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From Shikumen to Skyscrapers: Strategies for Integrating Shanghai's Past and Present

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Abstract. This article explores the current situation, challenges, and feasible approaches to the preservation of historical buildings in Shanghai. As a city with a unique "Shanghai-style" character, its architecture blends Chinese and Western cultural features. However, during the process of modernization, many historical buildings have been overly renovated or isolated, losing their original vitality and interaction with the city. By analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of different preservation methods, i.e. Preserve the buildings as it is, Adaptive reuse with new functions, and Relocation and reconstruction and by drawing on international cases (such as Xintiandi in Shanghai, Tokyo Station, and the Tate Modern in the UK), the article presents us with core viewpoints that by coordinating architecture characters and diversifying building usage, city goals for history reservation and development goals can be balanced and both achieved. Historical buildings will finally be reintegrated into urban life and become dynamic carriers that continue the city's memory.

Keywords: Historical building preservation, adaptive reuse, diversity building usage

1. Introduction

Shanghai is referred to as a city with "Shanghai-style". When the concessions first took root in Shanghai, the architectural styles from the West and the local Chinese styles had a unique encounter. The elegant and classical atmosphere that often comes to mind is like savoring a glass of red wine in a Western restaurant while listening to soothing piano music. For the young citizens of Shanghai, the Bund is such a typical place that has a kind of historical beauty unexperienced but engraved in heart.

However, strolling through some of the other concession building areas, such as Hengshan Road, people will notice that these once "Shanghai-style" buildings are buried behind excessively whitewashing walls. The walls, stand alongside the deep gray pavement, look hollow and lifeless, leaving large emptiness and space from its pedestrian. As an important street in the center of Shanghai which connects to a series of important scenic spots, the street seems to be vibrant with many people on the streets. But upon closer inspection, there is no interaction between the street and the pedestrians - the bare walls have no signs, no small windows, no small business, and even the walls that seem to be oozing with paint have no moss or stains. No one comes out of those old exquisite little houses, which look forbidden to the pedestrians either. There are few cars on the roadside, and shared bikes are not allowed to be parked. Only leaves fall on this heavily made-up, perfumed street. Overall, this is a barren island without any true "Shanghai-style", which represents

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the city's inclusiveness, mobility and energy. Is this the kind of protection right for Shanghai-style architecture?

Urban planners and architects have long been aware of the importance of preserving old buildings. Since the Athens Charter and the Nara Document on Authenticity, many old buildings around the world have been saved and become part of urban life. Of course, due to various influences such as the government's attitude towards building preservation, economic development, and different understandings of "building preservation" among architects and urban planners in different countries and regions, the protection of old buildings and their current appearance vary. Take East Asia as an example, in Japan, old buildings can be roughly divided into three categories: Chinese-style buildings from the Edo period and earlier, mainly concentrated in Kyoto and Osaka; Western-style buildings from the Meiji Restoration period, during which the "31-meter height limit law" that had a significant impact on the protection of modern Japanese architecture was introduced, mainly located in the Tokyo metropolitan area; and Shinto shrines, which are scattered throughout Japan, from cities to rural areas and even deep mountains. The protection of these buildings also varies, basically reflecting various protection methods in buildings preservation. Chinese-style buildings mostly adopt the "restoration to new" protection method, giving people a sense of grandeur-the white and bright city walls, black eaves and arches standing in the sky, with cherry trees, ginkgo trees, pine trees and maple trees below the walls; Western-style buildings mostly adopt the "restoration to old" method while giving them new functions, and these buildings are located in the city center and have been rejuvenated in the redevelopment projects of surrounding buildings. Urban planners hope to create a classical and elegant urban area with these buildings. Of course, some buildings have also taken detours, such as the dome at the Marunouchi exit of Tokyo Station, which was once demolished and turned into a geometric shape with sharp corners. Through discussion in this article and with the comprehensive best practice in the world, more protection and inheritance methods for Shanghai-style buildings can be sought.

2. Approaches for building conservation

Historic urban streets often depend on those aged buildings with diverse uses to thrive. As Jane Jacobs emphasized, cities must "preserve the existing city fabric, including old buildings" and support dense mixed-usage development [1]. Studies confirm her view that older buildings provide affordable, flexible space for small businesses and streets with diverse building ages have livelier activity patterns [1,2]. In practice, conservation of early-20th-century buildings in China has followed a few modes:

The most straight forward method is to preserve the buildings as it is. Meticulous restoration without changing uses. For example, historic theaters or halls can be refurbished as cultural venues, preserving original materials. This approach protects many buildings but often causes static uses and limited new foot traffic [3,4].

