

# Resident-led Renewal Models in Historic Cities: Historical Review, Institutional Barriers, and Policy Framework

DING Shouyi, HU Min, XIAO Yue, LIU Xiaoyu, CHEN Tianyu, YU Fengyao

**Abstract:** As the demolition-and-redevelopment mode of urban renewal dominated by real estate development and the renovation model reliant on government funding have become increasingly difficult to sustain, the resident-led regeneration model in historic cities has gained attention. This paper reviews the historical evolution of autonomous regeneration models, concluding that they have been the mainstream approach to conservation and renewal in historic cities. This study identifies and analyzes institutional obstacles and root causes that hinder the application of this model in four aspects: project approval processes, benefit distribution management, compatibility with technical standards, and changes in property rights registration. It proposes a sustainable autonomous renewal model of “self-regeneration under unified plans”. Additionally, the study outlines a framework for institutional optimization, including clarifying the requirements of administrative licensing, defining bottom-line protection rules and benefit management boundaries, optimizing construction and acceptance criteria, and streamlining the process of property right replacement registration. The paper concludes by highlighting the linkage between autonomous renewal models, land-based finance mechanisms, and grassroots governance systems, offering policy outlook for urban renewal in historic cities.

**Keywords:** historic city; autonomous regeneration; institutional framework; technical standards; grassroots governance

**Chinese Library Classification No.:** TU984; Document Code: A

**DOI:** 10.16361/j.upf.202501011; Article No.: 1000-3363(2025)01-0078-08

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**Funding:** National Key R&D Program of China, “Methods and Technical Systems for the Conservation and Renewal of Historic and Cultural Districts (Comprehensive Utilization Technologies and Demonstration for Historic and Cultural Districts)” (Project No. 2022YEC3803505); Central Government Fiscal Subsidy Project, “Research on the Conservation System for Historic and Cultural Cities and Districts” (Project No. 202405000106); Policy-Based Financial Support Project, “Research on the Cultural Heritage Conservation System” (Project No. 202405000107); Guangzhou Urban Planning & Design Survey Research Institute Co., Ltd. Research Project, “Investment and Financing Strategies for the Conservation and Renewal of Historic and Cultural Districts Based on Long-Term Operation” (Project No. RDI2230202072).

Against the restructuring of China's real-estate market and mounting fiscal pressure on local governments, both developer-led demolition-and-redevelopment and government-funded renovation face growing challenges<sup>[1]</sup>. How historic cities<sup>①</sup> can balance conservation and development and identify a sustainable renewal model has therefore become a central issue in their revitalization.

In a broad sense, historic cities include towns and cities with historical and cultural value, extending beyond legally designated historic and cultural cities and thus encompassing a wider and more general spatial category. Earlier renewal models—large-scale capital-driven demolition and redevelopment, or comprehensive government provision—are increasingly unsustainable in terms of efficient resource use, social equity, and cultural-heritage conservation. Where these approaches can no longer be sustained, is there a third pathway suited to historic cities that can address the challenges of stock-based development while balancing conservation and development? A resident-centered renewal model has increasingly demonstrated its advantages because property owners, namely residents, retain a high degree of autonomy in expressing renewal preferences and contributing financially.

Under the current emphasis on small-scale, incremental conservation and renewal in historic cities, resident-led renewal—the dominant approach before the founding of the People's Republic of China—has again shown its applicability. Guangzhou<sup>[2]</sup>, Hangzhou<sup>[3]</sup>, Nanjing<sup>[4]</sup>, and other cities have undertaken valuable experiments. Nevertheless, this approach continues to face barriers in project approval, benefit distribution, technical-standard compatibility, and property-right changes. This paper analyzes these obstacles and their institutional roots and proposes corresponding solutions.

## **1 Theoretical Foundations and Practical Exploration**

### **1.1 Resident-led Renewal Meets the Needs of Rule-of-Law Governance and Historic-City Conservation and Renewal**

#### **1.1.1 Social Governance Perspective: Resident-led Renewal Sustains Community Networks and Cultural Continuity**

Stable social networks constitute the organizational vitality that enables historic cities to endure. Residential communities are not static accumulations of physical structures, but living manifestations of social networks intertwined with the spirit of place<sup>[5]</sup>. These relationships give communities vitality and depth and allow them to evolve and improve continuously<sup>[6]</sup>. In urban renewal practice, developer-led demolition and redevelopment and government-funded renovation are generally large in scale, single-purpose, physically oriented, and inattentive to historical and cultural considerations, and therefore often disrupt social networks. By contrast, resident-led renewal is autonomous, small-scale and incremental, and “acupunctural”; it helps preserve stable social networks and sustain historical and cultural continuity<sup>[7]</sup>.

Resident-led renewal has generated substantial theoretical research on social equity<sup>[8]</sup>, the composition of social networks<sup>[9]</sup>, and related themes. At the level of practical governance, however, research remains concentrated on summaries of individual cases and experiments with benefit-sharing mechanisms<sup>[10]</sup>. The overall operating mechanism of social governance under resident-led renewal has received relatively little attention, and practical solutions to common problems such as renewal procedures and standard design remain insufficient.

