

Exploring Pathways for the Renewal of Older Residential Neighborhoods from an Informal Design Perspective

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Abstract: The urban renewal process in China has seen a significant change in recent years from one of expansion to an approach that involves enhancing quality. In light of this trend, old housing areas have received increased attention as there is greater recognition of the need for renewal processes. Nonetheless, conventional planning tends to be highly directive, making it impossible to activate grassroots involvement or take into consideration the varying needs of citizens. In contrast, this research proposes an alternative strategy through which a community-oriented renewal model is analyzed based on citizen participation. Based on participant observation and three case studies conducted in Beijing, this paper presents a reproducible model that consists of four stages: need identification, empowerment, construction, and maintenance. With this model, the paper reframes the design process itself to change it from merely a technical practice to an impetus for collective actions, building capacity, and trust. The research literature indicates that informal design processes, especially those focused on public green spaces, help people become actively involved in decision-making, planning, and management, and therefore provide a viable and humane approach to conventional urban renewal.

Keywords: Informal Design; Public Participation; Older Residential Neighborhoods; Urban Renewal; Micro-Gardens

1. Introduction

China's urban development is shifting direction. Unlike the large-scale outward expansion of the past, the current focus is on making full use of existing resources-through micro-renewal, upgrading and renovating existing buildings

block by block, filling functional gaps, and organically connecting urban spaces. The renovation of older residential communities [1], serving as a key driver for improving people's livelihoods and innovating urban governance, is an integral part of organic urban renewal [2]. Most of China's older residential communities were built in the last century and suffer from prominent safety hazards [3], aging infrastructure, and a lack of public services; their renovation has thus become a major project for both public welfare and development [4]. Against the backdrop of urban stock renewal, the renovation of older residential communities is no longer limited to physical repairs but focuses more on the synergistic regeneration of spatial quality and social relationships [5]. Community governance based on 'co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits' cannot be achieved without the participation of the public-the rights holders. Residents' participation-based urban renewal oriented toward governance has been a significant trend in urban micro-renewal in recent years [6]. Previous research has investigated the ways to facilitate the green self-governance of older residential communities via residents' participation from various aspects including policies, platforms, and self-organized groups [7]. The current literature on community micro-renewal and public participation has systematically studied both of these concepts from the angles of renewal paths, governance tools, and spatial strategies. When considering renewal paths, the 'Beijing Micro-Garden' series of programs has come up with the '1+N+∞' model of micro-renewal, developing a concept of community green micro-renewal based on public participation through micro-gardens [8]. Concerning the mechanisms for governance, literature related to this aspect highlights the fact that the change in the role of the government and incorporation of social

powers is very important for multi-stakeholder co-governance [9], and there is a creation of Four-All public participation framework which involves the entire process, the entire sample, the entire system, and the entire society [10]. From here, the process of participatory community planning has emerged as an effective method of co-production and co-governance, with its development path described as a progressive logic of “single-point”-micro-renewal-community planning-community governance [11]. At the same time, the emergence of collaborative governance theory has led to the identification of multiple models and mechanisms of co-construction of community gardens [12]. From the perspective of age-friendly communities, multi-layered age-inclusive strategies for the renewal of public spaces offer useful guidelines for aging-friendly and age-inclusive renovation of older communities [13]. There have been systematic efforts in the literature on the renewal and regeneration of older neighborhoods through existing research. Nevertheless, previous studies have paid more attention to the design and organization of institutions in terms of the roles played and how they coordinate among different entities including the government, social agencies, and planners, rather than resident spatial practice. Accordingly, this article attempts to explore the concept of informal design and examines how it may serve as a platform through which community micro-garden development in Beijing can be employed to provide an understanding of the possible approaches that can be used to implement public participation in the renewal of public spaces in older communities.

