THE CULTURAL REGENERATION OF HISTORICAL DISTRICT:
RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION OF THE THEORY OF URBAN REVITALIZATION IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF URBAN CATALYST

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ABSTRACT: The renewal of historical district is one of the significant issues in China’s current urban design. In recent years, the Chinese historical districts have been faced with the problem of physical degradation as well as the functional declination, and accompanying with it, is the question of how to carry on the traditional history and culture. The research of the present paper, based on urban catalyst theory, aims at the revitalization of historical district, and concentrates on the regeneration of neighborhood cultural vitality. The research attempts to set up a sustainable renewal mechanism for historical neighborhood and tries to find a way of renovation which is suitable for historical districts, and which pays more attention to the inheritance of historical neighborhood cultural environment and the maintenance of interpersonal relationships instead of to be a predetermined route. This requires the integration effect of urban design, in order that the historical neighborhood is revitalized, and the cultural regeneration for sustainability in historical neighborhood could be fulfilled.

KEYWORDS: cultural strategies for sustainability, urban regeneration, historical district, urban catalyst, cultural revitalization

Historical district is an integral part of the city, it not only reflects the city’s traditional values, but is also a witness of the city’s long-term development. However, while the modern cities are growing by leaps and bounds, historical urban districts are often faced with problems of slow development and gradual degradation, in some of the areas pieces of historical architectures are demolished, and other districts are withering away at a astonishing speed. In this case, to adopt a new mode of protecting historical district has become essential. The renewal of historical district, in particular, the regeneration of traditional neighborhood has turned to be a significant part of China’s urban design.

1 DISCUSSION OF THE REGENERATION PATTERNS OF URBAN HISTORICAL DISTRICTS

1.1 Problems of Chinese urban historical district

The current Chinese historical districts are confronted with problems from three aspects, the aging of physical environment, the insufficiency of services and facilities, and the decline of neighborhood culture. Due to the long life span, the considerable length of service and lack of maintenance, the exterior and interior quality of the buildings in historical districts are significantly decreasing, while the long-established unauthorized constructions have severely affected neighborhoods’ living environment. At the same time, the population in historical districts has experienced a large increase, leading to a lack of services and facilities which could meet the needs of modern life. Based on this, the destruction of community stability and safety
brought by the demolition of historical architectures, as well as the conflict with the original neighborhood culture which created by the emergence of non-native populations, both have accelerated the disintegration of traditional cultural life circle, which virtually led to the loss of traditional culture.

1.2 Discussion of the regeneration patterns of urban historical districts

At present, the research on the renewal of historical district mainly focus on the restoration of urban textures, the replacement of neighborhood programs, and the reinterpretation of traditional spaces, which is the physical renewal and functional renewal. The former is an environment updates, which is through the reformation of original land and space structure and the renewal of infrastructure and environment quality to improve the overall physical environment of historical districts and to promote economic development. For example, Bruges, Belgium completely preserved the historical buildings and unique style of traditional culture of European medieval city, and has created a pleasant living environment. Functional renewal is through the program replacement, to give new identity of the neighborhood, to change the original social structure of the area and to attract external finances, in this way, the neighborhood could be revitalized while preserving its historical memory. A good example is the Xintiandi, in the city of Shanghai. The project adopted a new updating mode, which is to preserve the external appearance of the original neighborhood, yet transform the internal structure and function, and entrust with it a new commercial value. The project is successful and has led to a renewal of the whole area.

However, the existing renewal mode of historical district also bears disadvantages; it pays more attention on physical and functional renewal but provides less concern on maintaining the vitality of neighborhood and protecting the lifestyle of original inhabitants. After long-term evolution, the traditional neighborhood has formed a stable society ecosystem; the transformation of physical space will result in great changes of neighborhood relationships, social structures, production and life styles. In the current transformation processes of the old cities in China, the blind-reconstruction developing methods as well as the over-commercial operations, have caused the breakdown of traditional neighborhoods, the damage of urban cultural space, the split of historical contexts, and thus have generated the features of “thousands cities one face”, which Wu Liangyong referred as the “identity crisis” of Chinese cities. Therefore, in order to improve the features of historical districts and to promote neighborhood development while maintaining the stability of current communities, the innovations of urban design theory and practice is urgently required.

