a folk museum and open to the public now<sup>13</sup>. As time goes by, it no longer conforms to the definition of 'living heritage'. The reasons that Ganxi's Mansion can be promptly repaired include not only its great historical value and rare huge scale, but also its relatively independent ownerships and the continuous relocation of original residents.

There was a period of 'tough' time when 'Pingshi Street' underwent partial demolition in 2013, due to the difficulty to repair the wooden structures and the pressure from the rising land price of the old city centre. However, it quickly triggered a strong social debate which forced the demolition to stop.

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<sup>9</sup> Xi Jinping, "Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics."

<sup>10</sup> China Youth Network, "Xi Jinping talked about the protection of cultural heritage."

<sup>11</sup> Southern Weekly, "Urban Construction in Nanjing Progresses in Debate."

<sup>12</sup> Wikipedia, "Nanjing."

<sup>13</sup> People's Daily Online, "Ganxi's Mansion - The ninety-nine and a half rooms."



Afterwards, some houses were designated as sites to be protected for their historical and cultural value at the level of municipality. According to Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics, the principle of keeping these cultural relics in their original state must be adhered to in the repairs and maintenance at the sites and in any removal involving these sites.

However, the other part of the street was still in an awkward situation. For a long time, local residents had to pass by those ruins every day. According to field surveys and interviews with locals, a core issue was raised. Is there an appropriate way to revitalize the street and meet all of the following goals at the same time?

- Keeping the cultural relics in their original state
- Displaying the historical and cultural value of the street
- Reusing the broken walls and wooden structures from the ruins
- Providing vitality for modern community life



Figure 2: Public Space Renovation Plan for Pingshi Street.

#### Tangible 'Reflection Alley' and intangible open museum

Therefore, the planning and design team put forward the concept of 'Reflection Alley', regarding the Pingshi Street as an open museum. No matter tangible or intangible, each historical fragment here is an exhibit. It can be as large as a courtyard or as small as a kettle. It may be a dish of traditional fried dumplings or a piece of



memory told by the elders. In other words, not only the material cultural remains are cherished, but also the memories of local residents will be recalled.

Six potential nodes in Pingshi Street were selected to further develop the detailed plan. Just like the preparation before the display, each historical fragment here went through the cleaning up, appraising and repairing process. In addition to the protection, more efforts had been made to renovate public space and stimulate community vitality. The 'reflection' idea can be perceived in the following ways:

- Transparent materials were used to complement the street interface. It helps to reproduce the original scale and texture of the historic blocks and provide containers for social activities.
- Vertical sections of the architectural structures left over from the demolition were protected by special glass covers. Some old photos of the building were hung on the wall which had an educational subtext.
- The trusses of architectural structure that remained in the site were redesigned and integrated into new communication space.
- If the street facade on one side had been missing, glass was used to reflect the appearance of the other side of the street to reshape the past image.
- To build a landmark at the street entrance reusing those old objects and discarded materials from the site.

In this project, it is the culture-oriented conservation of tangible heritage, which promotes the intangible heritage. It enables the street to 'self-describe', providing a new way of thinking for the conservation of living heritage. Pingshi Street has been revitalized by new vitality and integrated into the contemporary community.

### **Project 2: conserve tangible heritage in an intangible way**

In the Xiaoxihu project a 'Five-stakeholder Platform' is set up to support the progressive revitalization of a historic area. Through in-depth community engagement, our planning and design team have developed a three-phase planning guide helping locals to protect and repair their residences thus stimulating the vitality of community life.

#### **Core issue of Xiaoxihu**

The project site 'Xiaoxihu' is located in the south part of Nanjing inner city. The total area is about 4.69 hectares, with 1,390 households and 2,600 people living there. The value of heritage conservation here lies in its well-preserved traditional street pattern and a large number of traditional Ming and Qing Dwelling houses.

Now the block is among the list of 22 historic townscape conservation areas in Nanjing, which was announced in *Conservation plan of Nanjing historic city, 2010-2020* by municipal government. This plan divided historic areas (selected to be protected) into three protection levels, namely, historic districts, historic townscape conservation areas and general historical areas. Xiaoxihu belongs to the middle protection level, emphasizing both authenticity and flexibility in terms of protection requirements<sup>14</sup>.

The core issue of Xiaoxihu was the contradiction between the dilapidated living conditions and the growing demand for modern life. The per capita living area was less than 12 square meters according to the statistics of 2015. Apart from the high density, another imminent dilemma was the lack of basic living facilities (toilets, bathrooms, sewer system, prevention of roof leakage, etc.). It was imperative to expand the living space intensively, improve the living conditions efficiently, and ultimately enhance the vitality of the community on the basis of inheriting historical features<sup>15</sup>.

The government had organized some investigation and concept planning work about the final vision of this area. However, those ideas were a mere scrap of paper, without practical implementation plan guiding the whole regeneration process<sup>16</sup>. Another reason for the suspension of the ideas was related to the nearby tourist attraction, 'Laomendong'. It had a similar historical background to Xiaoxihu. Driven by consumption culture, this area had undergone a thorough relocation of local residents at the cost of high demolition and reconstruction funds. This kind of commodity-oriented renewal can maximize land benefits in the short term, and meanwhile lead to the depression of the overall living atmosphere of the historic blocks. After comprehensive consideration, the government decided that the Laomendong's mode will no longer be applied to Xiaoxihu. A culture-oriented and people-centred revival approach that would not just consider the material space was waiting to be presented.

