

Cultural Approach to Planning of Inner City Regeneration

- A Case Study of Nanluogu Alley in Beijing

1. INTRODUCTION

At the advent of the 21st century, culture emerges as a key force to promote urban development worldwide. In the western cities, the perfect combination of historical heritage and contemporary art has provided a new cultural-leading path for inner city regeneration¹. In the transition period in Chinese inner Cities, however, although the physical environment appears vanishing through large scale redevelopment, the lost of urban spirit cannot be make up any longer. So, a wan Nostalgia mood pervades in the air of urban China, lingering in Shichahai of Beijing, Xintiandi of Shanghai or Hefangjie of Hangzhou². But could the urban culture with thousands of history just inhabit in these places?

Since World War II, the planning pattern of western inner cities is undergoing the change from large scale reconstruction, gradual renewal to social cared and cultural led regeneration³. While the “truck-style” cleaning-up is criticized widely, “American dream” began to attract a large amount of population moving out of inner city to the green and idyllic suburb in the 1970s, which induces inner city decay and urban sprawl⁴. With the return of humanism in the 1990s, it’s even more important to protect local history and to continue local cultural context in revitalizing the inner city. In Europe and North America, there’re many successful cases on cultural-led urban regeneration⁵.

In China, since the economic reform in 1978, the inner city of China benefits from the historical heritage and traditional cultural undertakings, and gradually rises as multi-cultural mixed areas⁶. At the same time, some historical neighborhood was torn down under the title of “dangerous and old house reconstruction”, but the traditional houses are not dangerous or old actually⁷.

Since the late 1990s, it’s popular to redevelop the historical areas as tourism attractions, under the slogan “reestablish the old as ancient (*xiu jiu ru jiu*)” as a vividly description⁸. However, this approach emphasizes the buildings themselves, but neglects the local residents and business as the matrix of culture.

Under the background above, how to solve these problems and realize inner city regeneration becomes a hot issue challenging the planning filed globally. In this sense, the implication of cultural approach to inner city regeneration is not only lies in promoting the revitalization of urban centre, but also lies in preventing the urban sprawl in the suburb⁹.

2. CASE STUDY AND METHOD

2.1 Alley Nanluogu in Beijing

Select Alley Nanluogu in Beijing as the case study of the regeneration planning. Alley Nanluogu is located to the southeast to Tower Building, which is the center of inner

city. The 770 meters long and 741 years old alley used to be the busiest market in Yuan and Ming dynasty (Fig.1). Included into the historical protection area, Alley Nanluogu is thought to have the most complete form, most abundant heritage and richest culture.

Besides the dense historical milieu, the contemporary culture is also very prosperous. A group of high-level national cultural undertakings locate here, including the Central Academy of Drama, China Drama Theater, Rainbow Children's Theater et al. In the transition period, more than 50 café and bars emerges along the alley as cultural interaction spaces, which makes cultural buzz become thicker and thicker (Fig. 2).

However, there're also some problems involving in Alley Nanluogu like lay off or residents, poor living conditions and decay of traditional industries. Facing these problems, it's urgent to regenerate the old alley and save it out of the edge of decline.