2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF URBAN REGENERATION THEORY AND THE ANALYSIS OF URBAN CATALYST THEORY

2.1 Development and evolvement of urban regeneration theory after World War II

After World War II, in order to fight against the gradual decline of the residential area in the city centre, the States and several European countries started to carry on large-scale reconstructions and comprehensive developments, which mainly focused on the transformation and reconstruction of urban infrastructures and the physical environment of the historical districts. After 1970s, with the reformation of urban economy and the adjustment of social structures, the urban centre was falling and the original residential area was replaced by mega-buildings and open spaces; the middle class gradually moved to the suburbs, leaving the poor and a small amount of the rich in the centre, and thus resulted in the disintegration of traditional communities, which actually aggravated the problems intended to be solved. Into the 1990s, in the wake of the rapid
development of the post-industrial economy and the growing demand of people’s spiritual needs of history, culture, leisure and travelling, as well as the introduction of the concept of sustainable development, the renewal of historical districts “changed from the protection of individual buildings to conservation areas and rapidly developed from a straightforward and restrictive concern with preservation to a concern with revitalization and enhancement.”

The current urban historical district renewal theory regard the update process as a continues process, which require to maintain the local culture tradition, compared to the previous theories, it stress that the realization of the social and economic goals should be based on the interrelationships between humans and environment, rather than purely physical environment transformation, it is a integrated approach to deal with the old city problems.

2.2 Propose of urban catalyst theory and guidance to regeneration of historical district

Among the present urban historical district renewal theories, American scholars, Wayne Attoe and Donn Logan, proposed the concept of urban catalysts, which provide a unique respect of observing and thinking urban problems. Urban catalysts theory considers the interrelationship of various urban elements as a chemical reaction process; it focuses on the design of urban developing process instead of urban developing result. The urban catalysts theory believes that the city should have “A sequence of limited, achievable visions, each with the power to kindle and condition other achievable visions. This would be urban catalysis.” It concentrates on the essential elements of urban development that is the catalysts which could set up other actions. This essential factor could be architecture entity, yet could also be significant urban activities and construction trend. Thinking of the theory of urban catalysts to be the initiation of the research for the historical district renewal could reveal the inherent law of historical district, and in this way, the concern for historical district renewal could shift from entity to relationship and from isolation to interrelation.

3 CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE HISTORIC DISTRICT

Culture is the thinking, ideas and customs formed by a group within a certain period of time, as well as all the activities generated by the collective consciousness of the group. The general definition of culture not only includes tangible culture, which is the sensible, material culture entity, but also contains intangible culture, that is, folk customs as well as behaviors and activities with distinctive national, regional characteristics. Australian scholar Jon Hawkes develops the three pillars theory of economy, society and environment sustainability, and puts forward the idea of cultural sustainability. Cultural sustainability refers to the possibility of the community to create cultural process. City and neighborhood provide carrier and object for cultural creation, and cultural creation continuously enrich the spiritual content of city and neighborhood, the mutual influence between them promote the sustainable development of culture and urban community. Liang Sicheng said, in the history the culture of each nation has produced its own architectures. It is the unceasing passing on and changing of the culture, which enables the constant developing and evolving of the architecture and the city while retaining its unique regional characteristic and spiritual identity.

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In China, the historical district is not only faced with problems of physical aging and functional decline, but also with difficulties in carrying on traditional culture. The current urban regeneration used to take action from physical and functional aspects, yet accompanying with it, is the dispossession of context while the physical form of the historical architecture and district is preserved, and what happening at the same time, is the loss of original inhabitants and neighborhood vitality. Beijing Qianmen Street is a commercial street with long history, there was once clustered with a large number of time-honored old Beijing brands. However, during neighborhood renewal process, only the archaized forms have been paid attention to, but the interactive between customs and the original shops has been neglected, in addition to the over economy-oriented policy, a mass of old brand shops moved away from Qianmen area for the unreasonable rent cost and have been replaced by a few fashion shops. Without hawkers and jugglers, the lack of local features engender the tourists a cursory looking, shops fall into recession and the bustling scene of the past has gone. Tiesdell indicates, “the vitality and animation of the historic quarter therefore needs to be ‘authentic’ rather than contrived or prettified; a ‘genuine’ working, functioning quarter that is naturally animated rather than a theatrical stageset with actors hired from central casting.”

