

Urban Revitalization in Social Transition¹

The Case of West Yuehu Area Conservation and Renewal Project, Ningbo, China

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Abstract: Due to the economic and scientific advancement in the society, people's living condition has been in a gradually changing process. In modern society, with the rapidly developing economy and human notions, inevitably, some new requirements about their living environment have appeared. And surely, all of those must cause an enormous impact on the traditional culture and lifestyles of the urban dwellers, which brings the decay of our heritage. We have to find the exact way to preserve the historical identity and traditional values while improving the living environment to meet the needs of modern inhabitants. This article therefore aimed to synthesize urban renewal and conservation through examining the revitalization of a particular traditional urban area. The case of West Yuehu Area, Ningbo, is selected to show the planning approaches and proposals, constrains and contradiction regarding revitalization under this social transition.

Keywords: Urban revitalization, Social transition, Traditional urban areas, Conservation and renewal

1. INTRODUCTION

We are going through a century of rapid urbanization. With this the past few decades have seen considerable progress in development and technological breakthrough across the world. This dynamic growth and changes in urban structures entails serious demographic, economic and social changes. At the same time, in this rapidly changing economy, it's difficult to predict accurately the characteristics of users, their needs, attitudes and aspirations. In urban areas the ever-growing populations also demand accommodations for them, which creates high-density living environment with limited land resources. Industrialization, the growth of real estate and modernization resulted in some of the traditional quarters disappearing and most of them adapted to the developing needs of the city were built high-rise buildings. The environment created by these high-rise buildings is far from the traditional scale, shape and activity of our urban life. Thus traditional urban areas face issues of losing their characteristics, social values and meanings. We have to achieve a balance between preserving the identity while dealing with the need for the development. Revitalization of these areas with restoration of the physical fabric and active economic use would be one effective method. This Paper attempts to illustrate the dimensions of urban renewal and regeneration by examining the processes, conflicts and results of revitalization of traditional urban areas, considering the present changing socio-economic context.

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With the significant economic development in China, the structure of the society and their requirements are changing simultaneously. The case of West Yuehu Area, Ningbo, is selected to show the planning approaches and proposals, constraints and contradiction regarding revitalization under this social transition. The lessons and observations from experience of the revitalization of traditional urban areas, role of the government in this regard and the involvement of the private sectors are also discussed in this article. Its focus is on areas where there are significant numbers of traditional buildings concentrated in a small area, which are considerably threatened by the force of rapid urbanization, are now stand on a thin fence between survival and destruction.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE URBAN REVITALIZATION PROCESS IN CHINA

During the last 100 years, Chinese culture, economy and society have changed much. All the changes in thinking, culture and living style, which follow the continuity of increasing production and population, make people ask to renew the cities. Since late 80', the pace of urban renewal has been continuously speeded up in most of the cities in China. So the sustainable development of city renewal becomes the focus of all circles attention. In this way, there is a conflict between new and traditional culture in the old city than in any other place. With the economic boom, many historic cities have taken a new look. In most cases, the redevelopment projects cover a very large block, and the government relies on the development companies to provide the infrastructure and community facilities. Therefore for the development companies, it is the most suitable way to take those blocks as development units and to complete them as soon as possible in order to make profits. After some year's building, people found that there are many changes in the view of the cities. The old cities having been pulled down and the new buildings have taken the place of the old. This bristly high-rise development didn't make people satisfied, because the original social structures, neighborhood relations, characteristics of the communities and the sense of belonging to the place have been completely changed.

2.1 Present Practices of Urban Transformation in Traditional Areas

Presently most of the traditional housing areas in Chinese cities has undergone through some processes of urban transformation, which are responsible for the loss of traditional urban character and architectural heritage. In the name of urban renewal, there is often complete and large-scale demolition of the old urban fabric and are replaced by new high-density, high-rise apartment blocks. A significant percentage of the original inhabitants of these areas are typically displaced and alternative housing for them have found basically in suburbs. Sometimes the traditional housing areas, which surround protected historic monuments, are demolished by the redevelopment process to create open public spaces associated with the monuments to enhance tourism. In some cases, to upgrade and modernize the old houses in order to improve their living conditions according to the economic means, the inhabitants themselves gradually transform the traditional urban fabric as they rebuild them. Due to overcrowding and poverty of the inhabitants, it is often noticed the urban degradation where the traditional fabric is gradually destroyed.