2. The Essence and Framework of Informal Design

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Informal Design

From the 1970s onward, the study of urban informality has become one of the main issues of discussion in urban studies. Under the context of the process of rapid urbanization, the presence of informal elements becomes increasingly obvious in the cities of the developing world. Urban informality is essentially the outcome of the development of informal institutions through social interaction. Scholars argue for the

inclusion of a bottom-up spatial logic in urban planning [14]. It is no longer regarded as an outcome of institutional inadequacy, but informality has come to be seen as a method of governance, that is, a spatial activity or strategy that stems from the interaction between various parties such as the state, capital, and society. The informal institutions have become very significant in complementing, altering, or even supplanting the formal institutions; in developing countries that are experiencing rapid changes, informal behaviors sometimes precede institutional innovation [15]. Anthony Fontenot provides a comprehensive account of the evolution of the idea of “non-design” by stating that non-design is an aesthetic attitude with its primary aspect being the process of doubt and disbelief in conscious design and accepting anything spontaneous [16]. This idea can be attributed to the ideas of Friedrich Hayek, who argued that social institutions have an ‘undesigned’ nature in terms of their theory of ‘spontaneous order’, which means that the majority of social conventions and spaces emerge spontaneously rather than being rationally designed. [17]

The concepts of urban informality and “non-design” have revolutionized the way we conceive the city, by shifting our focus from planned interventions to the unplanned processes that create urban spaces as well. It is through this process of re-conceptualization that informal design emerges. Contrary to the formal method of design that works via professional agencies and processes, the informal design is carried out through a distinct process. In the case of urban renewal, the informal process of design is flexible and involves active participation of residents who engage in dialogue and easy participation. Decision-making is shifted from the designers to the residents, guiding the process from planning through construction. Communication moves from being an act of teaching to one of exchange. In workshops and co-creation events, many different groups come together, and solutions can be developed through dialogue rather than domination. This transforms the role of the planner, who is no longer the only authority but instead acts as a mediator and facilitator. Context-sensitive and amenable to revision, informal design attends to the complexities of everyday life as well as the changing conditions that affect them. More significantly, it repositions renewal as a means of

governance learning, improving citizen awareness, collaboration, and community self-governance.

In fact, what makes the difference in informal design is not only the way in which it impacts the physical surroundings, but also the way in which it affects society. The process of designing one's living environment helps to create trust among people, common standards, and the ability to act collectively. Because of its participative nature, affordability, and adaptability, it is well suited for redeveloping older neighborhoods. However, we have just started exploring its true potential; more practice and evaluation would be required to gauge its effectiveness.

2.2 Research Framework for Informal Design

in the Renewal of Older Residential Communities

According to a thorough analysis of the theory of urban informality and informal design, as well as an overview of the relevant literature, along with the fact that there is currently no system for engaging residents in the revitalization of older residential neighborhoods, this paper sets out a research framework for the revival of public spaces in older residential communities based on the idea of informal design (Figure 1). Based on the gradual evolution of residents' rights, this research framework takes into account the right to information, the right to expression, the right to decision-making, and the right to co-creation through four phases: project formulation, the design phase, implementation, and space outcomes.

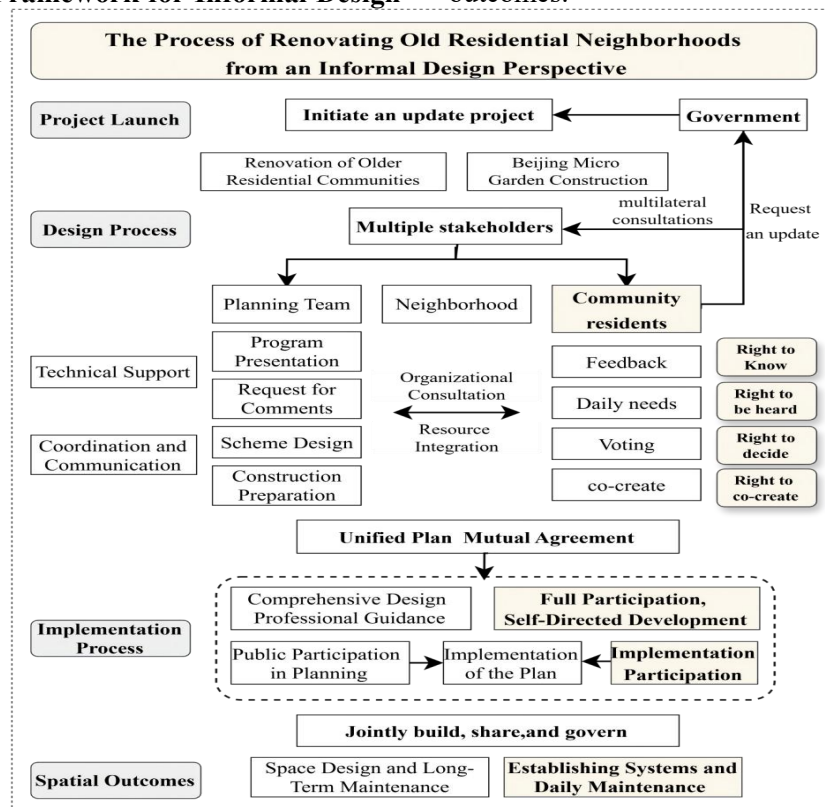


Figure 1. The Process of Renovating Old Residential Communities from an Informal Design Perspective (Source: Author's Own Illustration)