#### **1.1.2 Legal Basis Perspective: Residents Have the Right to Renovate and Upgrade Their Own Homes**

China's Constitution and laws do not explicitly state that “residents have the right to undertake resident-led renewal,” but relevant legal and policy grounds can be identified. Article 241 of the Civil

Code of the People's Republic of China provides that an owner may establish usufructuary and security rights over their immovable or movable property, while Article 272 provides that an owner has the rights to possess, use, benefit from, and dispose of the exclusive parts of a building. Residents, as owners, therefore have the right to possess, use, benefit from, and dispose of their homes, to renovate and upgrade them, to participate in decision-making, and to protect their legitimate interests; government should support and safeguard those rights.

Although Guangzhou<sup>[11]</sup>, Hangzhou<sup>[2]</sup>, Nanjing<sup>[3]</sup>, Shanghai<sup>[12]</sup>, and other cities have issued local policy documents on resident-led renewal in older residential communities, national law lacks a unified definition of the scope of such rights<sup>[13]</sup>. Gaps remain regarding the extent of renewal rights, eligible objects, and related matters.

### 1.1.3 Historic-City Conservation Perspective: Advancing Small-Scale, Incremental Renewal

Historic cities differ from ordinary cities in that renewal must give greater weight to cultural inheritance and conservation. Residents have direct needs and motivations to improve their living environments<sup>[14]</sup> and play a leading role in renewal<sup>[15]</sup>, acting as both initiators of demand and respondents. Small-scale, incremental approaches can identify and retain historic elements and cultural symbols with precision, avoiding the damage caused by large-scale demolition and construction. Resident-led renewal resembles the careful “crafting” of the living environment, incorporating residents' emotions and knowledge. It is therefore an effective path for small-scale, incremental renewal and helps conserve and transmit urban history and culture.

## 1.2 Experience and Limitations of Resident-led Renewal Practice in China

China has experimented with concentrated forms of unified planning and resident-led construction in historic-city renewal, notably in post-disaster reconstruction in Shangri-La, Yunnan, and Yushu, Qinghai. Dukezong Ancient Town in Shangri-La adopted a three-tier guidance system comprising parcel regulations, architectural prototypes, and a residents' construction manual<sup>[16]</sup>, which clarified reconstruction principles and improved efficiency and quality. Jiegu Town in Yushu used a “five fingerprints” public-participation procedure<sup>[17]</sup>, enabling residents to participate throughout reconstruction and rapidly restoring infrastructure and housing. These post-disaster measures, however, prioritized rapid response and recovery and were not fully integrated into the established urban planning, construction, and management system.

Recent years have seen several resident-led renewal projects. Residents of No. 2 Jiqun Street in Guangzhou pooled funds and organized construction to accelerate the rebuilding of dangerous housing; residents of Zhejiang University of Technology New Village in Hangzhou assumed the financial burden themselves, forming a multi-actor model involving government, residents, and the market; and owners at No. 39 Mado Street in Nanjing's Xiaoxihu area financed their own renewal. These projects emphasize resident autonomy and realize community self-renewal through shared participation and multi-party collaboration, but they also reveal fragmented policies and underdeveloped organizational mechanisms<sup>[18]</sup>.

China should establish an integrated framework and top-level design for resident-centered renewal, advance the sustainable development of resident-led practice, and combine cultural continuity with renewed community vitality in historic-city regeneration.

## 1.3 Summary: Returning to Resident-led Renewal Is Essential to a Long-Term Resident-Centered Conservation and Improvement Mechanism

At the 2023 symposium on cultural-heritage conservation and inheritance, Cai Qi called for “establishing a long-term conservation and improvement mechanism centered on residents.” This direction is crucial to the governance of historic-city conservation and renewal. Policy must shift from top-down target implementation during the era of incremental expansion toward the management and guidance of dispersed construction actors in the stock-based era. Neither theory nor practice has yet produced a genuinely resident-centered, sustainable, long-term conservation and improvement mechanism. Exploring resident-led renewal is therefore of major academic and practical significance.

## 2 Evolution of Resident-led Renewal in Historic Cities

Historic-city conservation and renewal models evolve in response to socioeconomic conditions. They include resident-led, capital-led, and government-led approaches. Resident-led renewal has generally remained the principal mode, while the three models have waxed and waned, overlapped, and complemented one another in distinct historical stages. Based on whether resident-led renewal occupied a dominant position, its evolution can be divided into five stages (Fig.1).