Adaptive reuse with new functions, in other words converting buildings for mixed functions, is wildly used throughout the world. A prominent example is Shanghai Xintiandi, where shikumen facades are preserved while interiors are repurposed into upscale shops, restaurants, offices and leisure facilities [5,6]. Research has shown that mixed-use redevelopment often distributes a large share of area to commerce. Xintiandi's program notably emphasized retail and dining as primary uses, which revived the area commercially though not socially [2,5,6].

Relocation and reconstruction though often used but is not recommended. Dismantling heritage structures and rebuilding replicas or transplanting facades, often result in loss of context and

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authenticity. While this approach can reproduce surface aesthetics, it typically cuts off historical continuity and undermines social meanings attached to place [4,7].

Adaptive reuse is treated as a pragmatic route: Bullen & Love pointed out that adaptive reuse can optimize operational and commercial performance of built assets while retaining heritage values, provided capital, architecture condition and regulatory constraints are addressed [2]. Vafaei et al's systematic review likewise emphasizes that successful reuse respects heritage while adding compatible contemporary elements to generate future value [8]. Thus, in urban practice conservation should combine authenticity safeguards with functionally compatible commercial activation rather than revert buildings to underused museum-like states or allow indiscriminate replication [2,7,8].

When applying the above three approaches, coordinating with surrounding environment is always being considered.

3. Coordinating architectural character

When trying to present historical buildings in urban planning, especially with the need to construct some characteristic streets, it is inevitable to meet with the interweaving of historical buildings and the modern ones. Due to complex reasons, many old architects are surrounded by tremendous numbers of modern buildings. One obvious reason is that with the expansion of the city, old districts such as Shanghai Shanyin Road, Hengshan Road and the old town areas are in the city center while the new-built skyscrapers are later built surround them. When the heritage value of those old buildings were unrecognized, new buildings intruded into those old districts and disrupted the original historical pattern or atmosphere which the original city designers were intended to create. Of course, these historical districts now all have a consistent architectural scale and tree-lined environment. When renovating individual buildings, the façades and their surrounding environment must be coordinated. The uniformity and harmony of the street appearance are equally important.

In practice there are many successful cases. For example, the ICCF Garden project on Hengshan Road in Shanghai (constructed by gmp) preserved and restored the façade of the historical villas from the 1920s to 1930s. The designing team retained the original brick walls, wooden beams and granite decorations as much as possible, and through the strategy of "more exposure and reconstruction", the historical appearance was "brought back to life" [9]. Similarly, in Nihonbashi area when redeveloping the COREDO Chuo series, these redeveloped skyscrapers, such as COREDO Chuo 1, 2, and 3, were strived to echo the "Important Historical Cultural Heritage" Mitsukoshi Main Store and Mitsui Headquarters Building. The cornices of the podiums of these new buildings are all limited to below 31 meters, and the podiums' street-facing façades follow the characteristics of historical Japanese building façades. At the same time, they respect the historical street features in terms of materials and colors, thus achieving the goal of continuing the urban street appearance of the Nihonbashi area and maintaining a continuous street façade [9,10]. The third example is that Tate Modern in the UK integrated the original industrial brick walls into the new design during its renovation, consistently used the material and texture of the façade, while transforming the interior into open exhibition and public spaces for the public [11]. These cases demonstrate that carefully designed juxtapositions of the old and the new can coexist: the old façade continue to define the street image, while the interiors undergo modernization. The above projects have well adhered to this principle.

When it comes to the urban area of Shanghai, the protection of historical buildings often remains within the historical and cultural districts mentioned above. For the majority of buildings outside these districts (referred to as non-retention buildings hereinafter), their fate is being demolished. Historical building protection cannot only be limited to those "valuable building areas" determined

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by architectural experts and meetings. "We must leave space for the corner grocery store!" [1]. “The space” mentioned here is merely a figure of speech, and what is intended to be expressed is the various past spaces buried in the non-retention buildings at the street corners. In the urban area of Shanghai, it is agreed that the buildings listed in the historical and cultural districts are indeed unique, precious, and have historical value, but their number is too small to form a corresponding atmosphere or field to preserve and experience the "space of the past".

4. Diversifying building usages

Some critics have pointed out that preserving only the facade: the conservation community has warned that merely retaining the shell while rewriting the interior would result in the loss of the building's integrity and its context of use. The Venice Charter warns that restoration must not "forge historical evidence" [3], and scholars have also criticized facade preservation. Plevoets has pointed out that preserving only the facade is often seen as a "compromise" or a planning failure and should be treated with caution [12]. However, successful cases such as the Tate Modern show that as long as the original form, materials, and composition are respected, and the new volume is proportionate and compatible in color with the surroundings while still being identifiable, facade preservation can make allowance for the renewal of internal functions while maintaining urban memory [3,11]. Therefore, in the protection of the appearance, the focus should be on the "harmony between the facade and the overall street block", supplemented by moderate modernization of the interior, rather than merely preserving individual buildings in isolation.