3. Empirical Research: The Application of Informal Design in the Development of Micro-Gardens in Beijing

This is due to the fact that the informal design approach is different from the conventional approach of top-down planning and design because its basic premise is to give users the power of design and decision-making, hence resulting in the empowerment of both space and

society through the process of stakeholder participation. A combination of unclear property rights, the variety of residents' requirements, limited amount of open space and no post-construction maintenance is what makes these projects difficult. The set of problems described above requires an adaptive, process-oriented and collaborative solution. Accordingly, this paper examines the concept of micro-garden development as an example that

would show how the principles of informal design may be used for the regeneration of public spaces within older communities. Specifically, this paper concentrates on two aspects, namely participatory design approach and low-maintenance construction.

3.1 Theoretical Mechanisms of Informal Design-Driven Renewal in Older Residential Neighborhoods

There are four steps to informal design: Identification, empowerment, construction, and maintenance.

In the first step, the community takes the initiative. The designers conduct surveys and interviews in order to identify the use of the space and problems associated with it. They then propose sites for intervention. These go to community discussion and a resident vote. Only after that are sites confirmed-so local knowledge actually shapes the outcome.

As the design moves forward, residents gain more say-through information, expression, decision-making, and finally co-creation. Authority gradually passes from designers to users, which strengthens residents' involvement.

Presentations inform, consultations gather input, and votes give real influence. The resident is not merely a passive recipient but becomes an active producer of space. What begins as a singular project becomes long-term capacity-building for the community.

In order to compensate for the absence of official participatory channels, the informal process of design initiates resident council formation, web-based comment systems, and public boards. These ensure that resident voices are always at the center rather than being just symbols. During the phase of co-creation, designers and residents collaborate on transforming proposals into actual places. During the phase of maintenance, governance shifts into the hands of residents-thus, any spontaneous actions get turned into routine activities. With professional assistance and community organization, it enhances physical environment, reconstructs social ties, and fosters self-governance. It provides a realistic approach which integrates government guidance, professional competence, and resident management (Figure 2).