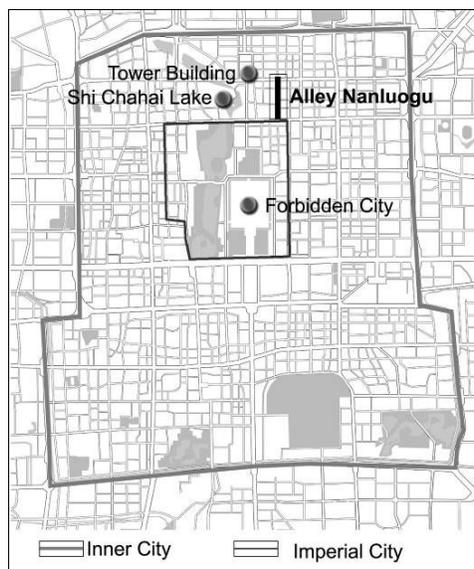


Fig.1 the Location of Nanluogu Alley in Beijing

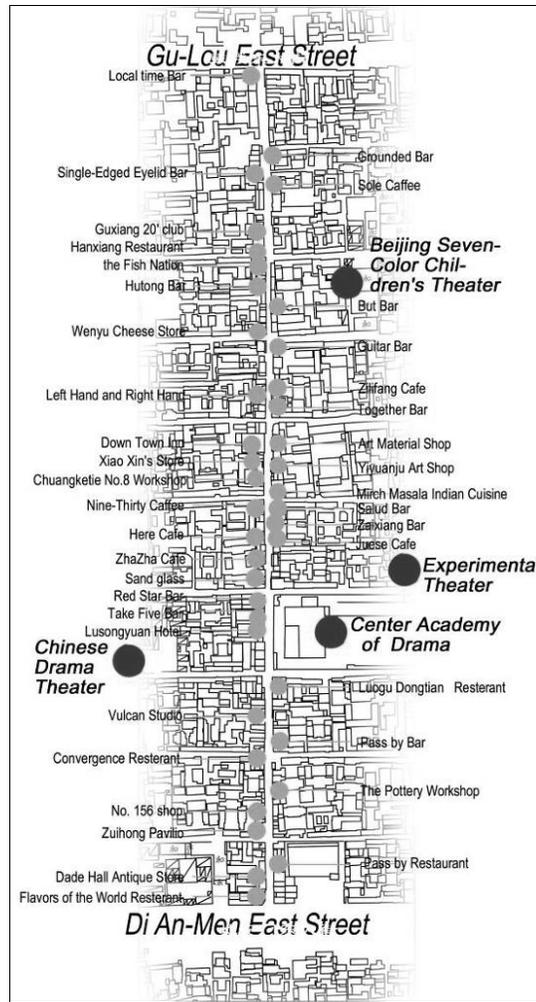


Fig.2 the Cultural Facilities and Interaction Spaces Surrounding Nanluogu Alley

2.2 Cultural Regeneration Planning: A Theoretical Framework Suitable in China

Focusing on the target of inner city regeneration, this framework comprises of three sector- cultural carriers, physical environment and cultural network, and includes micro, meso and macro three levels (Fig.3). The relationship between the three sectors is as follows: First, human as cultural carriers will play an active and core role. Second, physical environment will found a substantial base, upon which cultural network will provide social support. Third, physical environment can influence the value forming of cultural carriers, and cultural network can play as an aggregative force by activities organization.

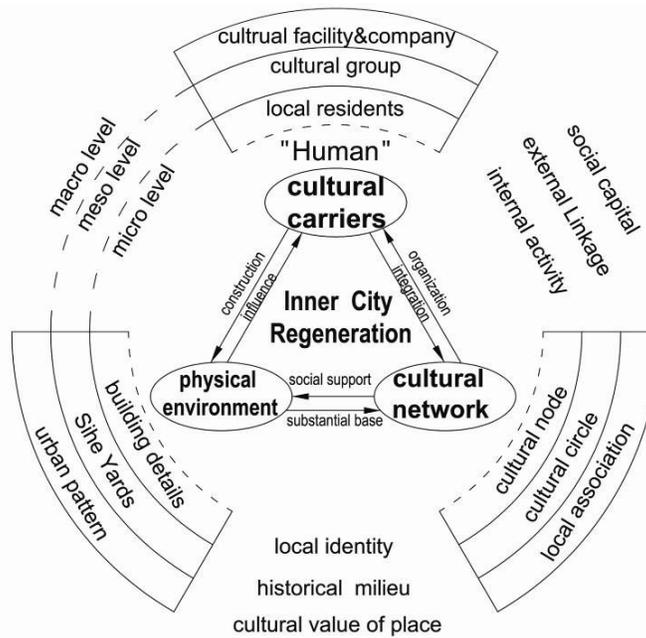


Fig.3 Theoretical Framework of Cultural Approach to Regeneration Planning

3. PLANNING RESPONSE STRATEGES

3.1 Multi-Cooperation of Cultural Carrier: Local Identity and Common Target

The cooperation of multi-culture will form a solid foundation in participation and fulfillment of planning. First of all, cultural entities and their characters should be identified. In the case study, the cultural entities include local residents, culture group and cultural facilities or companies (Fig.4). Among them, local residents bear the local original culture, which make them become the key component of humanism environment. And Cultural groups delegate "sub-culture" of place, which is beneficial to the diversity of cultural. Then, cultural facilities or companies (F&C) usually seek profit out of the cultural consumption, and they may either play positive or negative roles. All the above cultural entities should send representatives to involve into the regeneration planning and express their opinions.