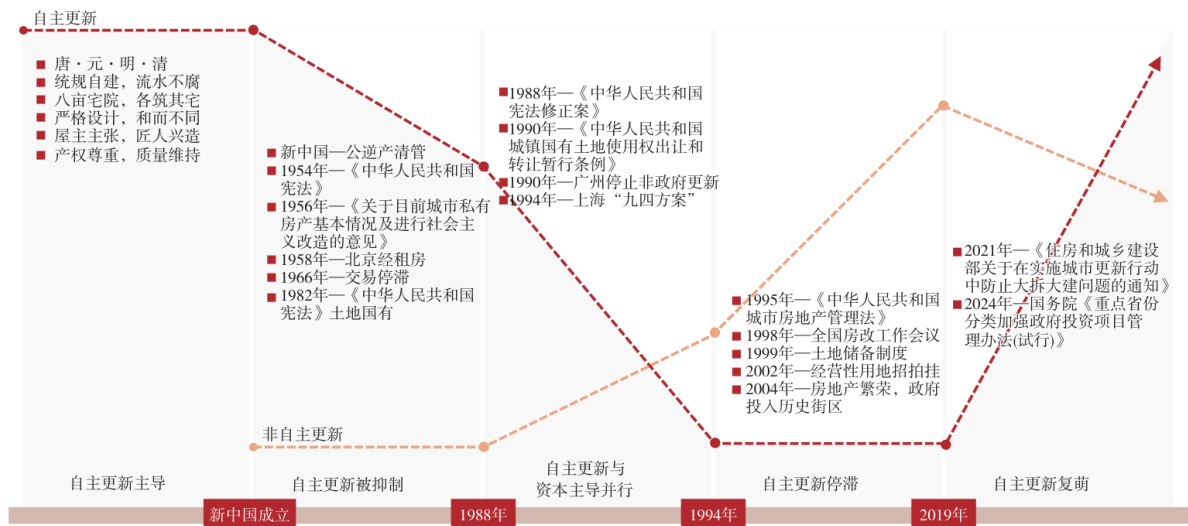


Fig.1 Schematic diagram of development stages of self-renewal models

### 2.1 Dominance of Resident-led Renewal (Before 1949)

Resident-led renewal was historically the mainstream approach to conserving and renewing historic cities. From ancient times, laws stipulated that, under unified construction standards<sup>[19]</sup>, the state should “allow the people to build their dwellings”<sup>[20]</sup>, fully respect residents' property rights<sup>[21]</sup> and construction preferences, and establish effective transaction mechanisms<sup>[22]</sup>. Housing was thereby maintained continuously through the combined efforts of residents and markets, creating a growth mechanism of unified planning, resident-led construction, and continuous renewal<sup>[23]</sup>.

### 2.2 Gradual Suppression of Resident-led Renewal (1949–1988)

From the founding of the People's Republic of China to the late 1980s, policy deficiencies accelerated the decline of old cities. China underwent a series of political, economic, and social transformations, including the clearing and administration of confiscated property, constitutional protection of citizens' ownership, socialist transformation of privately owned housing<sup>[24]</sup>, the managed-rental housing policy<sup>[25]</sup>, the suspension of housing sales and rentals during the Cultural Revolution, and the reform establishing state ownership of urban land. Private-property rights were disrupted, public housing lacked effective maintenance, resident-led renewal stalled, and buildings entered a continuing cycle of overall deterioration<sup>[19]</sup>.

## 2.3 Coexistence of Resident-led and Capital-led Renewal (1988–1994)

A series of laws and policies adopted in 1988, including the Amendment to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China and the Interim Regulations on the Assignment and Transfer of the Right to Use State-Owned Urban Land, legalized and regulated land transfers. These measures provided capital with strong incentives and a legal basis, making it the leading force in land renewal and development. Commercial projects such as Liwan Plaza in Guangzhou were rapidly completed<sup>[26]</sup>, causing continuing damage to the scale and character of the old city. At the same time, the sale of publicly owned housing in Shanghai and other cities produced a modest increase in private housing, and resident-led renewal continued to exist<sup>[27-28]</sup>.

## 2.4 Stagnation of Resident-led Renewal and the Rise of Government-led Renewal (1995–2018)

By the late 1990s, major cities represented by Guangzhou had halted non-government-led renewal in old urban areas, and municipal and district governments financed most renewal activities; resident-led renewal came to a complete standstill. Following implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Administration of Urban Real Estate and the first national housing-system reform conference, in-kind housing allocation ended<sup>[29]</sup> and was replaced by monetized distribution<sup>[13]</sup>. A booming real-estate sector allowed land-based finance to expand government revenues, which were then invested in historic-area conservation and renewal, producing well-known projects such as Yongqing Fang and Sanfang Qixiang. Historic heritage was preserved, but carefully renovated districts fully financed and constructed by government coexisted with deteriorating neighborhoods where resident-led renewal had stalled under a mentality of waiting for government support<sup>[12]</sup>. Old-city development became costly yet insufficiently beneficial.

## 2.5 Revival of Semi-autonomous and Resident-led Renewal (2019–Present)

Since 2019, restructuring in China's real-estate market and mounting fiscal pressure on local governments have reduced the share of public funds invested in historic-city renewal. Resident-led projects have consequently re-emerged, including No. 39 Mado Street in Nanjing's Xiaoxihu area<sup>[30]</sup>, No. 2 Jiqun Street in Guangzhou, and Zhejiang University of Technology New Village in Hangzhou<sup>[2]</sup>. These small-scale, incremental projects respect residents' preferences and have to some extent balanced cultural conservation with regenerative development.