In China, the spatial organization of cities is currently undergoing a change from the traditional horizontal pattern to vertical, which is the result of increasing population densities. This change from horizontal to vertical organization threatens the traditional character of many historic cities. Chinese municipal policies try to attract tourism, they are more or less concerned about the authenticity of historic monuments, but largely ignore the surrounding historic traditional housing and commercial areas, which are inseparable from the protected historic monuments, and an integral part of the traditional urban fabric. Often the finance, necessary to preserve the urban

heritage is not enough to repair traditional housing areas, also, in other cases, by surplus cash in new building programs, which encourages developers to invest in new structures rather than to attempt to rehabilitate existing traditional ones.

2.2 Forces and Obstacles in Revitalization Process

In the elaboration and implementation of revitalization process, it is a paradox to realize that poverty as well as rapid economic growth is the main obstacles to conservation policy. Everywhere, the importance of the conservation of cultural property is given less recognition than economic problems, whether they are linked with industrialization or with the struggle against poverty. Poverty includes a very dense utilization of the buildings in historic area, whether they are fit for dwelling or not. That is, not only the houses are overcrowded, but also, the historical areas may be squatted. The very dense occupation of the buildings, by those families, who do not have the means to maintain it or to pay a rent, which would justify maintenance by the authority cause urban decay and even collapsing of the buildings as the consequence of lack of maintenance and overcrowding over the years. Once the historic area has become a slum, conservation becomes more and more difficult. The authorities may consider slums and dilapidated houses as a direct obstacle to conservation.

The forces of rapid change are transforming the society from the demographic, economic and social point of view. As a consequence, there is a need to exercise choice in the protection of the cultural heritage. There is a debate of development versus conservation, where conservation is considered synonymous with resistance to change. In the short term, conservation policy may be considered as impeding physical development. But in the long run, more and more people realize, sometimes too late, that the destruction of one civilization's heritage is not a price, which should be paid for development. The relationship between conservation and rapid economic growth seems much more complex.

Everywhere in Asia today, there is a great strain on the work of revitalization of the cultural heritage because of the industrial and economic construction, which implies conflicts over the utilization of land and different uses of public funds. Land use in city centers with a high speculative land market, is the biggest obstacle to conservation. If conservation takes place, it is very difficult to go against the speculative market forces by trying to maintain the original population that is most often low-income people in the historic area. On the level of personal profit and central land use, conservation might be uneconomical, but it could still be worth and generating a lot of benefits in terms of the future development process.

3. URBAN REVITALIZATION IN NINGBO – A Critical Analysis

Upgrading and new development in urban areas are the positive outcomes of economic growth. They raise living standards and set the platform for continued development. The purpose of the revitalization of an traditional urban area is neither removing the old and constructing the new to satisfy the demand of modern human life nor hastily reconstructing after pulling the old down, but renewing on the base of the heritage of the city in order to succeed to it.

The loss of urban neighborhoods and historic sites was once thought to be the price of progress. However, planners now recognize that preserving the past is an essential part of creating livable, sustainable cities. Revitalization of a city's historic and cultural environment enhances the city and the quality of life for residents by: Preserving evidence of past achievements and cultural traditions; Protecting enjoyable areas of architectural and natural beauty; and Creating energy for development by generating positive identity and civic pride.

3.1 Context of Ningbo

The historic city of Ningbo in the coastal province of Zhejiang is an example of a city working to resolve the inherent conflicts between rapid urbanization and the revitalization of cultural heritage. In the last few years, Ningbo has upgraded basic urban services and facilities while also conserving valuable cultural property in the heart of the old city. The city of Ningbo began evolving before 770 BC and contains many cultural properties from the Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, which give it important cultural and historical values. Today, Ningbo is the second largest city in the province, the center of a massive transportation network and producer of one-fifth of the province's industrial output.

3.2 Background of the Revitalization Process in Ningbo

The revitalization process is one of the most difficult tasks in metropolitan areas worldwide – to find new uses for historic buildings, which provide adequate income for their operation and maintenance. In 1997, by the initiative of the Municipal Government of Ningbo, a team of architectural specialists and preservation consultants began taking stock of the city's historic property, in consultation with local communities. The team suggested some guidelines to lessen the impact of the rapid urbanization on the historic environment and to protect historic properties.