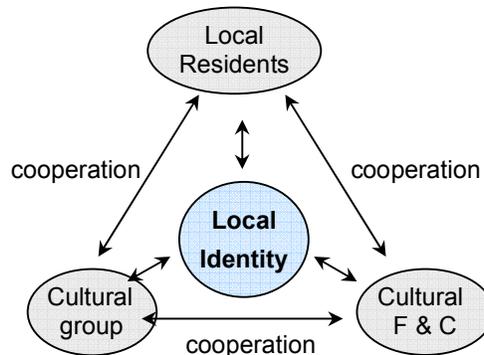


Fig.4 Multi-Culture Cooperation Framework

Secondly, based on the cooperation framework above, local identity can be literally

condensed as “*The heart of city, Hutong from Yuan dynasty, Sihe-Yard of traditional style, space for cultural*”. These words identify the local cultural from four aspects: the geometry centre location in the city, the urban pattern left from Yuan Dynasty, the traditional residential house forms, and the cultural contained in the sense of place.

Thirdly, in the cooperation framework, the common target of regeneration is decided. 1) Protect the local historical and cultural milieu as integrity. 2) Respect the diversity of multi-culture, and create more interaction spaces for them. 3) Seek way to combine the cultural and economical development together. 4) Mobilize the collective activities and strengthen the support of local social capital.

3.2 Physical Environment Strategies: The Protect of local Historical Milieu

Physical environment strategies emphasize protecting the integrity and authority of local historical milieu. Specifically, they include the following levels.

Firstly, the urban pattern in macro level should be strictly protected. The Hutongs (lanes) distribute parallel along Alley Nanluogu like a shape of “fish bones”, indicating the building block structure dating to Yuan Dynasty (Fig. 5). It should be preserved as the live fossil illustrating the fragment of ancient urban space configuration. It prevents any occupation of the Hutong space.

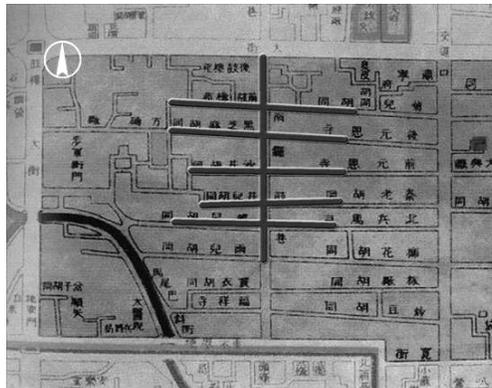


Fig. 5 the Fish-bones Shaped Urban Pattern of Alley Nanluogu

Secondly, the Sihe Yards in the meso level should be protect, repair, re-decorate or clear according to different situation. It aims at changing mess and dense yards into the traditional courtyard texture, and adding the friendly interaction surface along the alley (Fig. 6). The specific responding measures are depending on the ownership, current status and the natural element nearby. 1) For private buildings, both traditional and modern styled ones will be preserved, the discordant ones should be re-decorate by governmental finance, and the temporary ones and ancillary structures will be torn down with governmental compensation. 2) For public buildings, traditional ones will be preserved, modern styled ones will be repair both inside and outside, the temporary ones and ancillary structures will be torn down with no compensation. 3) For semi-public house under Work Unit charge, is similar to private house expect that the funding to repair, re-decorate and compensate is paid by the government, Work Unit and residents together.

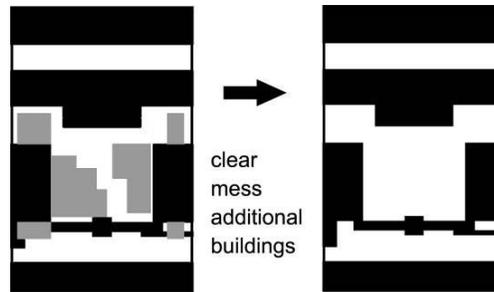


Fig.6 Changing Mess Yards Back to Traditional Texture of Sihe-Yard

Thirdly, the façade, contour and other details in the micro level should be controlled by guidelines. According to customs in Beijing, the buildings would mostly be one floor, in order to prevent the sight intrusion on privacy. Following local customs, it advocates the protection on height of new buildings, the control over current contour and the remove of temporary second floor layers. Meanwhile, guidelines provide detail suggestions and rule on roof, walls, doors, windows and billboards particularly and flexibly. Besides, a special funding for environment improvement is established for the fulfillment of these guidelines.

3.3 Cultural Network Strategies: The Social Support of Local Association

In addition to historical milieu, social network is also very important in regeneration planning. In the case study of Alley Nanluogu, local association provides various services, develops moral norms and manages individual interests through functional reorganization, thus strengthen the support of social network.

1) The foundation and background

The local association was found in 2006, whose predecessor is the alumni of Central Academy of Drama. To improve the cultural leading role of local association, planners and government officials reorganize and reconstruct the local association by providing more financial, human capital and technology resources.