## 3 Institutional Barriers to Resident-led Renewal in Historic Cities

Despite scattered local experiments, resident-led renewal continues to face institutional barriers in four areas: project approval, benefit distribution, technical standards, and changes and registration of property rights.

### 3.1 Project Approval: Incompatibility of Construction Planning Permits with Historic Areas

Policies for renovating and renewing historic cities conflict with higher-level legislation, leaving construction planning approvals without an applicable legal basis and creating implementation difficulties. On the one hand, permits for the renovation of existing buildings remain governed by the “one written opinion and two permits” system under the Urban and Rural Planning Law of the People's Republic of China, which has not been adapted to stock-based development. On the other hand, specialized approval rules for urban renewal are absent. Procedures for similar projects differ widely among cities<sup>③</sup>, creating legal deficiencies in planning-indicator compliance reviews and permit issuance<sup>[31]</sup>. Some cities process building renovation as “interior-decoration construction permits”<sup>[27]</sup>. Although this transitional approach temporarily eases permit difficulties, it is not sustainable.

### **3.2 Benefit Distribution: Unclear Fiscal Subsidies and a Lack of Standards for Managing Value Appreciation**

#### **3.2.1 Unclear Fiscal Subsidies Undermine Equity and the Ability to Meet Diverse Needs**

Renovating dangerous and dilapidated housing in historic cities is a basic government responsibility, but how subsidies can provide a minimum guarantee while maintaining fairness remains a major practical challenge. The Measures for the Administration of Central Government Subsidies for Urban Affordable Housing Projects covers housing security, the renovation of urban villages and old residential communities, and the refurbishment of shantytowns and dangerous urban housing. Yet details of guarantees and subsidies for resident-led renewal—including compensation for floor area, financial-subsidy standards, and adjustments for orientation and floor level—remain undefined. Local governments have not established unified standards suited to local conditions, and policies lack sufficient flexibility to address complex and changing circumstances.

#### **3.2.2 The Absence of Standards for Managing Value Appreciation Can Produce Inequity and Excessive Public-Service Burdens**

Residents often seek additional floor area through renewal, but without constraints and management this can create inequity and excessive public burdens. Under government-led large-scale demolition and reconstruction, for example, government assumes debt that does not become a public asset, while households acquire assets without assuming corresponding liabilities. This mismatch transfers public assets into private ownership and creates unfair outcomes<sup>[32]</sup>. At the same time, large-scale floor-area and household increases may exceed the capacity of urban infrastructure and public-service facilities, continuously raise the city's burden, and accumulate negative externalities<sup>[33]</sup>, ultimately threatening sustainable development. Governments therefore need effective mechanisms to manage expectations of value appreciation, avoid the appropriation of public resources, and balance overall interests.

### **3.3 Technical Standards: Existing Standards Are Inapplicable in Historic Areas**

Existing fire-safety<sup>[34]</sup>, sunlight<sup>[35]</sup>, and health standards<sup>[36]</sup> are often unsuitable for historic cities<sup>[37]</sup>. For fire safety, the Code for Design of Civil Buildings<sup>[38]</sup> requires dead-end fire lanes to provide turning lanes and turning areas of at least 12 m × 12 m for multi-story buildings and preferably 16 m × 15 m for high-rise buildings; historic areas can rarely accommodate such spatial requirements. For sunlight, the Standard for Urban Residential Area Planning and Design<sup>[39]</sup> requires residential buildings to receive no less than one hour of sunlight on the winter solstice or two hours on the Major Cold day. Compact building groups and narrow spacing in historic cities often cannot meet these requirements. For health, many historic buildings in Guangzhou have small dwelling units without independent kitchens or bathrooms and therefore fail to meet the Design Code for Residential Buildings<sup>[40]</sup>, which requires bathrooms of at least 2.5 m<sup>2</sup> and kitchens of at least 3.5 m<sup>2</sup>.

### **3.4 Changes in Property Rights and Registration: No Established Procedure**

#### **3.4.1 Missing Land-Supply Rules and an Unclear Procedural Path**

The Land Administration Law of the People's Republic of China, the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Administration of Urban Real Estate, the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China, and other laws specify that projects changing land use must complete procedures such as land-change registration<sup>④</sup>, execution or amendment of contracts<sup>⑤</sup>, adjustment of land-transfer fees<sup>⑤</sup>, and approval by relevant administrative departments<sup>⑥</sup>. No clear approval rules have been established, however, for renovation projects that do not change land use.