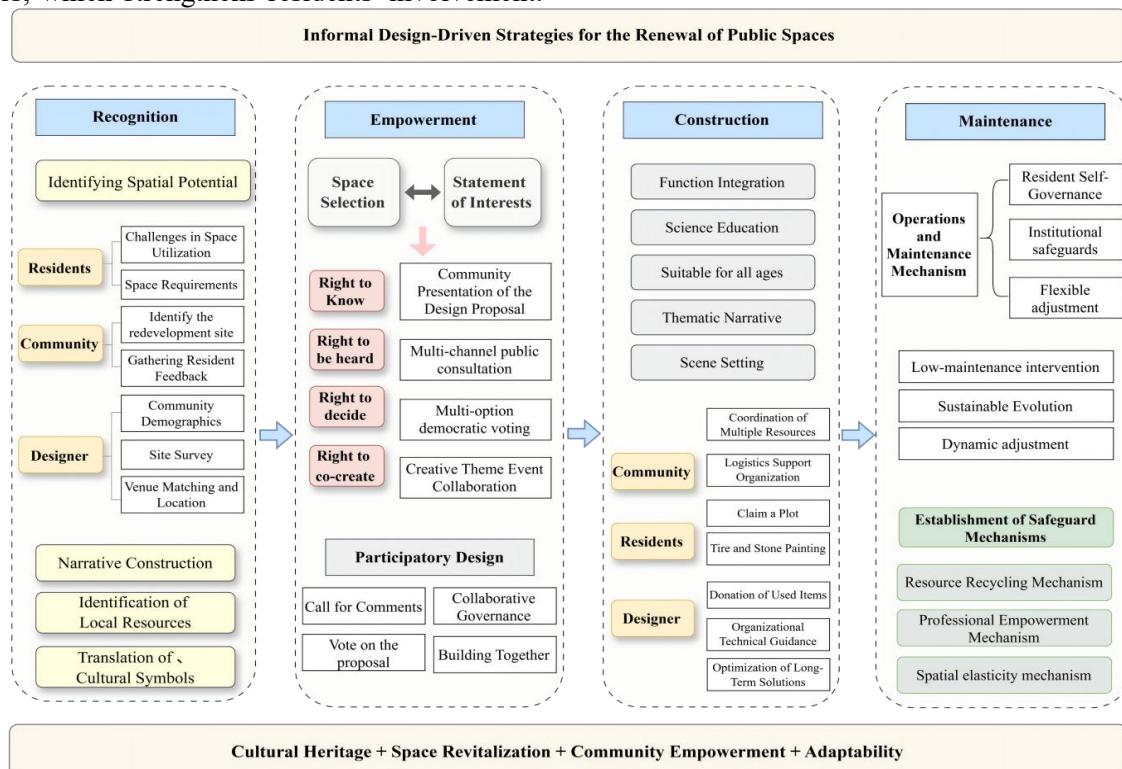


Figure 2. A Systemic Strategy for Public Space Renewal Driven by Informal Design (Source: Author's own illustration)

3.2 Creating Micro-Gardens from an Informal Design Perspective

Urban development has reached the stage where

the focus will be on upgrading the quality of existing infrastructural facilities, renewal of public spaces and environment will be an important approach for increasing well-being of

the communities. Micro-gardens are considered to be the “last mile” for resident participatory micro-renewal [18]. As the most basic unit within the urban landscape system, micro-gardens have become very popular in cities since they are small, gradually renewed, easy to implement, flexible, and quickly put into practice. These are now fully incorporated in community public places, becoming a tool for micro-renewal through the public participation approach [9]. The utilization of informal design in order to influence the process of urban micro-renewal is an attempt to develop new ways for people to take part in community building and resource sharing.

What can be achieved with informal design in micro-garden design? The answer is a three-dimensional end result which is accomplished through the integration of physical reality, social governance, and collective perception all at once.

Physically speaking, the bottom line is simple – to keep costs down and be sustainable for the long haul. It involves choosing plants that will

thrive in the ecological environment, reusing what has been thrown away, and using areas in multiple ways. All of these approaches, combined, lead to improvement in the quality and ecological efficiency of community public places. The next dimension of micro-gardens is governance and it means that in this case the main role belongs to residents' initiative. This process is organized in a very participatory manner with residents making all the decisions and not being asked for their opinion. In such cases, the micro-gardens are not only landscaping projects but platforms for discussion within the community and building new social ties. The third dimension is that of perception. The goal here may not be as noisy but just as significant-instilling a feeling of collective belonging among community members, having residents feel ownership of communal spaces, and reviving the friendly exchanges between neighbors. It is when all three dimensions come into play that spatial renewal and empowerment can no longer exist separately from one another (Figure 3).

