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The Protection and Upgrading of the Ancient City of Suzhou

China

Best Practice

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 - eco-logical design
 - homelessness

Level of Activity: Metropolitan

Ecosystem: Continental

Summary

Suzhou is one of China's most famous ancient cities. It is a city steeped in history with a rich ancient culture and is famous for its scenic spots, water canals, and its traditional Chinese rock and water gardens. With 35 km of waterways and rivers criss-crossing the city, it is often referred to as the "Venice of the East". Bordering Shanghai on the east, Wuxi City on the west, Zhejiang Province to the south and the Yangtze River to the north, Suzhou covers 1,730 square kilometers, with the inner city covering 14.2 square kilometers and a metropolitan area of 102 square kilometers with an inner city population of 1.11 million. In the year 2000, the city's GDP reached RMB 145.1 billion (US\$17.6 billion) or just over RMB 26,400 (US\$3200) per capita.

Suzhou has witnessed the vicissitudes of more than 2500 years since its establishment in 514 B.C. By the early 1980s, however, the ancient city was in urgent need of extension and upgrading owing to rapid economic and demographic growth. But it is not easy to upgrade an ancient city. How to combine the modernization of a city with the protection of its ancient architectural and cultural heritage is both a matter of local and international concern. Fully aware of these difficulties, Suzhou Municipal Government initiated a project geared towards the prudent yet rapid expansion and modernization of the city.

Lessons learned from other cities, such as Beijing where modernization has destroyed much of the city's character and architectural heritage, led the Municipal Government to adopt an approach based on preserving the ancient city's style and features in a comprehensive rather than piece-by-piece manner. The Municipal Government worked out a detailed program for the rehabilitation of 54 neighborhoods in the inner city. A planning and consultant commission was set up with the assistance of domestic and foreign experts to help design the projects. A phased approach was adopted through the implementation of pilot projects in order to gain the necessary expertise and experience and to fine-tune the overall upgrading strategy. This led to the establishment of guidelines, which included the objectives of: improving the overall living conditions of the city; protecting key architectural elements; preserving, restoring and reconstruction where necessary. The policy of operating the entire project based on economic and financial sustainability was also adopted, leading to a combined approach of commercial viability and the use of targeted subsidies.

Years of painstaking efforts have resulted in the equitable resettlement of a substantial portion of the city's population, the betterment of living conditions and improvements to the overall environment. The city has witnessed impressive

improvements in terms of urban green space; water quality; road networks and mobility; and basic infrastructure and services. At the same time, major efforts and investments have been undertaken to protect and preserve the city's architectural features and cultural heritage in order to pass on to future generations an important legacy of Chinese culture and history. This comprehensive approach to preserving the cultural environment has placed Suzhou in a leadership role in terms of culturally sensitive and sustainable urban development.

Narrative

Situation Before the Initiative Began

The old neighborhoods of Suzhou have been suffering from poor infrastructure and services, congested living conditions and poor environmental quality for a long time. Nearly 50 percent of the state-run and publicly owned housing stock was in serious disrepair with more than 60,000 households having to resort to the use of bucket latrines, communal baths, and coal-burning stoves for cooking and heating. Congestion and traffic jams were an everyday occurrence owing to a poor road network. Power supply was erratic and insufficient to meet demand, as were water supply, sewage and gas. An attempt to install a gas network in 1984 failed miserably with constant breakdowns and complaints of inadequate supply. Families resorted to burning coal and thus exacerbating air pollution. Green space was practically inexistent and what did exist was left wanting in terms of maintenance. Many old historic sites cultural relics had been damaged through neglect, disrepair and pollution.

Establishment of Priorities

The municipal government established priorities in 1986 further to a series of consultations with experts, citizens, developers and district governments concerned. These priorities were formulated in the form of an Urban Development Plan subsequently approved by the State Council. The highlights of the plan included the special characteristics and historic value of the cityscape and of selected buildings. The plan involved the upgrading of the inner city including the renovation of historic buildings. This required that the residents move out of the buildings with some opting for alternative housing within the framework of a re-housing policy and others opting to move back again after the completion of the works.