### 3.4.2 Unclear Procedures for Confirmation and Registration of Real-Estate Rights

Real-estate rights registration for housing demolition, old-neighborhood renovation, and conservation and repair of historic buildings continues to suffer from unclear procedures<sup>[41]</sup>. Demolition projects frequently involve inconsistent ownership records and owners who cannot be contacted, preventing release of land-use rights and subsequent real-estate registration. Statutory registration procedures for old-neighborhood renovation and the transfer of retained historic buildings are unclear, while local practices for registering additions and retained historic buildings vary widely; no standardized procedure exists<sup>⑦</sup>.

## 4 Institutional Framework: Rebuilding a Sustainable Model of Unified Planning with Resident-led Construction/Renovation

A long-term resident-centered mechanism for conserving and renewing historic cities should be grounded in property rights, place residents at the center, and use unified planning with resident-led construction as its basic model (Fig.2). Renewal should encourage participation by multiple actors, combine contributions from property owners and government, and fully consider the service capacity of local infrastructure. Capacity may increase, but the number of households should not; additional floor area should be controlled and paid for.

### 4.1 Establishing Clear Planning-Management Requirements and an Administrative Permit System

#### 4.1.1 Establishing a Planning-Control System that Combines Rigidity and Flexibility

Planning control should combine rigid and flexible requirements. Government departments should no longer comprehensively lead renewal, but should act as guides by developing policy tools, implementation procedures, and supervision mechanisms and by providing a sound policy framework and guidance<sup>[42]</sup>. Effective planning-control pathways can help residents understand and apply planning and construction requirements and improve project quality and efficiency.

Government should provide unified planning-control requirements for resident-led renewal. Beijing, for example, treats the block as the basic renewal unit and uses responsible planners as coordinators. Guidelines and related policy documents define the boundaries of different conservation actions, refine supporting management systems, and clarify repair and conservation requirements, providing a basis for resident-led renewal<sup>[43-44]</sup>. Guangzhou allows conservation-responsible persons to submit applications and provides technical consultation on repairs free of charge<sup>[45]</sup>.

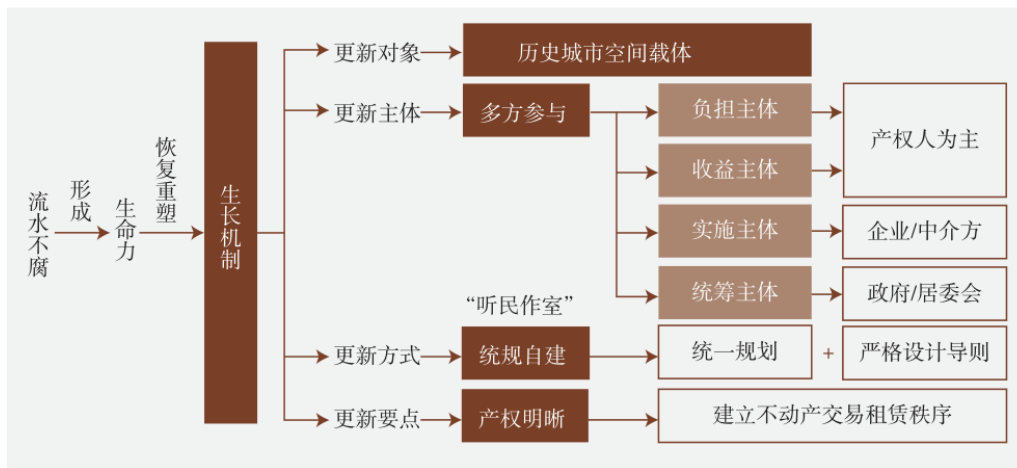


Fig.2 Resident-centered long-term protection and renewal mechanism for historic cities<sup>[17]</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Establishing Clear and Simplified Administrative Permit Procedures

Special implementation rules should be issued for resident-led renewal in historic cities, clarifying project application, scheme preparation, approval, construction, and acceptance so that every stage has a legal and procedural basis. Approval should be simplified. Most resident-led projects involve local repairs, partial renovation, or reconstruction, rarely changing land use or planning indicators. Where conservation controls already provide sufficient regulation of additional floor area and capacity, redundant review stages can be merged or eliminated. Joint review and multi-departmental coordination should be encouraged to enable information sharing and combined approval (Fig.3).

Preconditions should be explicit, including procedures for resident applications, whether the implementation scheme clearly addresses financing and property rights, and whether it has been approved by a residents' or owners' assembly, thereby ensuring legal compliance and the expression of residents' intentions. Permit stages should be streamlined. At the land-use stage, where a project conforms to planning and retains the original land-supply method, procedures should be optimized. Tianjin, for example, does not charge additional land payments where no floor area is added or where added floor area is noncommercial<sup>[46]</sup>. During construction planning and permitting, projects that retain their original planning use should be subject to simplified procedures and joint review. In Beijing, renewal projects that do not change building use, scale, or exterior profile may proceed directly to a construction permit<sup>[47]</sup>. At completion, joint acceptance should be conducted. Once acceptance conditions are met, a construction agent may apply to the housing and urban-rural development department, which organizes relevant authorities to jointly inspect planning, fire safety, and building energy efficiency. Following joint acceptance and completion filing, residents register the updated property with the real-estate registration authority, completing the renewal process.