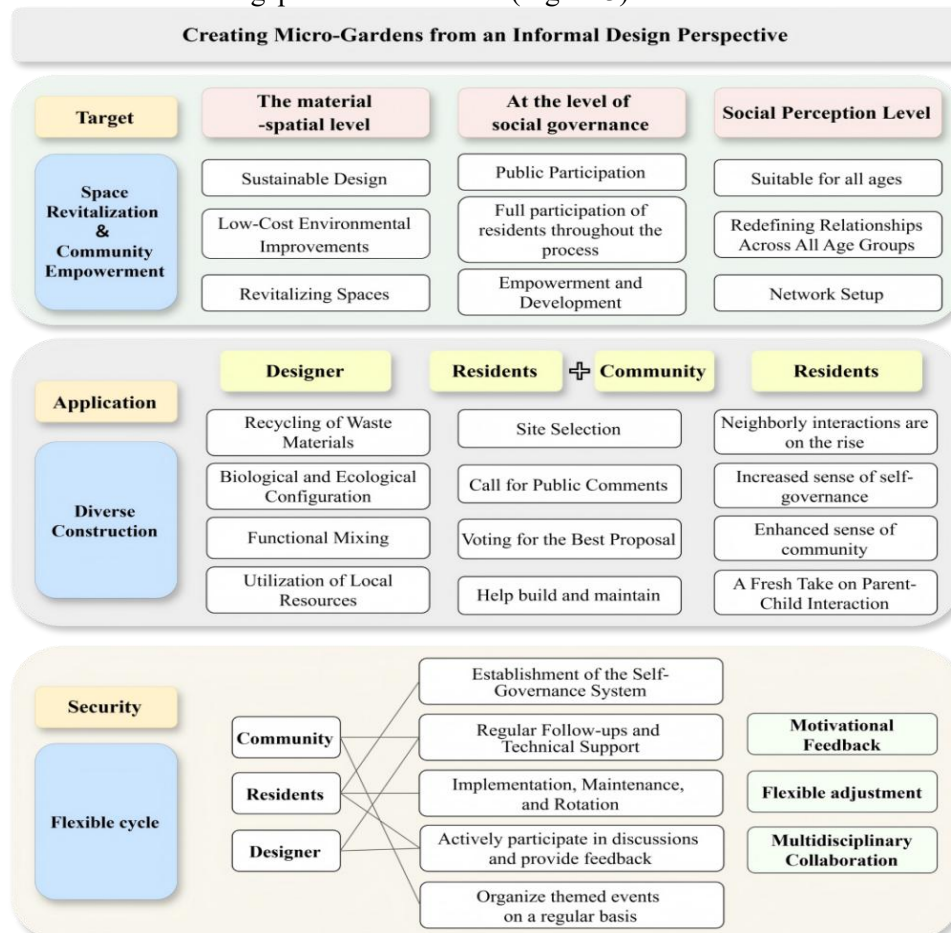


Figure 3. Micro-garden Construction from an Informal Design Perspective (Source: Author's Own Illustration)

3.3 Case Studies

In what way does informal design alter urban renewal in older communities? Ultimately, it allows citizens to reclaim their capacity, responsibility, and pleasure in designing their environment. It transforms urban renewal into a more participatory approach that is grounded in citizen activities and is based on a process-oriented rather than product-oriented logic. Micro-gardens, therefore, tools of reconnecting the inner workings of the community through self-governance.

What makes this approach unique is the fact that it emphasizes processes rather than end results and local capacity rather than outside knowledge. It is a strategy based on basic reasoning—low cost,

high participation, and adaptability. This makes it possible for it to penetrate the social fabric of society in a way which formal approaches rarely can. This flexibility is what makes it possible for micro-gardens to become established and to endure. In order to validate these concepts through a real-life example, the research adopted three representative older residential areas from the micro-garden programs in Beijing for empirical case studies. All these cases have different characteristics regarding their locations, ages, demographic compositions, and available resources; however, all these cases share the same informal logic of the model, which includes identification, empowerment, development, and maintenance (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Application of Informal Design in the Renovation of Public Spaces in Older Residential Communities (Source: Author's Own Illustration)

3.3.1 Wolong residential community, Datun subdistrict, Chaoyang district

Wolong Residential Area is located in Datun Subdistrict, Chaoyang District, directly bordering the Olympic Park. Dragons are featured all throughout—dragon-shaped water fountains, dragon motifs painted on walls, and dragon stones found in various places. The subdistrict office has also tied each of its 24 communities to one of the 24 solar terms.

Wolong got Jingzhe—the one that marks the awakening of insects and the return of spring. The design team spent time on site doing interviews, holding forums, and walking the neighborhood. What they kept hearing from residents was that the dragon symbol did not mean much to them personally—it felt like something official, not something they owned. The message that did ring true was the change in season symbolized by Jingzhe, that is, warming

up of the earth, the beginning of ploughing and planting. The project was thus built around this theme. The name they gave to it was "Jingzhe Farming." They incorporated a concept of "zero-waste" along with it. Seed-exchange fairs and composting workshops were organized. The local residents were encouraged to collect old bottles, seeds of fruits and vegetables from their homes to transform them into hydroponic pots and compost.

The key components in the process of design include three main factors; "one-meter garden, one-square-meter plaza, one corner landscape" with an intention of creating functional communal spaces with identity.

One-meter garden is estimated at 30 square meters of space and uses purple as the leading color alongside white and yellow colors. The "One-Square-Meter Square", which measures about 35 square meters, has a magnolia tree at its center, which serves as the central attraction. Around it are staggered metal barrels that have been created to form a science-related recreational area while hydroponic plants have been included in the design to clean up the water; the "One-Corner Landscape" is located where Huizhong North Road and Wolong East Road meet. In this case, signs have been erected along with strategically positioned plants to make the space known to the outside world. In the construction stage, there was community participation (Figures 5-6).



