

Transcultural Engagement in Community Design in China
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Abstract

This article describes an engagement in urban planning between community members and officials in the city of Quanzhou in Southeast China, and an international collaboration of faculty, students and professionals from other locales in China and from North America, Taiwan, and Japan. The engagement explored the utility of participatory community-level planning and design techniques in a context where institutions are hostile to public involvement in decision-making, where community planning is mainly a physical-design activity, and where “participation” is conventionally defined as mobilization for government goals – but where many *de facto* development-related decisions are made by non-state actors.

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Introduction

China's cities may be considered especially inhospitable to community self-determination and participation in environmental design. Not only does policy-making officially remain the prerogative of the Party-State, but the speed and scale of urban environmental change leave little time or space for public deliberation. The expansion and redevelopment of Chinese cities is taking place along lines reminiscent of the post-war reconstruction and Urban Renewal-enabled growth machines in Europe and North America – only at a scale many times larger, and with much growth still to come.² The sudden dislocation and reformulation of urban communities – spatially and socially – is one cost of this “catastrophic investment,” as Jane Jacobs would put it. It is rare that any part of a city or any group of residents is untouched by the whirlwind of development, but a multiplicity of interests and power arrangements conspire to prevent citizens from collectively trying to influence the fate of their neighborhoods.

On the other hand, the very decentralization of fiscal and development-approval powers that stimulated China's urban growth since the late 1970s has also diversified the way planning is carried out. Some cities have adopted policies, goals or unofficial practices that are more responsive to community needs than others. In this sense, the local “political culture” may be more amenable to participation than the general official or “professional culture” of planning and design.

It is such a case that serves as the subject for this article: a series of academic experimental community design activities in the city of Quanzhou, in Fujian Province, between 1993 and 2005. While I have described the first ten years of these activities in Quanzhou in an article in *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, that article focused on pedagogical aspects of the engagement.³ This article presents new material on the latest two years' of activity, and reflects on how this multi-year series of international collaborations between university groups working in one city may have supported the evolution of a local planning culture towards being more transparently engaging of residents.

The Legacy of State-Socialism for Participation in Neighborhood Planning

A number of features of China's "standard" neighborhood planning approach are common to state-socialist systems around the world. Collective (usually State) ownership or control of urban land and the lack of land markets translates to a command-type mode of governance rather than a regulatory one. The official suppression of private interests often translates to definition of the public interest that is at once poorly defined and difficult to challenge. Design tends to be the dominant type of expertise (as opposed to community economic development, for example). Communities-as-neighborhoods tend to be viewed as passive subjects of planning, rather than agents capable of collective action. Broad public "participation" is therefore usually taken to mean "mobilization" for Party/government-defined ends, rather than a means to determine what those ends should be.

While these assumptions underly official and professional planning practice in China, they do not always prepare planners and designers to confront the full reality of urban change.⁴ In Quanzhou, this is especially true. Although as in all Chinese cities since 1949, urban land in Quanzhou nominally belongs to the nation, land-use rights for most residential properties have remained more or less continuously in the hands of the families that owned them before the Communist Party came to power. This persistence of private property is due to the municipal leadership's decision not to collectivize housing even during such radical periods as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, for fear of alienating the residents' hundreds of thousands of Overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) relatives. Like many cities along the south and southwest coast of China, Quanzhou is home (*qiaoxiang*) to a wide network of emigrants who have settled mainly around Southeast Asia but who participate actively in the city's economic, political and cultural life through investments and remittances, visits home, and donations to charity, public services and temples. Yet this influence, and the property rights associated with it, is unofficial and often unrecorded.