The International Charter has clear regulations on this: The Venice Charter (1964) states that any additions are only allowed when they do not weaken the main parts of the building, its traditional appearance or its relationship with the surrounding environment [3]. In other words, the juxtaposition of the old and the new should avoid disrupting the main composition and the character of the district. The Nara Document (1994) further expands the concept of authenticity to include the historical environment and emotional value into consideration, emphasizing that maintaining the external "street scene context" is an important part of protection [4].

A primary obstacle to street vitality is programmatic rigidity. Many early-modern buildings were adapted for single, exclusive uses - bank headquarters, government offices, or luxury hotels - creating enclaves that contribute little to everyday street life. Jane Jacobs argued that street life requires mixed uses and accessible, low-cost premises that incubate small enterprises and social interactions [1]. Comparative studies in Singapore and Shanghai show that adaptive reuse which mixes retail, dining, offices and cultural spaces tends to increase pedestrian flows and economic resilience. Xintiandi is a good example for demonstrating how a re-programmed historic fabric can become commercially vibrant, albeit with critiques on its exclusivity [5,6,13].

International projects illustrate balanced approaches: Tate Modern transformed an industrial hull into a public cultural magnet while embedding cafes and retail that open to the river promenade; Tokyo Station’s restoration combined heritage conservation with retail, dining and public terraces that intensify everyday use at the station forecourt [11,14,15]. Vafaei et al. identify functional adaptation as a critical success factor for reuse projects: the new program must be sustainable, compatible with heritage values, and able to attract continuous public engagement [8]. Therefore, rather than shrinking historic buildings into museum relics or converting them to single-use enclaves, planners should pursue mixed, street-oriented programs that respect authenticity while restoring everyday life to the public realm [2,5,8].

Here, what can be done is often to restore the buildings to their original state. By restoring the ancient buildings and the other buildings, people will be attracted to move back into these buildings.

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At the same time, getting rid of the planning restrictions for various parts of the city and adopting a guiding planning approach might also be considered. Shops under the residential buildings is a key element. The charm of a city lies in people because a city is also a creation by people. However, for a long time, urban planners have always held an opposing attitude towards the commercial spaces spontaneously formed by the public. This is understandable because the supporting facilities in the designated commercial areas and those in the designated residential areas are vastly different. Inserting commercial areas into residential areas will inevitably lead to various safety hazards due to insufficient supporting facilities, such as privately installed electrical appliances and wires flying everywhere. But it is necessary to realize that when activities like purchasing goods, getting haircuts and having meals from these spontaneously emerged commercial facilities keep occurring in daily routine, these commercial facilities will finally become a part of our lives. Perhaps these commercial facilities are not positioned at a high-end level like Xintiandi but they can also be a practical way to bring old buildings back to life.

Returning to the title of this section, Shanghainese believe that although old buildings may cause low residential density or various safety hazards and inconveniences in life, they have existed for so long that they have become part of the city of Shanghai. Their existence in some way helps more in protecting the city's appearance and making the architectural appearance in a more harmonious way than those new towering buildings. Of course, renovating these old buildings is definitely not of necessity, as it would be a waste of resources. However, multiple protection methods can be selected from the various methods mentioned earlier to protect these buildings. Among them, Xintiandi in Shanghai is a typical case: before the renovation, it was an old residential area, and after the renovation, "the Shikumen buildings were retained and transformed into high-end entertainment venues for the elite" [6]. Although the project introduced international brands and luxury businesses, it also brought these heritage buildings back to the core of urban life. Meanwhile, only reconstructed the interior while ignoring the facade and street scene will cause the street to lose its coherence. Therefore, in the protection of architectural appearance, following international principles [3] and drawing on successful cases can be done to emphasize the preservation of the facade and the unity of the overall environment.

5. Conclusion

The preservation of Shanghai's historical architecture requires a balanced approach that integrates heritage conservation with urban development. Through the analysis of various preservation strategies, including restoration, adaptive reuse, and relocation, it becomes evident that adaptive reuse, when executed with sensitivity to authenticity and context, offers the most viable path forward. Successful international cases like Shanghai's Xintiandi, Tokyo Station, and the Tate Modern demonstrate how historical buildings can be revitalized while maintaining their cultural significance and contributing to urban vitality.

Ultimately, Shanghai's architectural heritage must not be erased for uniformity or be reduced to static relics, the former lacks historical depth and later isolates from city life. By harmonizing old and new, diversifying usage activation, embracing flexible, context-aware strategies, the city can weave its historical fabric into the dynamic present, ensuring that "Shanghai-style" remains a living, evolving testament to its cosmopolitan past and future.

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