The conservation zone surrounding Yuehu (Moon Lake) area became a symbol of changing attitudes in Ningbo. Yuehu, dating from the 7th century, is an urban oasis in the center of the old city. Much of the lakefront is a jumble of historic buildings and new development, while a quarter of the shoreline is a park for open-air relaxation and recreation. When the project began in 1997, the Ningbo City Planning Bureau intended to allow real estate companies to develop the east bank of the lake. Even though it was designated as a conservation area, plans were being made to sweep away all existing buildings and develop high-rise apartments. Over the course of the project, the rising living standard of Ningbo residents created more demand for pleasant places to spend leisure time. The conservation work, which was done as an isolated way, also raised public's understanding and appreciation of city's cultural heritage. Consequently, the bureau has designated viable historic property on the lakefront for restoration, and established requirements for new development using building setbacks and limits on density and height. The authority was requiring developers to make improvements to the area and lakefront. In addition, historic properties were conserved and conservation work was increased by integrating it into strategic planning and strengthening development controls. Most importantly, there is now a greater appreciation of the importance of preserving cultural heritage among city officials, the public, and private developers.

3.3 The Case of West Yuehu Area Conservation and Renewal Project, Ningbo

Citizen appreciation and positive comment on the conservation work have given city officials the impetus to continue and expand their policy on revitalization of traditional areas. The Yuehu project has stimulated some private groups to begin restoration projects of their own, and developers have learned from experience that their proposals are more likely to be approved if they conform to historic preservation regulations. Experiences in Ningbo show that conservation of cultural heritage can be effectively integrated with urban development to create a city that is both livable and dynamic. In 2002, the local authority of Ningbo has initiated the 'West Yuehu Area Conservation and Renewal Project'. The aim of the project is to revitalize the high-value historic area and to upgrade living environment through detailed conservation and rehabilitation planning.

3.3.1 Existing Condition of West Yuehu Area

The West Yuehu area, which is very close to the present city center, is an important source of historical events, having been the main traditional living area of this city for a long period. In the center of this site, Tian-i-Ge, which was the residence of a former scholar of ancient China, is

presently serving as a museum. Having the public library, local history research center, ancient works creation workshop and sales center, now this complex is acted as the cultural center of this area. There are also some important Temples and mosque scattered over the site, which enhance the historical significances of this area.