It was clear from the start that the comprehensive conservation of Suzhou's architectural heritage and cultural environment would have to benefit first and foremost the people living in the old neighborhoods where much of the historical legacy was to be found. Owing to very congested living conditions, inadequate road access and many buildings beyond repair, it was necessary to provide alternative housing for 60,000 households, half of which moved to new houses while the other half benefited from upgrading of existing housing stock and neighborhood infrastructure. At the same time, improvements to living conditions in terms of infrastructure and basic services had to benefit other residents of the city as well in order to secure their support and ownership of the project. This resulted in the establishment of the following priorities:

- (a) Living conditions: improvements to the city's overall infrastructure and services including roads; the broadening of streets to ease congestion, improved water supply, sewage disposal, power supply, telecommunications and cable TV, street lights and gas;
- (b) Improvement of water quality including the dredging of old waterways, sewage collection and treatment plants and the removal and relocation of pollution-producing factories;
- (c) Improvements to and increase of urban green space.

Formulation of Objectives and Strategies

The master plan was submitted to the State Council for approval. The Council, in its reply, suggested that that the style and features of the ancient city of Suzhou must be kept intact in the upgrading and that new development be started to the east and west sides bordering the inner city, thus creating "an ancient city with two modern wings". It also suggested that pilot projects be implemented first so as to gain and build upon experience in a gradual and phased approach to rehabilitating the ancient city.

Mobilization of Resources

A special planning commission and an advisory committee were established including such celebrated architects and planners as I.M. Pei, Wu Liangyong, Zhou Ganchi and others from both home and abroad. It was agreed that the whole initiative was to be implemented on the principle of commercial and economic viability, with the careful use of targeted subsidies and fiscal incentives so as to ensure its long-term sustainability.

Funds came from: the Municipal Government; private institutions and individuals; bank loans and foreign direct investment. Profits were realized through the allocation of real estate development rights, providing a cross-subsidy for subsequent phases of the initiative.

Households that opted for new housing benefited from a one-time grant of free housing equivalent to 3m² per person, a 14% discount on the price of housing, as well as preferential treatment in terms of choice of housing in accordance with their specific needs such as proximity to the workplace. Households remaining within the old neighborhoods benefited from subsidies for the repair of housing aimed at improving the livability, infrastructure and services. Special attention was paid to the needs of the elderly, of mothers with young children and other disadvantaged groups, including daycare centers,

health centers, the location of kindergartens and primary schools as well as other recreational and sports facilities.

Process

A total of 54 neighborhoods within the inner city core of 14.2 square kilometers were earmarked for intervention. In accordance with phased approach, a pilot project was initiated in the late 1980s involving No. 50 Shizijie Street with an area of 931.23 square meters involving 85 people in 17 households. The objective was to create a new settlement out of an old residential neighborhood. The rehabilitation effort involved the restoration of houses by preserving their external appearance, improving their interior living functions and improving local infrastructure. In early 1990s, a larger-scale reconstruction project at Shiquanjie went into operation with the traditional pattern of "building houses along the rivers and making the roads and the rivers parallel". This project covered an area of 25,000 square meters and involved 2880 people and 720 households. Next came the reconstruction project at Tongfangxiang designed to renew a whole area with surface of 27,800 square meters involving 1811 people and 665 households. The area was transformed into a unique residential district complete with infrastructure facilities and modern conveniences while the traditional pattern of "small paths opening-up on enchanting vistas" and the traditional architectural features of "elegant pink walls and black-tile roofs" were kept.

The comprehensive approach to conserving the cultural environment necessitated nonetheless the restoration of certain historic buildings and cultural monuments. This involved the restoration and maintenance of Song Dynasty (960-1279), Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and Qing Dynasty (1616-1911) buildings of cultural value situated in the neighborhoods, making these communities more attractive and lively. Some more recent historically valued buildings, relics and time-honored trees were also restored and protected in order to maintain the overall cultural environment of the ancient city.

In order for the rehabilitation effort to benefit a maximum of citizens, parallel projects were implemented to improve infrastructure and service facilities throughout the city. A road network was established involving the broadening of ten streets. Major improvements were also made to the city's water supply and sewage network, power supply, telecommunications, cable TV, streetlights and gas supply. The readjustment of land-use also provided allocations for community facilities such as schools, kindergartens, office space and recreational centers for the aged. Parking lots, green spaces, parks and gardens and green belts were created to ease congestion, improve the urban environment, and improve access and mobility.