(a) Current site status



(b) Design rendering after renovation

Figure 5. Before-and-After Photos of the One-Meter Garden (Source: Created by the Author)

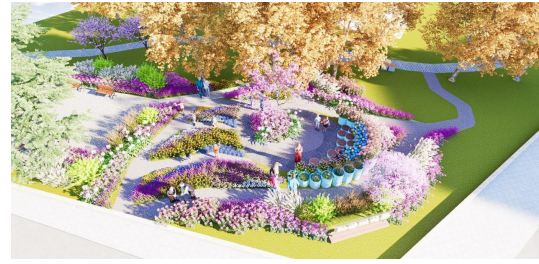


Figure 6. Rendering of the Micro-Garden at the Wolong Residential Complex in Datun (Source: Created by the Author)

3.3.2 Mingyueyuan community, Luyuan subdistrict, Tongzhou district

Mingyueyuan Community is an affordable housing complex primarily inhabited by young families, with a high proportion of children, yet volunteer resources are relatively limited. There was little on the plot of land except for two peach trees and hard-packed grass, which was a boring, empty spot without any facilities for children or activities for parents and kids together. The team collected information from residents via door-to-door surveying, drawing sessions with children, and parents' questionnaires. More than 20 children between the ages of 4 and 10 drew their vision of an ideal garden.



(a) Current site status



(b) Design rendering after renovation

Figure 7. Before-and-After Photos of the Mingyueyuan Community (Source: Created by the Author)

Design was done in consideration of the inputs given by the children. Painting classes were held again, but this time the aim was to get the input from all regarding their preferences on specific

decorative items. From the inputs of the children, the idea of “Falling Petals” was created using two existing peach trees. With the use of flower-shaped planters, colorful pebbles, and flowers, the place became a lively and engaging one. This joint effort created an even larger effect; interactions between neighbors started to become common, and community unity increased.

The "Big Hands Hold Little Hands" program was an effort that allowed the designers and the residents of the community to come together during the construction process. The parents and their children were involved in the same activity, working shoulder to shoulder while making tire paintings and flower collage to construct the garden. Formed a group called “Little Flower Guardians”: children water the plants on a rotational basis and record their growth by either drawing or taking pictures, whereas the parents prune and replant them (Figures 7-8).



(a) Overall bird's-eye view



(b) Detail view of the planting configuration
Figure 8. Rendering of the Micro-Garden at Mingyueyuan Community (Source: Created by the Author)

3.3.3 YueTan subdistrict, Xicheng district
Guangyi Community is managed by the SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television) dormitory complex, with most residents being retired or current SARFT employees. The site was mostly shrubs and grass, with bare patches throughout. The western side had decent grass cover, and the site retained wooden posts, ornamental rocks, a crooked tree, and a blank wall.

In-depth interviews and site research revealed that residents had strong emotional ties to their broadcasting careers. They were also sensitive to noise and privacy, since the site is adjacent to residential windows. So the team set aside the conventional plaza approach and turned to "sound waves" for inspiration. Curved pathways and wave-like patterns created a low-intervention, narrative space for remembrance. A vintage item drive brought in donated radios, cassette tapes, and other objects, which were repurposed with community help into a distinctive landscape feature. The group conserved whatever existed wherever possible while designing. The leaning tree was kept and strengthened to become a base for the climbing plants; a naturalistic setting was created by planting ground cover between the wooden posts, while the empty walls were made home to climbing roses. The ground is covered with crushed stones and grass seeds that form a semi-natural surface. Tall, medium, and short flowers are planted around the curving garden pathway in order to achieve depth and a natural feel of the landscape design. The plants used in the garden include lily-of-the-valley, irises, daylilies, and coneflowers (Figures 9-10).