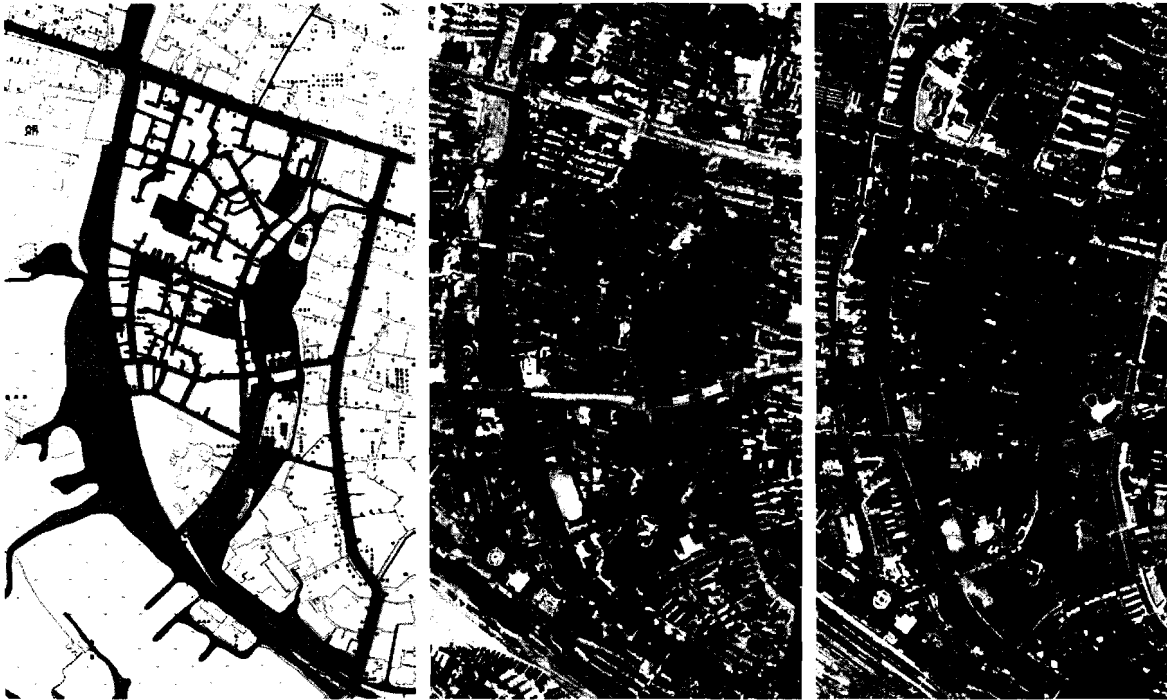


Figure 1 (from left) Ningbo Yuehu area in a.1937, b. 1997, and c. 2002

Except some 6-7 stories apartments at the northern end and the western edge of this area, here most of the buildings are 2 or 3 stories traditional brick houses; always have no wide lane in between. The type of the housing is Chinese courtyard house, which traditionally occupied by a single family but then was shared by several families. Therefore the way to use the houses has been greatly changed. The qualities of the houses are varying from good conditioned privately preserved house to extremely dilapidated houses. There were no private toilets and kitchens and people used the public lavatory, washed their washings in the courtyards, and mostly cooked their food in the halls or simple added huts. There are some buildings, which are a unique amalgam of west and east. The old buildings survived in these decades, time devoted the beauty for those brick facades and lanes. Some of them are still in good condition. Here the building groups make the public spaces, main lanes and branch lanes. The lane in the building groups normally is 3 meters wide, some part of them even narrower, which give a significant character of this traditional area.



Figure 2 Existing traditional structures in West Yuehu area, Ningbo

Most of the residents in this traditional housing area have lower living condition than the minimum standard by the general regulation of old areas. Slightly capable person, especially the young generations prefer to move other places. Therefore, most of the residents living here are poor and aged. We experienced, many owners have a dualistic love/hate relationship with this area.

As a result of longtime ignorance, most of the buildings have fallen out of use and are in a state of disrepair because of lack of proper maintenance. In other words, vital parts of the townscape are in a state of decline. This is a serious threat for the historic urban fabric and for the cultural heritage of the site. How to respect of these buildings, how to respect the old time living behavior and what can we do for this significant old area is the concern of the planning.

3.3.2 Aims and Objectives of the Project

In this revitalization project, the following key issues have considered:

- How to preserve and revitalize the valuable historic area under the rapidly changing market economy?
- Conservation, rehabilitation and renewal, which is the best for this area?
- Spatial structures of the historic area, and their relationship to the life style and the development of the physical environment.
- Location of the site and its potential for the future, patterns in urban conservation and redevelopment under the rapid urbanization.
- The price of urban renewal (social price, economical price, etc.)
- What should we do for the old and the new addition part to correspond with the old in the social transition?

This project is objected to resolve these basic issues. We should make the decision for where to keep and where to demolish. Any new additions should respect the scale and pattern of this historic site. After reconfiguring every necessary services and infrastructures, we still have to keep the most of the original experiences of this old traditional area. It is also a question talking about the new material and new technology which to use into the renew process.

The basic aims of the project:

- To find a way out in the old town renewal, that doesn't follow the dominant practice in Contemporary China to tear done all the old houses and to build unified 6-7 stories high flats in lines.
- To rehabilitate the people who have been originally living here for generations, rather than to move the ordinary people to the outskirts of the city and to sell the new houses to the richer people or to the people with higher social status.
- To workout a method in which the social structure should be preserved and developed during the process of the old town renewal.
- To keep the original street and lane structures as much as possible, therefore the relationships between residents and their outdoor spaces may be well kept.
- To create a new urban quarter and house-form from the tradition in this social transition.

3.3.3 Planning Approaches

Much of the unique character of historic cities comes from the details of their urban fabric – pattern of land use, variety of architectural styles, and local activities, because they are the sum of many interconnected parts. These cultural assets are particularly difficult to maintain when development puts pressure. We have to protect the scale and character of traditional neighborhoods and combat the loss of historic urban fabric. The harmonized developments among the city economy, function, landscape, social, cultural and historical value should be ensured. Which method is adopted to renew the old city must be cautiously thought. So that we can examine the

achievement of city renewal and find the best scheme to protect historical city and excavate cultural meaning.

Prior to the detail master plan, site investigation and feasibility study, and detailed survey of the traditional housing were done to establish a project management system based on GIS technology to guide the overall planning process.