By the beginning of 2008, there're already more than 40 bars, cafes, tea rooms, book stores and other kind of cultural-related shops along the alley enrolled into the association, which counting for more than half of the total numbers. Local association promotes cultural interaction by regular gathering and various activities, and fulfils the agreement commonly reached by the relationship in the social network (Fig.7).



Fig.7 Spatial Organization Form of the Local Association

2) The structure and configuration

Highlighting the importance of local roots, the residents, culture group and cultural facilities or companies are encouraged to participate into the local association. Through management adjustment, the president is chosen from the managers of the shops along the alley, while the secretary and coordinators are from chosen the local government and residents.

In the organizational structure, the local association consists of a variety of cultural circles and cultural nodes as a network (Fig 8). The cultural node usually emerges near the cultural facilities providing cultural interaction space, such as bars and cafes. And focusing on a certain theme, these nodes assemble into a cultural circle spontaneously (Figure 8).

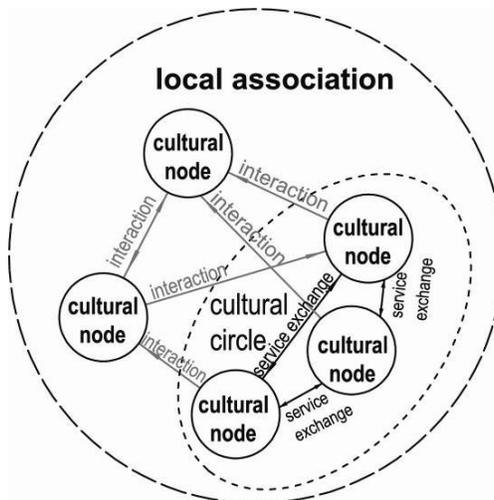


Fig. 8 Organizational Structure of the Local Association

It's advocated by the local association in the regeneration planning that the local cultural elements can be transferred into cultural nodes, thus to promote the communication between multi-culture. For example, the Sihe Yard can be a node in forms of home stay or private museum. Figure 9 illustrates the cultural interaction between local residents and other cultural groups through arranging a variety of activities in a day. This brings the cultural interaction from street surface into the inner yards, enlarging the depth of cultural intercourse.

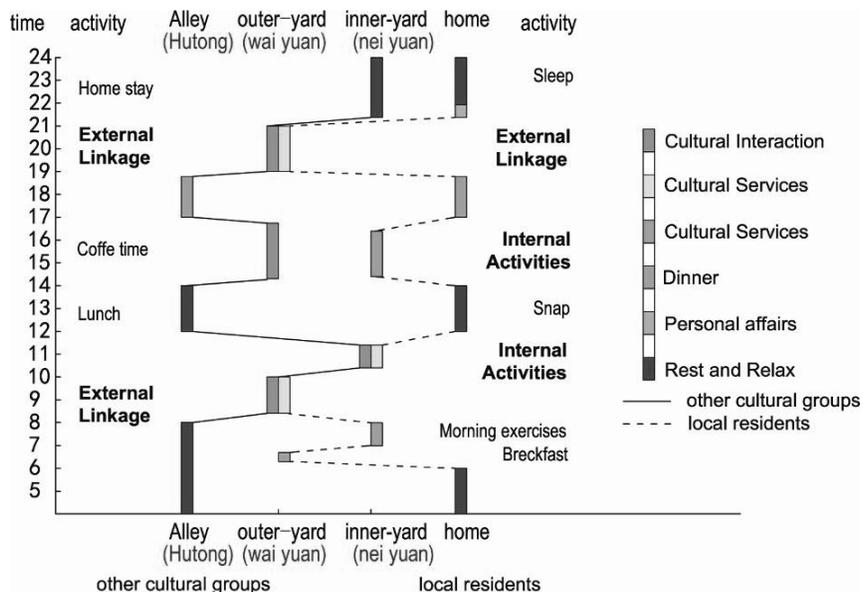


Fig.9 Colorful Activities in Sihe Yard in a Day as a Culture Node

3) Internal Activities Organization

Through frequent internal activities within the local association, the network density of social capital gets thicker and thicker. During this progress, the main activities are service exchange and interests management among the cultural circles.

On one hand, inside a cultural circle, the nodes will form an alliance to exchange services or commodities based on the specialty and the division along the cultural linkage. Via service exchange, the cultural nodes focus on a limited work and play their best, thus saving the high cultural training cost. For example, a traditional snack shop, a minority music studio, a paper-cut store and a local clothing shop under the same nostalgia style of old Beijing may form an alliance, which makes it available for customs to appreciate the samples of local paper-cut and clothing and to enjoy the local music while dining. The service exchange behaviors connect various cultural nodes together, and draw the externality within the cultural circle (Fig. 8).