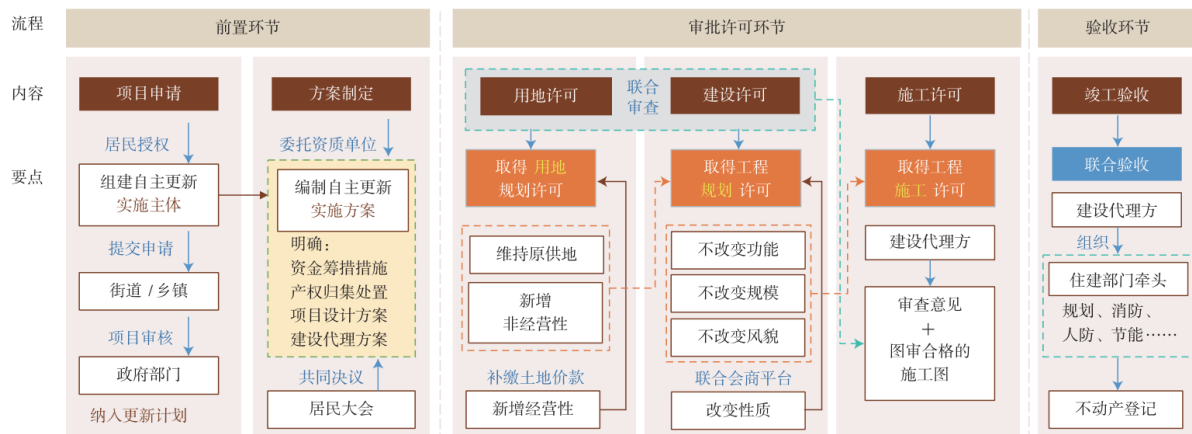


Fig.3 Schematic diagram of resident self-renewal processes

## 4.2 Defining the Boundaries of Government Guarantees and the Management of Value Appreciation

### 4.2.1 Government Subsidies Should Provide a Minimum Guarantee

Government subsidies should function as a safety net during project implementation and focus on public domains such as dangerous-housing renewal, municipal and public-service facilities, and roads and transport. In the Xiaoxihu dangerous-housing renewal project in Nanjing, professional assessment first classified buildings by condition. For grade-C dangerous buildings, government covered 40% of costs—20% each from municipal and district governments—and residents covered 60%. For grade-D

buildings, government covered 60%—30% each from municipal and district governments—and residents covered 40%.

#### 4.2.2 Establishing Clear Boundaries for Managing Value Appreciation

Where resident-led renewal creates value through additional floor area, policy should define eligibility, permitted scope, maximum expansion, and contribution costs. Nanjing allows homes with original floor areas below 45 m<sup>2</sup>, between 45 and 60 m<sup>2</sup>, and above 60 m<sup>2</sup> to expand by 15%–20%, 10%–15%, and no more than 10%, respectively. Guangzhou limits above-ground added floor area to 30%. Hangzhou permits no more than 20 m<sup>2</sup> of additional area plus a parking space, with an average household contribution of RMB 900,000. Beijing sets specific standards for kitchens and bathrooms in non-self-contained housing—4 m<sup>2</sup> and 3 m<sup>2</sup> respectively—generally disallows expansion for homes above 70 m<sup>2</sup>, and likewise caps above-ground expansion at 30%. Tianjin limits expansion to 15%. These policies specify the content and boundaries of value-appreciation management and provide guidance and support for resident-led housing renewal (Tab.1).

Tab.1 Regulatory provisions related to expansion policies in selected cities

| 城市 | 可增加面积                                                                                                 | 补缴地价政策                                                                     | 政策依据                                           |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| 南京 | 面积在45 m <sup>2</sup> 以内、45—60 m <sup>2</sup> 、60 m <sup>2</sup> 以上的,分别可较原产权建筑面积增15%—20%、10%—15%及10%以内 | 评估价90%补缴土地出让金                                                              | 《居住类地段城市更新规划土地实施细则》(宁规划资源〔2021〕478号)           |
| 广州 | 地上增量建筑规模不超过30%                                                                                        | 基于市场评估价的40%(村庄)                                                            | 《广州市城镇危旧房改造实施办法(试行)》                           |
| 杭州 | 不超过20 m <sup>2</sup> +车位(户均出资90万元)                                                                    | 扩面部分按市评估价出资(根据不同楼层、户型、朝向等因素略有浮动)                                           | 《关于稳步推进城镇老旧小区自主更新试点工作的指导意见(试行)》                |
| 北京 | 非成套住宅厨房4 m <sup>2</sup> 、卫生间3 m <sup>2</sup> ;原则上大于70 m <sup>2</sup> 的不增加,地上建筑规模不超过30%                | 四环线以内:按指导价40%补交<br>四环路线以外:按指导价60%补交                                        | 《关于进一步做好危旧楼房改建有关工作的通知》《北京市人民政府关于实施城市更新行动的指导意见》 |
| 天津 | 增加15%                                                                                                 | 不改变土地用途;可维持原供地方式,不再收取土地价款用于销售产权;新土地使用权市场价格与原土地使用权条件下剩余年期土地使用权市场价格的差额补缴土地价款 | 《天津市人民政府办公厅关于印发天津市老旧房屋老旧小区改造提升和城市更新实施方案的通知》    |