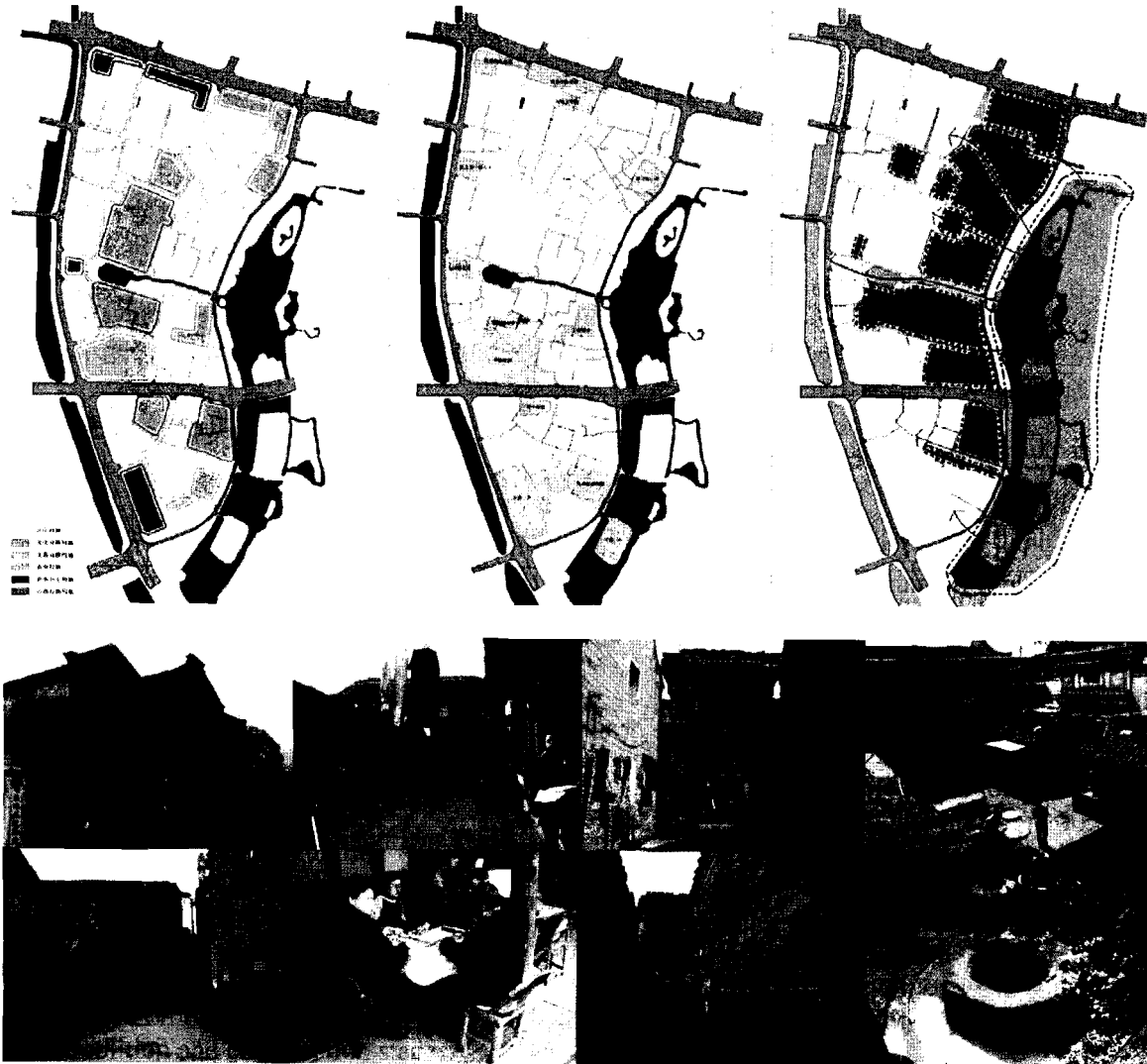


Figure 3 Schematic drawings and analysis of West Yuehu area (top) and some traditional features (bottom)

During the planning process, we have found that one single approach cannot be applicable for a successful revitalization. An integrated planning is essential for this historic site, which will combine conservation, renewal and rehabilitation. All significant structures of this site should be preserved. The outer appearance of the traditional houses should be kept and restored and the living conditions inside should be improved. Necessary service facilities and infrastructures, especially sewerage and drainage system should be provided to ensure a healthy environment. We have to provide private kitchen and toilets, which will not disturb the original timber-framed structure. The new spatial organization should respect the old space layout and relationship between the different use spaces. In the rebuilding process, the old houses in very poor quality should be destroyed and built some new houses based on the concept of the traditional courtyard houses. The networks and patterns of the streets and lanes around the block and within the block

have to keep. The height of the new buildings should be mostly 3-storey high; hence the scale of the residential area will sustain to keep the intimacy within and around the block. The courtyard and outdoor spaces should be kept and recreated therefore the direct relationship of indoor spaces and outdoor spaces will be maintained. A space structure with emphasis on the transition from public to semi-public then to semi-private and finally to the private should be established as in the traditional Chinese residential areas. We have to create some community spaces where the people can seat and talk and children can play.