Local officials have made a number of concessions to these "constituents" that have greatly influenced the city's planning and design practice.⁵ One of the most important of these is an especially favorable compensation policy for homeowners whose houses are demolished for urban redevelopment. Not only are they given the same amount of floor space that they had in their demolished house, but they have the right to a

unit in their original neighborhood. Whereas in other Chinese cities it is typical of developers to relocate inner-city residents to cheaper land at the city's edge and sell units in the center at higher prices, in Quanzhou their ability to do this is more limited by the compensation policy. It is further limited by the tendency of households in the inner-city to own quite large houses, requiring more floor area to compensate them. Finally, Quanzhou is designated an Historic and Cultural City and "the origin of the maritime silk road" – its many monuments date as early as the Tang dynasty, and include evidence of one of the most cosmopolitan ports in the world in the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries – and therefore the city has established building height restrictions in the historic center that prevent developers from maximizing floor area.

Since the early 1990s, Quanzhou has expanded its edges and widened many major thoroughfares, but for the most part the government has avoided clearing large parcels of existing housing just for the purpose of neighborhood redevelopment. Planners have instead placed priority on regulating private housing construction, improving infrastructure and the public environment, and encouraging residents to invest in preservation and contextual rehabilitation – precisely those tasks for which planners in China are conventionally ill-equipped. In the absence of clear property rights, the property tax system is very undeveloped, and design and construction policy in China lacks such tools as tax incentives; sophisticated density measures; guidelines and other information services; and the linking of home mortgages and insurance to clear property title and building code compliance.

Engaging Communities in Quanzhou

From 1999 to 2004, a collaboration of academic partners introduced a variety of techniques of community engagement to staff of the Quanzhou Municipal Planning Bureau, to assist them with the challenges listed above. Faculty from the University of British Columbia and the University of Washington in Seattle joined counterparts from Tsinghua University School of Architecture and the China Academy of Urban Planning and Design in Beijing to lead students from these schools and other universities in various combinations to demonstrate the techniques in Quanzhou. The Ford Foundation's Governance and Civil Society Unit in Beijing supported these activities, which culminated in a conference organized in Quanzhou by the Municipal Planning Bureau and the national Urban Planning Society of China, on "Democratization of Urban Planning Decision-making" in July 2004. The following year, 2005, the Quanzhou Municipal Government itself funded a project with some of the partners to further use some of the techniques.

A number of communities of different sizes and situations were partners or sites for the exercise of these techniques. The first was the historic lane of *Qinglong Xiang* (roughly pronounced for English-speakers like "Ching-loong Syahng"), or "Green Dragon Lane," whose traditional vernacular architecture was designated for protection by municipal policy (but not law), with a population of 679 residents in 207 households on a site of just over 2 hectares in area. The studio group recognized that Qinglong Xiang

posed a particular challenge to municipal planning authorities in their efforts to enforce preservation policy and building regulations.

The neighborhood was famed for its many fine old courtyard houses and Southeast Asian colonial-style villas of characteristic local granite and red brick. Yet during the 1990s, many owners replaced them with new block-like houses of gleaming white glazed tile. The new homes were many times larger than the old, even to the point of containing much unused space. Often they were built on pieces of an extended family plot that had been subdivided between relatives. They were also as modern as their builders could make them, including air-conditioning and flush toilets when possible (though no sewer main yet exists in the lane). Moreover, these houses frequently exceeded the three-story height limit established by the government for all private housing within the Old City. Despite its inability to enforce these regulations, the government's response was to make them more draconian. The most recent municipal ordinance calls for the eventual reduction of all multi-storey individual houses in the Old City down to two stories, and forbids the enlargement of all existing one-story houses.

The main planning issue identified in the 1999 survey at Qinglong Xiang, therefore, was how to reconcile historic conservation policy with resident aspirations for modernization as expressed in the self-building process. This is especially critical given that the self-building tradition itself is an important part of the city's environmental character. A survey that the Tsinghua-UBC team conducted in summer 1999 concluded that any effective conservation strategy would have to gain the residents' approval, and, more importantly, would need to be implemented primarily by them.⁶ Further research and intervention in Qinglong Xiang (and other similar settings) should therefore address: the more precise definition of historic environmental "character" worthy of conservation; methods of encouraging civic pride in this character and organizing communities to take stewardship over it; and focusing government conservation resources on a few outstanding examples of vernacular architecture or on the public space itself, whose maintenance was beyond the means of the owners.