(a) Current site status



(b) Design rendering after renovation

Figure 9. Before-and-After Photos of Guangyi Community (Source: Created by the Author)

In summary, these three case studies demonstrate the underlying principle of informal design, whereby the involvement of the residents in the

whole process is vital in making spatial renovation possible and mending the broken community relations. The Wolong Residential Community involved the cultural story from the daily experiences of the residents as it turned the agricultural practices in the Jingzhe solar term and zero waste into interesting activities; the Mingyueyuan Community involved the children as the active participants of the design process through exciting activities in order to make them feel a part of the place; and the Guangyi Community involved flexible strategies. These examples illustrate that successful informal designs do not lie in the complexity of the plan but in the perception of the inhabitants about the micro-gardens as areas where they feel at home and keep investing in them.



(a) Perspective view of the public space



(b) Pedestrian perspective view

Figure 10. Rendering of the Guangyi Community Micro-Garden (Source: Created by the Author)

4. The Development and Considerations of Informal Design in the Renovation of Older Residential Communities

Based on the previous discussion about the informal design theory, its operational mechanisms, and the empirical research on the micro-garden project at a community in Beijing, the next part of this chapter will discuss more about the systemic approach for the application of the informal design for the renewal of old residential communities in terms of policy,

practice, and operation.

4.1 Adopting Empowerment Strategies Based on Group Differentiation

Not all residents are alike. There are some who use the area every day; there are some who are naturally organized; and there are some who are likely to be ignored in official processes. The conventional methods of universal voting and representation usually assume that all individuals have equal abilities to participate and express their needs. The consequence tends to be a superficial kind of empowerment, which does not tackle differences at all. This research calls for a more nuanced approach. Frequent users—the elderly or young people, for example—must be given more say in matters related to spatial details. Opinion leaders like building managers and volunteer coordinators will be better suited to act as leaders in negotiating plans and making rules. Groups on the margins of society, including tenants, professionals, and the disabled, require a different form of protection, namely the power of veto. The empowerment process does not have to happen all at once; it can be phased in slowly, as individuals get used to participation. This process ensures that everyone gets a chance to participate and influence decision making where their contributions can be best used.

4.2 Building a Sustainable Collaborative Network

The sustainability of the management of informal places can never be achieved without considering the cooperation between many parties, such as the designer and the government. This network is built around the following system that combines the process of resource exchange and the balance of obligations: designers supply technical knowledge and conduct periodic checks to ensure professional quality of construction; communities undertake organizational, coordinating, and mobilizing activities, making sure that micro-gardens are included in the agenda of communities' governance; and local governments finance and support the policy as well as create the platform of inter-communities communication for best practices exchange. It is crucial that all parties involved are engaged by formal means including signing cooperation contracts, and joint meetings should take place from time to time to assess the efficiency of cooperation. It is possible to create an ecosystem of collaboration where the balance

between contribution and gain is maintained via resource exchange.

4.3 Establishing a Long-Term Strategy for Operations and Maintenance

Long-term maintenance is the main distinction between informal design and one-off projects. Lack of an effective way to maintain it will result in quick failure of the most successful renewal process. The frequent pitfall is to spend money on building and forget about management, which this approach seeks to escape from. The responsibilities have to be made clear at the organizational level. There needs to be a community-centered approach where there is a smooth transition of responsibilities from the project team members to the community members themselves. Operationally speaking, the emphasis has to be placed on self-sustaining ecological cycles and material recirculation, as well as user-friendly manual systems. These steps ensure that costs are minimized for the long run. Community involvement is also part of the solution. Holding activities related to different themes – seed exchange, gardening days, workshops during various seasons – will ensure that the site remains vibrant. With regard to incentives, there are flexible arrangements and reward systems that need consideration. Volunteering points, honorary names, or an appreciative remark. In combination with other factors, informal design will be integrated into the community.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

Informal design is resident centered and participatory. By shifting the designer's role from a "director" to a "facilitator", it tackles two recurring problems associated with renewal of aging neighborhoods-low resident participation and sustainability.

By means of micro-gardens, citizens can reassert their right to have input in the choice, planning, development, and management of their space. As experience shows, such an approach facilitates the creation of social capital and grassroots governance. Thus, micro-gardens perform two functions at once: transform the physical environment and act as tools of empowerment. Informal design facilitates community-driven initiatives by means of spatial activities, providing practical information on how to shift from occasional activities to sustainable community self-management. In order to

proceed further, it is essential to develop the theory, establish monitoring systems, better incorporate informal design into urban renewal policy.

As the Little Prince looked after his flower, so too should the citizens of the community look after their own community garden. Let there be every old neighborhood flourish with its own vigor, as a result of having undergone informal planning.

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