#### 4.2.3 Public-Interest Incentives Can Motivate Resident-led Renewal

Public-interest subsidies are an important incentive for resident participation. In the resident-led renewal of No. 2 Jiqun Street in Huadu District, Guangzhou, government offered incentives for residents to share renovation costs and established a jointly managed account to safeguard the collection and use of funds. The district government provided low-interest loans for financially disadvantaged households and subsidized owners at 50% of actual property-maintenance-fund contributions and 50% of several construction costs. It also provided appropriate awards and subsidies for property-maintenance funds and category-II project costs<sup>②</sup>. These measures not only reduced residents' financial burden but also encouraged active participation, supported the upgrading of historic areas, and improved living quality.

### 4.3 Optimizing Applicable Construction and Acceptance Standards

Applicable construction and acceptance standards can be optimized through four approaches: strict adherence, adaptive modification, no deterioration from existing conditions, and exceptional approval pathways. National health standards such as GB 55031—2022 should be strictly observed. Subject to tight control over added building volume, non-self-contained housing should be converted into independent units with kitchens and bathrooms meeting statutory area standards. Fire-safety requirements may be adapted: where space is constrained, enhanced warning, protection, evacuation, and firefighting capabilities can compensate for limited physical access. Sunlight requirements may follow a “no worse than existing conditions” principle. Hangzhou's implementation guidance for urban renewal, for example, allows dangerous housing to be renovated or rebuilt with modest increases in internal floor area, provided building spacing, sunlight, setbacks, and other conditions do not

deteriorate. Where existing procedures, rules, standards, and regulations cannot be satisfied, renewal permits may be granted automatically if existing planning conditions are not worsened, supported by dedicated technical specifications and regulations for historic-city renewal.

#### **4.4 Streamlining Property-Right Reconfiguration and Registration**

##### **4.4.1 Simplifying Land-Supply Procedures for Reuse of Existing State-Owned Land**

Reusing existing state-owned land can improve land-use efficiency and reduce renewal costs. In Zhejiang University of Technology New Village, Hangzhou, where land use remained unchanged and all indicators were maintained or improved, no additional land-transfer fee was required and the land did not need to be resupplied, ensuring that the project remained “de-real-estatized”<sup>[2]</sup>. This approach protected residents' legitimate rights while avoiding the additional costs of resupplying land and paying transfer fees. Guangzhou likewise treats demolition and reconstruction for upgrading as the reuse of existing state-owned construction land, eliminating separate land-supply procedures and further improving efficiency.

##### **4.4.2 Supplying Newly Added Small Parcels through Allocation or Agreement**

For newly added land, the Ministry of Natural Resources clarified in the Notice on Further Strengthening Planning and Land Policy Support for the Renovation and Renewal of Old Residential Communities (General Office of the Ministry of Natural Resources <sup>[2024]</sup> No. 25) that small scattered parcels may be supplied through administrative allocation or negotiated agreement<sup>[48]</sup>. This provides a flexible and efficient land-supply route for added public space, greenery, and recreation space in resident-led renewal of historic cities.

##### **4.4.3 Exchanging Existing Property Certificates for New Real-Estate Certificates without Prior Cancellation**

Property registration should be simplified. Where ownership is clear and additional construction has been defined, a new real-estate certificate may be issued through an “old certificate for new certificate” exchange without first cancelling the original property certificate. In Hangzhou, the construction entity collects the original certificate when the dwelling is vacated. After rebuilding, residents can obtain a new real-estate certificate without discharging the original mortgage, while paying the costs generated by additional floor area. This avoids cumbersome cancellation procedures while ensuring that the renewed property has clear and lawful ownership. Registration should also follow the principle of “additional capacity without additional households”: dwelling area may increase, but household numbers should not, thereby protecting the sustainable use of supporting facilities.

### **5 Conclusions and Further Discussion**

#### **5.1 Conclusions**

By reviewing the history of urban renewal and examining the rise and practical shortcomings of developer-led demolition and redevelopment and government-funded renovation, this paper identifies resident-led renewal as a third pathway suited to historic cities.

Because it is spontaneous, small-scale, and incremental, resident-led renewal offers clear advantages in economic sustainability, continuity of social networks, integrated protection of spatial form, and the transmission and evolution of historical culture. Its implementation, however, requires institutional breakthroughs in project approval, benefit distribution, technical standards, and changes and registration of property rights.

The paper therefore proposes clear planning-management requirements and administrative permits, defined boundaries for government guarantees and value-appreciation management, optimized construction and acceptance standards, and streamlined property-right reconfiguration and registration. Together, these measures can establish a long-term resident-led conservation and renewal mechanism.

