Urban Renewal and Revitalisation

**Urban renewal and revitalization:** Across China we can see the adoption of urban renewal measures inspired by overseas, mostly European city innovations. Retrofitting of old, existing building stock seems to be supported by economic rationale. However, the unprecedented urban wealth rather has encouraged the destruction and many older neighbourhoods and built environments. With the greening of the building sector, the challenge arises if the can be a green, energy-efficient retrofitting of entire neighbourhoods. Urban renewal is recommended through environmental measures (*Tool URR 1: Environmental instruments for neighbourhood revitalisation*), through measure which revitalise the local economy (*Tool URR 2: Economic instruments for neighbourhood revitalisation*), and the technical retrofitting of the building stock and infrastructure (*Tool URR 3: Social instruments for neighbourhood revitalisation*).
China’s Xian village with Guangzhou’s central business district towering behind. Source: http://www.slate.com/content/dam/slate/articles/news_and_politics/roads/2015/09/150903_RK_Xian-01.jpg
Sector Profile of Urban Renewal and Revitalisation

Introduction. Many cities in the developing world have undergone wholesale transformation of their urban economies, a phenomenon that has typically led to a dramatic shift in the composition of economic activity and the spatial pattern of land use in the urban core. The historic areas of such cities become transformed into tracts of land, highly valued by commercial users. This typically leads to continually increasing pressure to eliminate any remaining vintage housing stock. Most cities in the developing world have paid—and continue to pay—very little attention to urban renewal and revitalisation (URR) of their historic urban core areas, and the housing stock therein. As a result, these areas continue to decline, both in terms of their overall quality and their potential contribution to the city’s housing market and overall economy. Eco-cities should build a bridge between the URR and the concepts of eco-city development.

State of Demand in China. China’s unprecedented urban extension has drawn in recent years again the attention to urban renewal and revitalisation (URR), especially in historical cities. URR in China has been discussed since the creation of the People’s Republic of China. Many studies and attempts have existed to launch larger URR programmes in Beijing, Shanghai and other cities. Many Chinese cities still do have a historic city centre left, though this may be disappearing rapidly. The dramatic urban surge which China has experienced, however, has meant massive destruction of old neighborhoods across all cities. The advent of the car for mass transit, the need for more circulation space has meant the end for many old neighborhoods (hutongs), for instance in Beijing, and tenement housing areas in Shanghai, for example.

Policy Directions. The New Urbanization Policy of 2016 specifically called for action to identify historic cultural blocks and historic building in all cities, and encouragement of integrated urban renewal and revitalisation. (In addition, the new policy has pointed out that within the 13th Five Year Plan all illegal constructions need to be dealt with.)

MoHURD Strategic Objectives, Pronounced at the 2015 Central Urban Work Conference. In December 2015, the following directives were issued in regard to urban renewal and rehabilitation: Complete the ongoing renovation of urban substandard housing, underdeveloped areas in cities, and dilapidated housing by 2020;

- Enhance urban management to build smart cities;
- Adapt the historical heritage into urban strategies. Overall city planning shall consider reforms, technology and culture in order to improve urban sustainability. Cities shall strive to promote the reform of the planning, construction, management, household participation, and other aspects of planning. Cities shall consider the promotion of stable employment and life of the resident population as the primary task... Cities shall protect the traditional Chinese culture, and rehabilitate the city’s historical context, as well as protect the cultural heritage. To combine their historical heritage, regional culture, cities shall promote their own profile.
- Accelerate the reconstruction of urban shantytowns and the transformation of the old districts. Urban development shall take into account nature and ecological restoration. This implies control of the intensity of urban development, promotion of the formation of green low-carbon production. Urban transport, energy, heating, waste water management shall act according to the concept of low-carbon green development.
- Encourage private enterprises and citizens to participate in development and management of their cities.¹
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Post-independence residential areas are candidates for urban renewal – Luoyang</th>
<th>Ancient dilapidated neighbourhoods (hutongs) are in equal need of revitalisation – Dongcheng, Beijing</th>
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<td>Private sector-driven gentrification of hutong houses - near Drum Tower, Beijing</td>
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<td>Improved construction for energy-efficiency in hutong houses - Nanluoguxiang, Beijing</td>
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**Best Practices in Europe.** In Europe there have been meaningful experiments with ecological urban renewal, and it is felt in China that the eco-city approach should also be considered for renewal and revitalisation of historic or older urban areas which warrant investment and upgrading. It is assumed that in the context of URR, eco-city concepts can have an important place and role to play. Like in Europe, there should be scope to build into URR in Chinese cities elements of clean energy, green building technologies, resource-conserving means of water supply, energy-efficient and chemically un-harmful means of waste water treatment, environmentally friendly means of solid
waste management, and green industries. This represents the recognition of the interrelationship and the interdependency between sustainable development and heritage conservation. Maintaining as much of the original fabric as possible is maintaining the character of the historic neighborhood. That’s cultural sustainability, also part of sustainable development. URR in Europe has been multi-dimensional, addressing environmental improvements, the local economy, and social rehabilitation. The recent drive for energy-efficiency in the buildings sector has lead to a wide-spread application of energy-efficient retrofitting programmes (‘green building’ techniques) in the old housing stock.