The historical district is not an isolated system, in historical district, the society, economy and culture form a complex relationship, each of these elements interact as both cause and effect, to renewal the district simply from only one side could hard to be effective. In particular, for the vitality of historical district, it depends on the balance among strong business, healthy environment and good quality of life. At present, the renewal of historical district in Unite States and European countries also have transformed from the renovation of single objective to the comprehensive solutions of regional issues, and also have stressed on the conservation of neighborhood vitality. Since the 1990s, the theory of urban regeneration has received additional significance. Urban regeneration focuses on the integral revival of society, economy and environment, in which culture plays a key role. In the urban regeneration of certain UK cities, culture-led regeneration has been regarded as a economic method to create more job opportunities and more points of growth for the revival of old towns. Culture, as the catalyst of traditional district, could help to improve living environment, increase neighborhood vitality, promote the development of business and tourism, and to bring positive effect to surrounding area. Meanwhile, culture-led policy could enhance the self-assurance of the community, encourage the development of neighborhood culture and the recovery of neighborhood communication, and thus, to push forward the sustainable development of the city.

4 REGENERATION PATTERNS OF HISTORICAL DISTRICT CATALYZED BY CULTURE

Kevin Lynch, in the book *Good City Form*, summed up five points for a good city, which is vitality, sense, fit, access, and control, and among these, to create vitality is a significant object for both urban design and urban regeneration. *The Theory of City Form Vitality* explains the city vitality system from the methods of system theory, it points out that city vitality includes economic life, social life and culture life, and culture is the inner requirement of city vitality. Speaking of historical district, only when neighborhood vitality is maintained, the physical renewal and functional renewal could be properly carried out, and the traditional spirit and cultural memory could be carried on. Wu Liangyong has said, “(Urban planning) could not only focus on architectures, it should be more problem-oriented, and derives the strategies for urban culture development from the deep structure of culture.” Therefore, to revive the vitality of historical district, to

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find an integral solution for historical district development, culture is an important catalytic factor. Culture-catalyzed regeneration contains following strategies:

4.1 Historical district regenerations taking cultural industry as catalyst

In the post-industry era, cultural industry has become a considerable growth point of urban development. Urban managers and developers, take cultural industry as precursor, plan art exhibition, cultural tourism and even city festival, as a way of urban regeneration to attract visitors and investments. Especially in the renewal of historical district, culture and art has been introduced into neighborhood, combined with commercial and offices, to replace the declined urban functions by new cultural and economic activities.

Glasgow could be considered as an illustrative example of how European cities regenerate urban district through cultural industry. In history, Glasgow is an industrial city primarily based on shipbuilding industry, yet it had gradually declined in the industry restructure after World War II. Government and planning department had taken various methods and policies to restore the vitality of city centre, including the construction of social housing, the redistribution of central city population, etc. However, none of these measures had fundamentally solved the problems of traditional industry transformation and rehabilitation. In 1983, the municipality of Glasgow launched a far-reaching urban movement: Glasgow’s Miles Better, which is to take advantage of the restoration and reconstruction of historical culture facilities, holding various cultural events and conferences to attract external finances and talents. During this period of time, Glasgow constructed and transformed a number of important art and cultural buildings, such as Theatre Royal, Burrell Collection and excellent works built by Charles Mackintosh, all of these have become gathering place for local cultural activities. In 1990, Glasgow won the title of European capital of culture. In the following years, Glasgow has defined cultural industry as the catalyst of historical district regeneration, continued to attract local and external participations and investments through large-scale cultural projects and historical cultural districts. In addition, the promotion of city image has also enhanced locals’ sense of pride and recognition of the historical and cultural value of the city.

The regenerations of historical districts of Glasgow, taking cultural industry as catalyst, have greatly improved its city image, however, there are certain limitations in this cultural-led movement, the movement favored in large-scale cultural projects and exhibitions, but paid quite limit attention to the continuation of traditional culture and the encourage of folk art works, while the promotion of city image benefited tourists and investors, local residents got few substantial interests. At present, there are also several Chinese cities which boast historical district featured by cultural industry, for example, Shuyuanmen area in Xi’an, and Italian style area (former Italian concession) in Tianjin. However, these projects, more often than not, are actually commercial and tourism developments in the name of cultural industry, the developments, to a certain extent, could maintain the feature of historical district, but it could not really solve the problem of vitality declination. Therefore, the cultural continuity of historical district should be paid more attention to, in order to give it new vitality.

4.2 Regeneration taking tangible heritage as catalyst

UNESCO, in the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, subdivides culture heritage as tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage. Tangible cultural heritage, usually defined as physical cultural heritage, includes buildings and historic places, monuments, artifacts, etc., that are considered worthy of preservation for the future.

The tangible cultural heritage, especially historical architectures, is the long-time distillation of the
imagination and creativity of refined culture. At present, the cities are flooded with modern architectures composed of standard components and made by industrial constructions, compared to this, historical buildings are more of the reflection of superb craftsmanship and diverse artistic styles, and also the art and cultural values of historical buildings are more recognized by the public. In 1976, UNESCO in the Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas pointed out that, “Protection and restoration should be accompanied by revitalization activities. These (new) functions should answer the social, cultural and economic needs of the inhabitants without harming the specific nature of the area concerned. A cultural revitalization policy should make historic areas centers of cultural activities and give them a central role to play in the cultural development of the communities around them.”