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<sup>14</sup> Nanjing Government, "Conservation plan of Nanjing historic city, 2010-2020."

<sup>15</sup> ZOU Jianguo, "The inheritance and development of residential space."

<sup>16</sup> DONG Jia, "From Design to Management."



### Intangible ‘Five-stakeholder Platform’

It was indicated in the guidance note (People-Centred Approaches to the Conservation of cultural heritage: Living Heritage) published by ICCROM in 2016:

*Communities contain capacities and assets that outlast political or professional structures and complement specialist knowledge and skills. Where the relationship between people and heritage has been weakened or broken, a people-centred approach seeks to identify the problems and rectify them. In this context, heritage is seen as having the potential to play an active role in communities and bring benefits to people, thereby demonstrating that heritage is meaningful to society, as well as gaining society’s support for its on-going use and protection.*

The crux of the controversy lied in the fact that individual residents of Xiaoxihu had not formed an organized whole to participate in the coexisting multi-stakeholders’ game with the equal rights to speak. With this in mind, the planning and design team firstly conducted in-depth interviews with 216 property units to stimulate more extensive community involvement. Outputs included a deeper understanding of the specific desire of each household to improve their living standards, as well as an ‘identity file’ with photos and requirements for each property unit. Moreover, we also unearthed some potential community leaders who were willing to speak for the interests of the residents. These above were conducive to providing residents with personalized solutions, predicting the difficulty of advancement and implementation of the follow-up demolition plan, and ultimately strongly guiding the direction of the overall conservation strategy.

Throughout the design process, there were various forms of public participation, such as public exhibitions, cognitive map graffiti events, community open days, and the establishment of social media platform public pages<sup>17</sup>. More often, the exchanges within five stakeholders’ platform were achieved through meetings. A vivid and easy-to-read ‘Five-stakeholder Platform Guidebook’ defined the rights and responsibilities of each party:

- Planning Bureau and other government functional departments are responsible for formulating and interpreting the policies and handling specific policy issues arising during the process.
- Sub-district and Community Neighbourhood Committee undertake a large number of basic tasks such as opinion collection, policy advocacy, and coordinating the specific contradictions in the process.
- The planning and design team communicates directly with the residents, proposes revival plans, answers technical questions of architectural design, and guarantees the goals and effects of the planning implementation.
- The major investor is in charge of the infrastructure construction and the disposal of public housing. Commissioned by government or residents, construction team works according to the architectural design plans.
- With the help of community autonomy organization, local residents can have equal dialogue with other stakeholders and put forward their requirements of the architectural design.



Figure 3: Public exhibition. Figure 4: Community open day. Figure 5: Cognitive map graffiti event.

### Tangible construction guide

The conservation of Xiaoxihu is a continuous process of development. A three-phase, small-scale, progressive construction guide was developed for different types of functional units. In addition, the design team chose a typical site for each type of functional unit for a pilot design.

- In the first phase, most of the work will be carried out to improve people’s livelihoods. It will last for 3 to 5 years to address the issues that local residents are most concerned about, such as improving infrastructure,

<sup>17</sup> XU Yiran, “Participatory urban design methods.”



adding toilets and kitchens, etc. The reserved and some newly added public service spaces will start renovation or construction in the form of government co-ordination. Residents can freely choose whether to accept compensation for demolition and move at any time. With reference to the style guide, residents can independently update relatively good residential units. Community autonomy organizations are still in the process of nurturing and the five-stakeholder platform has not yet been completed<sup>18</sup>.

- During the second phase, the five-stakeholder platform is established, on the basis of which all types of functional units will be built. The whole process is estimated to take 5 to 7 years. Government will mainly promote the construction of public service space and the conservation of historic buildings. Correspondingly, the renovation of general dwelling units is led by community autonomy organizations. Once a consensus has been reached among residents sharing the same house, they can seek help from the five-stakeholder platform and apply for the permit. Reaching the consensus as soon as possible gives priority to improving their dwellings.

- The third phase is expected to take another 3 to 5 years, focusing on the joint updating of the general dwelling units. The five-stakeholder platform undergoes constant adjustment and improvement while the construction and renovation of public space have ended. Inevitably, there will be some groups that do not reach consensus and will continue to negotiate abided by the principle of residents' free will and five-stakeholder consensus.

In summary, the Xiaoxihu project itself was an innovative attempt of collaborative planning, achieving a full range of social mobilization, and gaining in-depth design results and extensive social influence. The most precious intangible heritage here is the residents themselves and their lifestyle, which is the core of the conservation of living heritage. The intangible people-centred approach helps to give equal respect to different stakeholders, particularly safeguard the interests of disadvantaged communities, avoid potential conflicts, and ultimately achieve a smooth conservation of tangible heritage.