The following policies have been formulated for URR in Europe.

- **The Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities.** The Charter has indicated the need for modernisation of infrastructure networks and improved energy efficiency, and that deprived neighbourhoods be upgraded.²
- **The Toledo Declaration.** This declaration, highlighted the strategic importance of integrated urban regeneration to achieve a smarter, more sustainable and inclusive urban development. ³
- **The Freiburg Charter – Universal Principles for Creating a Sustainable City.** This Charter has stressed that urban redevelopment will be of special importance in the future.⁴

**Best Practices.** European practices of urban renewal and revitalization cover physical development, environmental and socio-economic development. Some of the most well-known European urban renewal experiences can be found in the following cities and countries:

- **Germany: Cautious urban renewal/ preservation of listed building.** Since the late 1070s a nation-wide area-based participatory urban renewal program of small towns and villages has been implemented.⁵
- **Berlin-Kreuzberg, Germany: Ecological urban renewal.** In the 1980s, the German City-State of Berlin implemented the International Building Exhibition which focused on careful urban renewal of old residential blocks.⁶
- **Copenhagen, Denmark:** Good example of improvement of thermal performance. The energy demand of this property can be reduced by 73% through the combination of different measures.⁷
- **Germany: Urban Neighbourhood Renewal Programme.** German Development Bank (KfW), European Union subsidies, city budgets, and the citizens’ own contributions (of up to 30%). ⁸
- **Copenhagen, Denmark: Copenhagen Green Roofs Program.** In 2008 the City of Copenhagen began exploring alternative ways to handle rainwater in the city. Since then initiation of the programme, the city has mandated green roofs.⁹
- **Vienna, Austria: ‘Sargfabrik’ Urban Renewal Project.** It is one of the pioneer projects in creating apartments on a former factory site. Applied concepts are: optimized energy consumption (energy-saving technology, good insulation), composting, solar water heating, heating for the pool is secured by PV panels, large windows allow maximum use of sunlight. Parking spaces are reduced to minimum.¹⁰
- **Bologna, Italy: Area-wide traffic restraint.** Under a slogan of "A City for Living" the authorities have recently tightened again access to streets in the historic central district while improving bus, trolley, and metro services.¹¹
- **Frankfurt, Germany: Noise Action Plan 2010.** The Frankfurt Noise action plan of 2010 concerns mostly mobility, with the goals established at "reducing noise pollution so as to maintain and improve the city's residential quality". ¹²
- **Vienna, Austria: ecological block renewal programme.** Building renewal opportunities are supported with a maximum of 30 % financial contribution from the EU URBAN fund.¹³
• Gothenburg, Sweden: the first city in the world to issue green bonds. The Green Bond Programmes and funds are used primarily to support projects that counter or help adaptation to climate change.  

State of the art in urban renewal and revitalisation in China. China’s unprecedented urban extension has drawn in recent years again the attention to urban renewal and revitalization (URR), especially in historical cities. URR in China has been discussed since the creation of the People’s Republic of China. Many studies and attempts have existed to launch larger URR programmes in Beijing, Shanghai and other cities. Many Chinese cities have a historic city centre left, though such historic urban areas may be rapidly disappearing under the pressures of real estate development, or the influx of migrant workers which bring their village to the city. The dramatic urban surge which China has experienced, however, has meant massive destruction of old neighbourhoods across all cities. The advent of the car for mass transit, the need for more circulation space has meant the end for many old neighbourhoods (hutongs) in Beijing and tenement housing areas in Shanghai.

Prior to the Olympics in 2008 the international attention was drawn to wholesale destruction of entire neighbourhoods. This has happened despite the Beijing Municipal Government (BMG)’s plan for the conservation of 25 historic areas in Beijing’s Old City, which had been endorsed in 2002. Also in other cities, the path to urban revitalization is a complicated one. This can also be illustrated by the case of Baishizhou, Shenzhen. After large parts of Baishizhou were destroyed, in 2016 intervened and stopped further destruction. It seems that MoHURD’s new interest in urban renewal and revitalization of valuable historic areas has had some positive impact.

Problems of land values. The explosion of urban land values since the early 1990s has meant that historic residential areas have become an object of speculation and investment interest of private developers who have developed many new real estate schemes on the sites of historic residential areas. For many if not most of these this has meant that original population has been compensated and resettled to other, mostly far-off, alternative locations.

Tendency of gentrification. In URR, gentrification is a quite controversial outcome of renewal and revitalization processes. “Gentrification” means that the nature of social and economic character of an urban renewal area is radically changed with the effect that higher class social and economic standards are being introduced which usually are associated the exclusion of the former resident population and small or medium businesses.