A unique feature of Suzhou is the fact that it is criss-crossed by a waterway system including 35 km of rivers within the city center. Efforts in preserving the architectural heritage of the city only make sense if they were integrated with the riparian heritage of the city. A comprehensive approach was adopted by connecting the waterways and rivers and in improving water quality. More than 140 polluting factories were closed down, retro-fitted or relocated outside the city center and the city's sewage treatment capacity increased from 42,500 tons in 1994 to 197,500 tons a day, to reach 377,500 tons by the end of 2002. Green space, including public parks and gardens, walkways and residential green space was increased from 4.66 square kilometers in 1990 to 26.4 square kilometers in 2001, bringing the per capita green space to 5.47 square meters. A green belt around the city was developed through the ecological re-mediation of low-lying land. Original walkways and trees were preserved and all new housing estates were encouraged to develop residential gardens and ponds in line with the city's tradition.

Results Achieved

After ten years of hard work, some welcome results have been achieved in Suzhou's upgrading. The inner city's population has decreased from 350,000 to 290,000, relieving the pressure and congestion in old neighborhoods. More than 30,000 households have been resettled in ten years in new housing estates. This resulted in a per capita increase in floor space from 16.5 m² to 22.4 m². Housing estates, replete with modern infrastructure and services, account today for 79 percent of the housing stock, up from 40 percent in the late 1970s. The city's sewage treatment rate increased from 12.9% to 80.7%, and gas connectivity from 52.3% to 98.5%. Considerable improvements were realized in terms of air quality. Particulate matter was reduced from 0.307 mg/m³ in 1991 to 0.095 mg/m³ in 2001 and the content of SO₂ and CO₂ from 0.069 mg/m³ and 8.5mg/l in 1991 to 0.046mg/m³ and 8.2mg/l in 2001 respectively. A rational road network has taken shape, easing traffic congestion and improving mobility. A total of 54 neighborhoods have been restored, maintaining their residential characteristics while introducing much-needed social and commercial facilities. Today, Suzhou has become once an even more popular tourist destination, with an estimated 16 million tourists a year from both within and outside China. Besides the jobs created directly by the projects, investments in public works and the improvement of the environment have helped diversify the local economy. The expertise and experience gained through conservation work has developed a corps of specialized professionals and artisans in Suzhou who continue to apply their know-how both within and outside the region. Last but not least, the citizens of Suzhou have a renewed pride in their 2,500 year-old city.

Sustainability

The upgrading of the ancient city of Suzhou was conducted in a partnership mode with the government as the enabler and organizer and private developers and the community as the implementers. A series of preferential policies and reduced fees, taxes and tariffs introduced by the government offered strong support and incentives for mobilizing private and individual investment and the timely implementation of the upgrading projects. The financial resources involved came from various channels including bank loans, targeted grants and subsidies, and private investment from within China and abroad. The underlying principle of commercial viability has ensured the sustainability of the operation through the development of new commercial enterprises, real estate development and new knowledge and skills gained.

Land-use planning and the re-remediation and reuse of industrial land has provided for a much more rational layout and land-use pattern, reducing congestion and improving transport and mobility. Traditionally, already a very popular tourist destination, tourism has now been extended to and integrated within the neighborhoods, providing for a judicious integration and mix of residential use, tourist facilities, business and commerce.

The environmental improvements in air and water quality and green space have changed the physiognomy of the city, providing for an environmentally friendly and livable coexistence between urban functions and nature.

Last but not least, the pride and dignity of the people of Suzhou has been enhanced. They have participated in and benefited from substantial improvements to their living conditions and to the growth of the local economy. They have become fully aware of the interconnection and mutually reinforcing relationship between culture and nature, one of the fundamental principles of Feng Shui, which formed the basis of the original design and layout of the ancient city of Suzhou.

Lessons Learned

The key lessons learned from the Suzhou's experience include:

The comprehensive rehabilitation and restoration of architectural heritage and of the cultural environment provides for a more effective entry point and results than a piece-meal approach to historical preservation. The neighborhood approach to conservation allows for the effective participation of all concerned stakeholders and the integration of residential, commercial and infrastructure needs and aspirations.

People are less interested in the "expert approach" to urban development and rehabilitation, which tends to focus on specific problems one-at-a-time. They are more interested in how projects can improve the overall livability of their immediate environment. With their active involvement in project planning and implementation and once they see tangible results, they become much more receptive to other issues such as protecting the natural environment and preserving and maintaining historic relics.