By the end of 2017, the first phase of work has made some progress in accordance with the guide. A pilot part of the municipal common ditch is under construction. Some buildings planned to become public service spaces in the future are expropriated under the premise of respecting the wishes of residents and property owners.

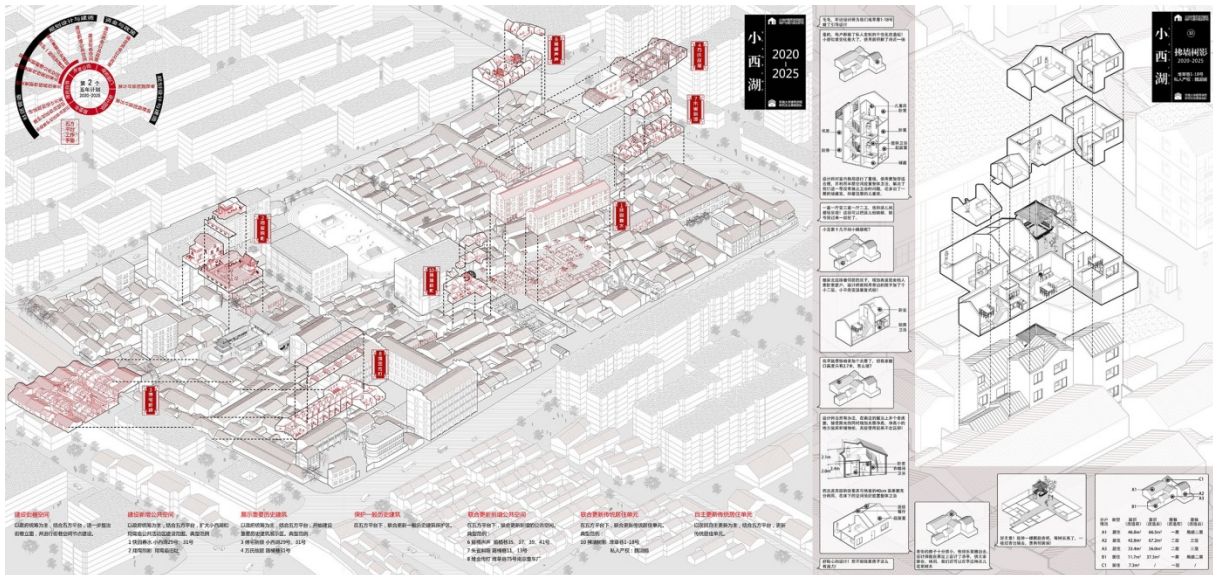


Figure 6: Construction guide for different types of functional units for Xiaoxihu.

### Conclusions

Living heritage is defined as a heritage place maintains its original function and connects with community. Its essential characteristic, 'continuity', does not mean invariance, but is accompanied by changes in both tangible and intangible components. Over the last two decades, protection scope of 'cultural heritage' has been continuously enriched worldwide. UNESCO and ICCROM put more emphasize on sustainable development in terms of economic, environmental and social factors, and the living dimensions and community involvement of heritage sites, to reconnect the different cultural traditions with socio-economic dynamics that are present in any

<sup>18</sup> ZOU Jianguo, "The inheritance and development of residential space." essential



contemporary city. In China, especially in the cities with higher levels of citizen culture, shows the similar trends shifting from commodity-oriented renewal to culture-oriented and people-centred revival in living heritage conservation practices. There are two main reasons for these trends: the increasing importance of culture as a kind of soft power at the top-down level, and the continuously strengthened bottom-up civil coordinating forces.

From the two projects (Pingshi Street and Xiaoxihu) introduced above, one can easily perceive the gratifying progress from conventional conservation methods separating material and non-material parts, to new small-scale, progressive and organic revival approaches with tangible and intangible interactions. Whether the starting point is 'tangible' or 'intangible', the ultimate goal is to achieve long term sustainability in safeguarding heritage and its hidden culture with an empowered community engaged in decisions made for them and their heritage, which is the real motivation for advocating culture-oriented and people-centred revival in the process of protecting living heritage. The systematically approaches of living heritage can be seen in the ICCOM guidance note *People-Centred Approaches to the Conservation of cultural heritage: Living Heritage, 2016*, from which one may have a deeper understanding of living heritage.

More efforts should be placed on the continuous tracking and management of living heritage. After all, there is no end or a simple completion to maintain the vitality of community and reach the harmonious coexistence with society. Besides, the economic or commercial interests mentioned above are not unimportant as well. They are indispensable sources for the restoration work and need to be considered. In the context of this article, the emphasis is on the perception of a comparatively more noteworthy issue. In fact, how to balance economic interests and original continuity of community is also a problem that needs further exploration.

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### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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### Image sources

Figure 1: Conceptual diagram made by XU Yiran (the author).

Figure 2: Design Proposal for Pingshi Street project made by XU Yiran, YUAN Man, SHEN Bowen, and LYU Mingyang, Southeast University, China, 2015.

Figure 3-5: Photograph by ZOU Jianguo, 2015.

Figure 6: Design Proposal for Xiaoxihu project made by urban design team, Southeast University, China, 2015.