Government sponsorship needed. To avoid and control the possible impact of gentrification, government’s support is very much needed if URR is to succeed, and if continuity of the original resident population and small or medium-sized businesses is aimed at. Obviously, most URR schemes intend to introduce higher quality of urban spaces into the old urban fabric, a renewed quality of technical infrastructure, housing, and social services. The tendency will be to bank on the concept of mixed-use compact development which will be adaptable for modern uses and new clients. However, such mixed-use development should ensure a place for the original resident population and small or medium-sized businesses. This is not easy under the pressure to maximize the returns on development of precious, well-located inner-city land, and even if the government will attempt to enforce such policy or approach, in reality it may be difficult to achieve.

Linking Urban Renewal and Revitalization with Eco-City Development. MoHURD’s eco-city programme and the work of some cities to preserve historic areas has brought to the fore the possibility of “ecological” urban renewal and revitalization in old neighbourhoods.

This will be no easy task since it will mean to confront the pressures of market development, the commercialization of land, and the aims of developers. Instead it will have to deal with the resident
population which is under threat of relocation and poor compensation by the conventional URR approach. Ecological URR is (still) a theoretical possibility, it needs yet to be put in practice in China.

Some of the recent URR projects in Beijing seem to clearly to be illustrations of gentrification, replacing old building stock, and generating as per the old pattern high-end replicas for economically more advanced owners (examples in Nanluoguxiang, Beijing) and an outright conversion into “culture streets” and shopping malls (Dashilar/Qianmen area, Beijing). None of these seem to have considered eco-principles (yet).

Entry point for the “greening” of today’s URR can be: (i) renewable energy with solar elements (challenge to marry architectural conservation guidelines with technology requirements); (ii) utilization of “Passivhaus” technology (better insulation of walls, windows, and roofs), (iii) rain water collection (rain water harvesting) facilitated by sloping roofs and open courtyard spaces; (iv) neighbourhood-based waste separation and participation in ecological waste management schemes; and (v) greening of industries through the use of renewable “new” energy sources, and clean(er) production processes. Additionally, there seems to be reasonable good scope for urban agriculture activities in such traditional inner-city areas.

### Proposed Urban Renewal and Revitalization KPIs

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Indicator Category</th>
<th>Indicators: indicative values</th>
<th>Current achievements / Time frame for accomplishment</th>
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<tr>
<td>1  Identify cultural heritage areas and buildings in all cities [1]</td>
<td>100% [1]</td>
<td>By 2020 [1]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 4  Use of non-fossil energy [2]

Sources:

**Outlook and future sector agenda.** The eco-city approach offers something like a new opportunity for historic inner-city areas, and for modern heritage districts. The first wave of URR has affected many heritage areas with the impact of modernization and gentrification. The new potential of new approaches to URR, guided by eco-city principles could mean new chances and opportunities for urban heritage areas. In the absence of clear policies, it will require bold local initiatives by city administrators and investors to promote the eco-approach in urban renewal and revitalisation. As soon as “eco” will be universally fashionable (“chic”), there is good scope that this new approach will
have large(r) scale applications. Retrofitting of old buildings as per energy-efficiency criteria does is a new direction which European green building practices have provided. In China’s old neighbourhoods and old building stock, the green building practices of “passive” housing are yet to come; much will depend on government support, in terms of implementation and financing.

Ecological URR - a new dimension of urban renewal and revitalization. The eco-city approach offers something like a new opportunity for historic inner-city areas, and for modern heritage districts. The first wave of URR has affected many heritage areas with the impact of modernization and gentrification. The new potential of new approaches to URR, guided by eco-city principles can mean new chances and opportunities for urban heritage areas. In the absence of clear policies, it will require bold local initiatives by city administrators and investors to promote the eco-approach in urban renewal and revitalization. As soon as “eco” will be universally fashionable (“chic”), there is good scope that this new approach will have large(r) scale applications.

“China has achieved notable results and gained extensive experience in this area, particularly in: prioritizing urban regeneration, and strengthening top-level design and planning; focusing on regenerating specific types of cities, such as old industrial cities and resource-based urban areas; integrating the renewal of old city districts with the development of new urban areas, optimizing the distribution of urban space, and enhancing the functions of cities; stressing the role of industries and innovations in urban regeneration; and promoting green urban development and preserving cultural heritage of across cities.”

References

1. MoHURD. Meeting notes. 20-21 December 2015.
9. [http://www.klimatilpasning.dk/media/631048/green_roofs_copenhagen.pdf](http://www.klimatilpasning.dk/media/631048/green_roofs_copenhagen.pdf)


These key performance indicators were prepared and compiled by the EC-Link Project. See: EC-Link. 2016. Sino-EU Key Performance Indicators for Eco-Cities. Beijing (unpublished draft)