In recent years, with the impact of the idea of urban regeneration, the protection of architectural heritages is no longer merely simple restoration; it integrates into people’s daily life by the means of reuse, and works for urban construction as well as the revival of historical districts.

Tate Modern is one of London’s landmark buildings; its collection comprises works of outstanding artists in the 20th century. The museum is located in an old industrial area at the south bank of Thames River, and is based in the former Bankside Power Station. When the power station moved, only the original steel structure systems and brick walls are retained. In 1999, Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron reconstructed the building. The new museum reinforces the existing structure and makes full use of its industrial space; the huge boiler room becomes exhibition and communication space, and also includes the entrance hall and main circulation space. On the top, the additional two-storey café make it possible to enjoy the scenery of the River Thames, its glass roof also provides good lighting for the museum. The top of the large chimney has been transformed in a light installation “Swiss Light” by artist Michael Crage-Martin, and it also becomes a famous city night view of London.

The successful transformation of Tate Modern has a significant impact on the renovation of the surrounding industrial area, and the new expansion project which will be complete before London Olympics will pump more vitality throughout the region. “People will be able to cross the Thames, walk through the existing Tate Modern and Turbine Hall, and out onto the new plaza. From there direct paths continue into the heart of Southwark – helping to connect this whole area to the South Bank and the City beyond, and providing the catalyst for the further regeneration of this whole area.”

Take the historical and artistic value of historical architectures as an urban catalyst, the regeneration of the area could be more effective, the neighborhood vitality is increased and at the same time, the cultural connotations and historical memory of the community is fully protected. In the city, the contrast between buildings of different periods, various forms and styles could better display their diversity and uniqueness. Mumford, in the Culture of Cities, said that “By the diversity of its structures, the city in the past escapes the tyranny of a single present, and the monotony of a future that consists in repeating only a single beat heard in the past.”

When western countries takes the reconstruction and reuse of historical architectures as the chance to revive the vitality of historical neighborhood, the similar practices also happen in China, examples as Shanghai 1933 and Jiangwan stadiums. But at the same time, a number of historical architectures are occupied by government offices and enterprises, so they are not able to give play to a better public effectiveness. Therefore, the historical buildings in the cities should play a more positive role; it should help to bring public participations in order to increase local vitality, and to promote the regeneration and development of historical district.

1 Extracted from http://www.tate.org.uk/
4.3 Regeneration taking traditional culture as catalyst

The value of historical district is not only the importance of its tangible heritage, but also includes people’s collective memory of the city. This memory, accumulated over a long period of history, is composed by the traditional elements of the urban culture, and culture, only exists within a specific cultural environment. Regeneration which take traditional culture as catalyst could maintain the living environment of historical district; also help to construct the facilities and services in the area and to improve the living conditions of locals. Culture-catalyzed renewal could be more helpful in protecting the cultural life of local residents, preserving the authenticity of historical district and it is a complement of physical renewal and functional renewal. In China, currently, there are only few practical examples of this kind of regeneration, urban managers and planners are engaged in continuous practice and exploration.

Tian Zi Fang area in the city of Shanghai was once a neighborhood where Lilong factory and ShiKumen buildings both exists. In the 1990s, this area was a street market featured in rattan commodities, and today it becomes a famous creative industrial area in Shanghai. The entire neighborhood renewal divides into three stages, in the first stage, the municipality focus on improving the existing facilities and neighborhood environments while introducing creative industries into the area, transforming the old factories into a creative design studio to attract social resources; in the second stage, without changing the function of living, protecting and repairing Shikumen buildings, and creating a Lilong-featured community which bears a Shanghai cultural living style and combines with both residential and industrial. In the third stage, introducing the theme of culture, and making it an important area of folk life, leisure and culture, and leading the revival of surrounding areas. The regeneration of Tian Zi Fang not only brings commercial and tourism development to the area, but also practically benefits the local residents.

Compared with other historical regenerations which taking cultural industry as catalyst, for instance, Hong Fang and NO.8 Bridge creative industry area, the former more emphasis on the redevelopment of the building’s own value and the development of supporting commercial projects, while the stage planning of Tian Zi Fang pays more attention to Lilong lifestyle preservation and culture brand making. “The transformation of historical district should enable individuals to see the city’s history through the widows of the residents.” Therefore, to maintain the historical authenticity of the city, the municipality could improve the infrastructure and facilities of historical district and set up cultural brands of the area, at the same time, it could offer a certain percentage of housing maintaining payments for the residents, so that the residents could join in the entire process of decision-making, planning and the implementation of historical district regeneration in the way of “policy guidance” and “community collaboration”.