3.4 Conflicts and Contradiction in Social Transition

The planning guidelines specify that the objective of the plan is to conserve the culturally and historically valuable buildings, traditional environment and the special character of the landscape through adaptive uses. The planning and management of the area is collaboration between planners, local authorities and private developers.

Several factors contribute today to enforce the sensibility to the heritage: the attention to the environment more generally, tightening links between culture and economy, research on particularism to attract investors, feeling or responsibility of the generation of today versus the future generations. Those preoccupations are evidently far from the preoccupations of real estate operators that intend to make money. And the municipal authorities have to deal with the adaptation of their town to the constraints of a boosting development with a lack of financial means. During the policymaking and physical planning process of West Yuehu Area, the private developers gave priority to the short-term profit. When we were planning to demolish the dilapidated traditional houses and proposed low-rise new houses considering the traditional pattern and scale, they were more interested about making high-rise apartments to justify the high land value. However, the accompanying rise in land values and pressure for high density urbanization can lead to the destruction of historic property and disruption of the traditional urban fabric.

The dissociation of these two notions, tradition and authenticity is common and is obvious in urban heritage conservation policy. It should be reminded that the perishable materials (wood and brick) of these constructions make them difficult to protect over the centuries. In this case, there is always a confusion that what techniques should we prefer, traditional repair techniques and materials or the modern rational techniques.

There is a problem for the careful treatment of old buildings that conservation and restoration often is more expensive than new construction. But in maximum cases, the existing inhabitants are not able to bear this expense. In this case, it is very difficult to avoid gentrification, though one of our major objectives was to rehabilitate the people who have been originally living here for generations. But only preserving the high value traditional houses without the presence of the original inhabitants, this area will loose its traditional environment. Again, it is inevitable that people generally aspire to escape form the very past which the intellectuals are attempting to conserve, and which for them is synonymous of discomfort and unhealthy environment.



Figure 4 Narrow streets, a significant character of this traditional area.

So, if gentrification is obvious, in this case, a new group of users of higher income will replace the present occupants. Nowadays, Living in the old town has gradually become more and more popular within the newly affluent higher middle class as a symbol of prejudice. If we go back to history, we can find that before this place was a residential area for the affluent class of that time. In this perspective, we may consider this as a revival of history. But this new user group desires vehicular access to their houses, which demands wider roads. Here the lanes are too narrow to allow the vehicles. Any type of modification will hamper the strong character and unique experiences of these lanes. Thus, by the pressure of rapid economic development and changing social needs, this traditional quarter is confronting adversity for its authentic existence.

4. CONCLUSION

The recent acknowledgement of long neglected heritage has not changed the urban land use strategy. The governmental policy consists of making the land resources as profitable as possible. The logic of real estate profitability leaves the old urban area competing with high-rise buildings, the new symbols of modernity and insurance of rapid returns on investment. And the residents in substandard traditional housing in the downtown area like to have the comfort of living. Having been pushed out to suburb, these former city center residents have most certainly improved their housing conditions, but at the expense of the social elements that gave structure to their lives in the neighborhood. Just one social class is profiting from this clearance of traditional urban area. The desire of maintaining the inhabitants in their house is fundamental in a certain idea of heritage, but is completely unrealistic if we avoid to loose money and if the city does not give subsidies.

The deterioration of a historical city center is perceived differently by a variety of individuals and groups. Some of them may consider the decay to be nothing extraordinary – just a part of life. For others, however, the deterioration creates a whole series of problems, and they therefore will seek relief in a variety of ways, whether it is rehabilitation, conservation, or clearance and building of a modern city center. The perception of the value of such heritage is subject to drastic changes over the years, depending on education, awareness, fashion and external influences. So we need to generate awareness amongst the people for an appreciation of their cultural heritage and the need to conserve it. Awareness is also necessary among professionals and decision makers.

To find out the way of development in this social transition and the way of old city revitalization is difficult to one person or one generation. But the most important is that we should exploit our mind; develop the advantages of our culture, and save our heritage from decay. The challenge today is, while preserving the old historical areas, to be able to develop the sustainable cities of tomorrow.

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