## 5.2 Further Discussion

This study focuses on planning and construction management. Because resident-led renewal involves a wider range of issues, its relationship with overall urban strategy, unresolved historical property-right problems, and grassroots governance requires further clarification. The following issues warrant additional discussion.

### 5.2.1 Balancing Resident-led Renewal with Government Land-Based Finance

Although land-based finance is currently under pressure, it remains a major source of general public-budget revenue for government. Resident-led renewal should therefore manage its relationship with land-based finance and avoid undermining it. Policy should define its applicable scope, such as historic urban areas, historic and cultural districts, and old urban areas<sup>[49]</sup>. It should also assess whether a proposed site falls within a key urban development platform, land-reserve plan, near-term municipal or transport-infrastructure construction plan, or area-based urban-renewal implementation plan.

### 5.2.2 Clarifying Property Rights in Historic Cities Is a Precondition for Resident-led Renewal

Historic cities contain extensive public housing and complex property-right arrangements involving government, public institutions and enterprises, and residents. Complex ownership and conflicting interests raise maintenance and management costs, leave buildings without responsible maintenance, and contribute to aging facilities and unauthorized alterations, producing a dissipation of property rights. Such dissipation can further lead to outdated infrastructure, deteriorating living environments, intensified social conflict, and policy-induced decline. Complex property relations also seriously impede resident-led renewal. Clear ownership and responsibilities are essential for all parties to participate. Ownership surveys and verification, active coordination of competing interests, and clarification of property rights are therefore critical preconditions for successful renewal.

### 5.2.3 Stronger Grassroots Governance Can Improve the Efficiency of Resident-led Renewal

Because resident-led renewal is flexible, small-scale, and continuous, poor management, unequal resource distribution, and information asymmetry can readily cause waste and efficiency losses. Under a stronger grassroots-governance framework, improving the efficiency of unified planning and resident-led construction becomes an important path for community development. Time and a growth mechanism are needed so that renewal can occur incrementally, orderly, and according to need. Institutions should optimize resident-led procedures, establish inquiry platforms, simplify application systems, and provide public-interest design and construction assistance, laying a foundation for sustainable community development.

The authors sincerely thank Deng Kanqiang, Deputy Director of the Guangzhou Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau; Mr. Ji Taiping, former Director of the Pingyao County Urban and Rural Planning Bureau; and Ju Dedong, Director of the Historic and Cultural City Conservation and Development Institute of the China Academy of Urban Planning and Design. Deputy Director Deng provided valuable policy recommendations and practical experience that deepened the study's understanding of historic-city renewal; Director Ji shared successful cases from Pingyao County; and

Director Ju's account of the Yushu experience broadened the study's perspective. Their guidance and support made important contributions to this research.

## Notes

- ① “Historic cities” in this paper are not limited to the legally defined categories of historic and cultural cities, historic urban areas, and historic and cultural towns. The term broadly refers to historic settlements with a certain period of built history and humanistic and social value and is therefore more spatially extensive and general.
- ② Article 13 of the Implementation Opinions on Pipeline Relocation for Municipally Funded Construction Projects in Guangzhou (Sui Jian Gui Zi [2023] No. 13) states that the estimated cost of a pipeline-relocation project shall include construction costs (category-I costs), other construction-related costs (category-II costs), and contingency costs (category-III costs).
- ③ Shenzhen requires nonresidential buildings converted to rental housing to comply with planning laws and regulations. District housing and construction departments accept applications in a unified manner, housing and construction authorities conduct joint reviews and issue project-recognition documents, and conversion proceeds in accordance with approved designs and relevant construction-reporting procedures.
- ④ Article 56 of the Land Administration Law of the People's Republic of China provides: “A construction entity using state-owned land shall use the land in accordance with the contract for the compensated use of the land-use right, such as an assignment contract, or the approval document for administrative allocation. Where it is necessary to change the approved construction use of the land, consent shall be obtained from the land administrative department of the relevant people's government and approval shall be obtained from the people's government that originally approved the land use. Within an urban planning area, a change of land use shall first obtain consent from the relevant urban planning administrative department before submission for approval.”
- ⑤ Article 18 of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Administration of Urban Real Estate provides: “Where a land user needs to change the land use stipulated in the land-use-right assignment contract, consent shall be obtained from the assigning party and the urban planning administrative department of the municipal or county people's government; an amendment to the assignment contract shall be signed or a new assignment contract shall be concluded, and the land-use-right assignment fee shall be adjusted accordingly.”
- ⑥ Article 350 of the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China provides: “The holder of a construction-land-use right shall make reasonable use of the land and shall not change its use; where a change of use is required, approval shall be obtained from the relevant administrative authority in accordance with law.”
- ⑦ The Guangzhou Measures for Promoting the Reasonable Use of Historic Buildings provides that, after land-use procedures are completed and the original registration is cancelled, the real-estate registration authority may process confirmation and registration of a historic building by reference to the procedure for initial registration.

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Revised: December 2024