Another attempt of historical district regeneration is to make architectures and landscape which bears historical values into ruins park. In the ruins park, the conservation of ruins and design of landscape are combined, and through proper planning, the historical human resources could be integrated and the historical and cultural connotations of the area could be fully developed. In China, there are a large number of precious

6 Lilong: alleys formed by Shikumen buildings which planed as western townhouses.
7 ShiKumen: Shikumen is a typical Shanghai residential houses, it is also the most popular, most ordinary housing in the old Shanghai, at present, there still remains a large number of Shikumen buildings in the central part of the city.
8 Hong Fang: Shanghai Sculpture Space, the former No.10 Shanghai Steel Factory
9 Michelle Moynier, Speech on International Conference on Heritage Conservation And Sustainable Development, 2010
historical heritage resources, yet not many of them are playing a significant cultural influence to the surrounding area, such as the regional transformation of Beijing Summer Palace. Summer Palace is the largest and best preserved imperial garden in China, and it is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Around Summer Palace, there were once the Qi for palace guarding and scattered villages, and also a number of villas of officials and scholars, later it gradually developed into residential areas with services and commodity markets, yet because of the wall of Summer Palace, the surrounding area have difficulties to connect itself with Summer Palace and also because of its remote location, the development of this area have been very slow. With the continuous expansion of the centre of Beijing city, the problems of transforming this area have arisen, in the revival of this region, the Summer Palace could play the role of cultural catalyst, open the closed area to the public, break the barrier between neighborhood and cultural heritage, enable the ruins park to be a daily communication place for locals and historical and cultural place for tourists. In this way, more communication opportunities are created, the cultural quality is improved, and the surrounding area could be better integrated into the overall development, the historical district could be revitalized.

The ruins park both bears the continuity of urban context, and meets the needs of modern cultural life. In a certain cities, there are also similar explorations going on. Compared with historical scenic area, the concept of Ruins Park more focuses on culture communication and the catalyst effect on the surrounding area, it is no longer only for the visitors, but for the surrounding residents and anyone who would like to know the history and culture, and it is a new concept of taking traditional culture as catalyst.

5. DISCUSSION AND PROSPECT OF REGENERATION TAKING TRADITIONAL CULTURE AS CATALYST

From urban design to urban management and urban renewal, the history and culture of the city should be respected and continued. Cultural vitality is part of the civic vitality, and cultural development is a significant part of the overall urban regeneration. In the above paragraphs, the discussion focuses on how to catalyze urban development through culture, and to maintain cultural continuity in order to achieve the revival of historical district. Historical district is the most potential area in the city, and taking culture as the regeneration catalyst, could better improve living environment, restore neighborhood vitality and promote the quality of the city. And it is more helpful in preserving the long-term accumulated cultural content, and in protecting the substantive interests of local residents. Currently, the transformation of old city has gradually changed from large-scale changeover to small-scale progressive renewal. Take the city of Beijing as an example, in the recommendations of promoting the culture development of the capital core area it is pointed out that, “to restore the historical context of the area around main axis with cultural and commercial elements” and “it will not be major construction projects in the old city area”. It could be obtained from this that the renewal of historical district is no longer a one-time project, but a long-term process. Compared to development depends on large-scale project, selecting a catalyst which could guarantee ongoing renewal becomes especially important.

The research of the present paper aims at the revitalization of historical district, and concentrates on the regeneration of neighborhood cultural vitality. The research attempts to set up a sustainable renewal mechanism for historical neighborhood and tries to find a way of renovation which is suitable for historical districts, and which pays more attention to the inheritance of historical neighborhood cultural environment

10 Qi: The barracks of Manchu soldiers
and the maintenance of interpersonal relationships instead of to be a predetermined route. Individual elements in the neighborhoods could produce a linkage effect, which leads to the integration of the overall space system. Presently, the transformation of the governance pattern and the enhancement of the citizen’s democracy both call for a fundamental change of the social environment of the historical district, and in this case, the discussion and understanding of historical neighborhood renovation reach a new high. This requires more emphasis on continuity and integrity of the update process and the integration effect of urban design, in order that the historical neighborhood is revitalized, and the cultural regeneration for sustainability in historical neighborhood could be fulfilled.

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