On the other hand, the local association will coordinate interest among different cultural circles, through supervision of business behavior and common interest lobbying. For example, the local association promotes the cultural activities differentiation on theme and time: Zha-Zha Café calls together the poets every Monday night, the Luogu Cave restaurant organizes English corner every Tuesday and Thursday night, Sandglass Café holds a mini-music promulgate meeting every Friday and Xiaoxin Bar holds the photographers salon every Sunday.

4) External Linkage and Collective Activity

In addition to internal activities, the local association also emphasizes seeking chance to embed the local network into global culture network. Among this, collective procurement is a typical behavior promoted by the local association, to cope with the risk of individual cultural investment. By collective procurement, global cultural service standard is imperceptibly accepted by the local shops, and at the same time local culture will be cognized and earn fame worldwide.

Collective procurement can be depicted as the progress that local association on behalf of the shops, order to and negotiate with the suppliers collectively. It can be divided into three steps, which include collect orders – transact and pick up – inform to distribute. While sharing of the benefit of low price, the shops also achieve the quality control of raw materials and maintain fixed linkage with supplies (Fig.10). For example, the group A will procure special Tibetan Perfumes, group B will procure expensive Blue Mountain coffee together, and group C procure recycle packages which are daily used. The coordinator of local association will responsible for avoiding and punishing the flee-out behavior, and helping to connect the transfer of redundant procurement.

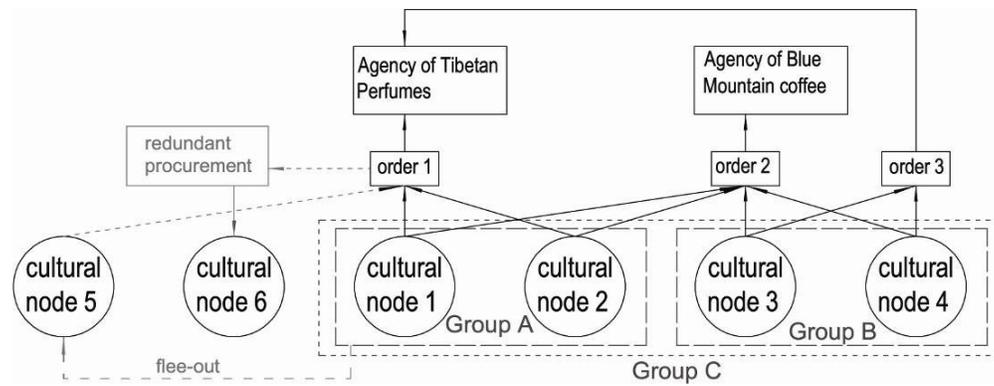


Fig. 10 the Collective Procurement of Cultural Raw Materials

4. CONCLUSIONS

As the case study of Alley Nanluogu shows above, this paper illustrates the cultural approach to inner city regeneration in China. This approach distinguishes itself by highlighting the value of the matrix of local cultural, and extending the boundary of planning field from designing the physical environment to reconstruction of local cultural network.

Through two years efforts, many achievements have been reached in the progress of culture regeneration, so that the local residents and other cultural entities can share the benefit of planning. Firstly, the living environment of local residents has been improved. Secondly, the local historical and cultural milieu gets thicker, calling the deep memory from the heart of place. Thirdly, the local association forms a social network to promote cultural linkages, which organizes the cultural nodes and circles and then embeds the local culture into global network.

However, there're some unpredictable factors challenging in the path of regeneration. For example, some managers of cultural facility overestimate the economical profit, and ignore the value of local culture. Besides, while enjoying the benefits of regeneration, some of the local residents began to ask more and more housing rent, which makes it more and more difficult to maintain present cultural activities. At the same time, some officials' own wishful thinking of changing this alley into a sheer commercialized street, may also ruin the local sense of place. This underlying crisis brings up new issues to the research on inner city regeneration in future.

In conclusion, the planning in China cities in the transition period can't neglect long history and rich culture depositing in the inner city. The implication of culture approach to inner city regeneration is lines in that it merges the spirit of local culture in to the urban landscape, and illustrates the role of planning in reconstruction of urban culture. It is believed that the China cities with history of more than a thousand years will distinguish themselves by renaissance in urban cultural in the 21st century. And through regeneration of inner city, citizens in China will not lose the spirit of city in the rapid development and redevelopment, will not replay the tragedy of "death and life of great Chinese cities¹⁰", and will not be reduced to Lost in Paradise¹¹.

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