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Views & Comments

Strengthening the Protection and Inheritance of Urban & Rural Historical Culture in Urban Renewal

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Currently, there are two concerning phenomena that warrant attention. First, after cities, villages, neighborhoods, and architectural landmarks are added to conservation registers, inadequate management and inefficient operational mechanisms often result in their gradual structural and aesthetic deterioration. Thus, when urban renewal projects are implemented in surrounding areas, unclear regulatory requirements may lead renewal practices to deviate from the original intention of "protection first, rational utilization". Second, due to insufficient understanding of the relationship between preservation and renewal, an excessive emphasis on material modernization during facelift and upgrade initiatives has emerged, neglecting authentic heritage integrity and holistic conservation. Practices such as historical imitation fraud and demolishing authentic structures for fake ones have arisen, with misguided assumptions that modern design capabilities and new materials can completely replace outdated cultural heritage. Therefore, it is imperative to address the critical challenge of maintaining historical preservation during urban renewal, harmonizing traditional values with innovation, and preparing for unseen circumstances and complications. Globally, balancing the tension between historic preservation and modernization has long been a core challenge in urban development. From European models of historic urban landscape management to international urban regeneration frameworks, cities worldwide grapple with how to accommodate contemporary socioeconomic demands while safeguarding cultural identity. Placing China's experience within this global context demonstrates that the struggle between heritage conservation and rapid development is a shared worldwide dilemma, yet one that requires context-specific solutions rooted in localized wisdom. I propose focusing on three key aspects throughout the entire process of planning options, architectural design, and operational management: Historicity, Regionalism, and People-Centeredness.

(1) Historicity: Historical and cultural heritage in our urban and rural spaces are the carriers of civilization and are the essence of national culture. As is well known, China is an ancient civilization with a history of five thousand years, boasting extremely profound cultural traditions. As early as the 1940s, Mr. Liang Sicheng mentioned in his book *A History of Chinese Architecture* that "the individuality of Chinese architecture is the individuality of our nation, the individuality of Chinese architecture is the character of our nation. Even if suddenly accepting a new form and influenced by foreign ideas, it can still express the spirit of the country." It is evident that the integration of "tradition" and "modernization" is not merely about transforming architectural design forms and functions, but rather a core issue concerning civilizational innovation and the embodiment of national culture. Therefore, urban renewal should not be limited to physical space upgrades, but also serve as a vital process for preserving historical continuity, strengthening cultural identity, and promoting sustainable development. Urban rural historical and cultural heritage should not be seen as obstacles or burdens to urban development, but rather as valuable assets that highlight uniqueness, enhance soft power, and drive robust growth. Every modern urban construction project involving historical and cultural environments must be grounded in thorough research and a profound understanding of their cultural genes, spatial patterns, and spiritual essence. The fundamental principles are respect and harmony, not innovative novelty that disregards historical context.

(2) Regionalism: Architecture is always closely linked to its regional environment, and buildings need to reflect regional characteristics, especially for China. China's culture is diverse yet unified, sharing common value pursuits. By integrating factors such as natural environments, historical culture, and economic development

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across different regions, distinct architectural cultural zones have emerged. Historically, whether it is the residential architecture of Jiangnan, Lingnan, Southern Anhui, or Loess cave dwellings, or the palaces and pavilions like the Forbidden City, Yellow Crane Tower, Tengwang Pavilion, and Yueyang Tower, they all exhibit distinct regional characteristics and embody Chinese culture. To this day, the regionalism of Chinese architecture has not received due attention, with scarce architectural works that highlight regional features. Urban and rural architecture still suffers from the phenomenon of "a thousand cities looking the same" and "a thousand villages looking the same". China currently has 145 historic and cultural cities spread across 9.6 million square kilometers of land. Regionalism is the essence of their urban and rural characteristics. Urban construction must be rooted in regional culture, requiring us to reevaluate, inherit, and promote local construction wisdom through creative transformation and innovative development. This requires bridging traditional construction wisdom with modern urban management frameworks, ensuring that regional character drives sustainable and resilient growth.

(3) People-Centeredness: Both urban and rural architecture serve the people. President Xi Jinping, during his 2019 inspection tour in Shanghai, pointed out: "Cities are the cities of the people, and people-oriented cities serve the people. Whether in urban planning or construction, whether in the development of new urban areas or the renovation of old ones, we must adhere to a people-centered approach." Reflecting on famous cities and buildings throughout history and across cultures, none fail to provide a grand stage for the people, where they fully share their joys and sorrows, express their ambitions, and harbor their beautiful ideals. Aligning these humanistic insights with the engineering focus requires placing the safety, health, and structural resilience of residents at the forefront of urban renewal. Historic districts and aging structures are frequently vulnerable to natural hazards, seismic events, and environmental degradation. Therefore, a truly people-centered approach must integrate disaster resilience, structural safety enhancements, and environmental health improvements into heritage preservation. Protecting the lives and safety of residents alongside preserving their cultural habitat ensures that community vitality is sustained. Traditional Chinese architecture further integrates buildings closely with human life, embedding them into social living. Whether residential houses, temples, or iconic pavilions and towers, they all embody reverence for the people, carry their expectations, and strive to care for, serve, guide, and create life. In a sense, Chinese architecture is "life architecture" a remarkable tradition that should be further promoted in urban renewal. Whether in cities or rural areas, the living environment serves as a place where people gather, as the saying goes, "a place where the hearts of the people are entrusted" Modern urban renewal in China must be people-centered, serving and caring for the people, uniting their emotions, and boosting their confidence. Urban construction is a century-long plan, while cultural inheritance constitutes an endeavor spanning millennia. We must firmly grasp the historical, regional, and people-oriented aspects throughout the urban renewal process, advancing steadily with a long-term historical perspective, profound cultural heritage, and the spirit of meticulous craftsmanship akin to embroidery.

In conclusion, successfully navigating the complexities of modern urban regeneration requires more than mere adherence to conceptual frameworks. It demands a collective commitment to actively advance our theoretical understanding and technical implementation of Historicity, Regionalism, and People-Centeredness. Only by bridging the critical gap between engineering pragmatism and cultural preservation can we ensure that our historical and cultural heritage endures as a living, resilient, and deeply rooted foundation for future generations.

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