The rehabilitation and restoration of ancient parts of a city should be linked with overall improvements to the rest of the city, such as roads, infrastructure, utilities and social services. In this way, the citizens of the entire city feel a sense of solidarity with and ownership in what may otherwise be perceived as preferential treatment of selected parts of the city.

The conservation of the cultural environment must go hand-in-hand with the conservation of the natural environment. Conservation is an expensive undertaking and it makes no sense to preserve entire neighborhoods or monuments only for them to deteriorate as a result of persistent air and water pollution resulting from unsustainable production and consumption patterns. Environmental awareness and education are key contributing factors to success. For this reason, and despite the hardships involved, the people of Suzhou and the enterprises involved were willing to close down, relocate or retrofit polluting factories and enterprises.

The phased approach to implementing projects, careful planning and timely implementation of projects and cost and quality control enabled the local authority to make adjustments to and fine-tune its strategy and to integrate lessons learned from experience. Mistakes were made initially in: (a) over reliance on government funding; (b) focusing on new construction versus rehabilitation; and (c) lack of transparency in decision-making. These mistakes were overcome in subsequent phases through the active involvement of all stakeholders in planning, design and implementation. This helped mobilise funding from a much greater number of players including the citizens themselves, local, national as well as international real estate developers, enterprises and associations. It also revealed that an integrated approach whereby new construction is undertaken in conjunction with rehabilitation and upgrading.

The principle of commercial and financial viability is essential to the long-term sustainability of any project. This does not mean that all aspects of the project must be profit making or revenue generating. It does imply that any grants or subsidies be carefully targeted and used for their intended purposes. It also implies the creation of a level-playing field, which is essential for the mobilization of private investment.

Transferability

The Party and state leaders as well as experts both at home and abroad speak highly of the originality in the approach and the effectiveness in the results of the upgrading of Suzhou. Mr. Shen Changquan, vice mayor of Suzhou Municipality, delivered a key speech entitled "An Inevitable Choice by History" at the Sino-European Historic Cities Mayor Conference held in Suzhou in April, 1998 when the Suzhou Declaration on Strengthening International Cooperation in Protecting and Developing Historic Cities was adopted. The speech, entitled "The Protection and Development of the Ancient City of Suzhou" by Mr. Chen Deming, Mayor of Suzhou Municipality, at Sino-American Mayors' Conference held in Suzhou in June 2000 and the speech entitled "A Practical Approach to Upgrading Neighbourhoods of the Ancient City of Suzhou" by Mr. Lu Zukang, head of Suzhou Construction Commission, at the "Istanbul +5 Regional High-level Preparatory Meeting for Asia and Pacific and International Seminar on Urban Environment and Housing Development" held in Hangzhou, in October 2000, were both well received.

Such projects as the upgrading of Tongfangxiang, Shilinyuan, No.37 Neighbourhood, have adopted the approach and main

characteristics of the Suzhou initiative and were respectively granted the "National Urban Pilot Residential District Gold Medal" by the Ministry of Construction of China; the title of "2000 Better-off Demonstration Residential District" also by the Ministry of Construction of China and the Ministry of Science and Technology.

Many officials and real estate developers have come to Suzhou for study tours and visits, the most noteworthy are those by Beijing and Shanghai Municipal Governments.

Key Dates

1992: The initiative started.

1994: Ganjianglu Road was completed

1997: The reconstruction of the first batch of neighborhood houses and surroundings were finished.

October 1997: The reconstruction project of Tongfangxiang won the State Pilot Award.

2001: The reconstruction project of the 2nd batch of neighborhood houses and surroundings came to completion and won China Human Settlements and Environment Award.

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Type of Partner Support

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Suzhou Construction (Group) Ltd. Co., Suzhou Jianye Construction Development Co., Suzhou Panmen Travel Development Co. and Suzhou Ganqian Construction Development Co.: Financial and Technical Support
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Type of Partner Support: Financial and Political Support

Financial Profile

Year	Total Budget (Million US \$)	Local Government	Construction (Group) Co.	Jianye Real Estate Co.	Panmen Travel Development Co.	Guanqian Construction Development Co.
2000	93.33	74.3%	6.1%	13.8%	2.3%	3.5%
1999	199.67	47.8%	5.0%	6.5%	10.2%	30.5%
1998	150.27	68.9%	5.9%	10.5%	3.4%	11.2%
1997	116.11	86.2%	5.2%	8.6%	Nil	Nil
1996	82.48	91.7%	8.3%	Nil	Nil	Nil



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