A participatory project seemed especially feasible in Qinglong Xiang compared with other neighborhoods in the Old City for a number of reasons: (1) the neighborhood was located in the last historically significant area of the city that had not been the subject of any planning work up to that point, and had so far escaped any impact by large-scale development, and its relative isolation appeared to keep any threat of such development at bay; indeed, the municipal government was preparing to make Qinglong Xiang a model of historic conservation in the Old City; (2) community identity as exhibited by the membership of the Elders Association and survey responses by individual residents not only appeared to be strong, it was also contiguous with both the administrative boundary of the neighborhood committee (i.e. it did not spill over into more than one neighborhood committee's jurisdiction) and also the spatial boundaries of the lane itself; (3) a non-state social organization was already in place, in the form of a temple; finally, (4) the ancestral home of the Director of the Planning Bureau himself was located in the lane, and this circumstance provided a special opportunity to demonstrate the government's commitment to whatever plan would come out of the process.

Despite these advantages, different interests within the community became sharply delineated, and challenged the sense of communal purpose that the project was in part intended to foster. Initial meetings with residents by the project partners identified four very clear interest groups:

- (1) residents of well-preserved traditional courtyard housing who advocated a strict interpretation of preservation, including partial demolition of illegally high houses that overlooked them; they resented neighbors who abandoned a local building tradition in favor of a modern form of ostentation;
- (2) residents of dilapidated or crowded old housing who either intended to rebuild and/or enlarge their houses as much as possible, or seek government subsidy to restore them; they may or may not have felt attached to the particular forms of their house, but they resented government preservation policies that prevented them from making their house liveable;
- (3) residents who recently rebuilt their houses to heights that exceeded legal limits; this group wanted the plan to focus on the public facilities of the lane and the preservation/restoration of the remaining old houses, if anything, but adamantly opposed any change to their own houses;
- (4) residents of the poor-quality and illegal developer-spec-built condominium apartment bloc, who were in turn divided into two sub-groups:
 - (a) those who purchased their units from elsewhere in the city and had no particular attachment to this neighborhood; their main concern was not necessarily to remain living there, but to receive adequate compensation and relocation terms if their building were to be demolished as part of a crackdown on illegal construction in the neighborhood; and
 - (b) those who moved from nearby and depended on the location for access to school, job or services; they opposed demolition of the building, despite its poor quality, fearing they would have no where else nearby to live.

Once the project team identified these interests, it proposed to mediate among them and between them and the planning authorities, through the following categories of activity, loosely modeled on the *Planning for Real* approach of the Neighborhood Initiatives Foundation in the United Kingdom:⁷

- (1) publicity, including: close coordination of project activities with festivals, and general close contact with television and newspaper media.
- (2) workshop-style meetings which: acquainted both residents and planning officials with interactive techniques of discussion; made the existence of conflicting interests an explicit and legitimate topic of discussion; formed a “core group” of residents willing to keep the community informed and involved; devised a range of policy options and corresponding trade-offs to respond to each interest; and arrived at a (modest) action plan among representatives of each resident interest group and representatives from each relevant government agency;
- (3) a parallel program of conventional survey research designed to understand the context of the neighborhood, including: interviews with policy makers in various branches and levels of the government, from the municipality down through the district and sub-district to the neighborhood committee; surveys of temple associations and other

- community organizations; surveys of commercial and investment activity in the larger area of the Old City of which Qinglong Xiang is a part;
- 4) a series of technical and design-oriented activities to further clarify various interests and their associated trade-offs, including:
 - (a) a *Planning for Real*-like community modeling exercise in which residents identified problems and opportunities for action by placing cards on a model of the neighborhood;
 - (b) a private housing “design clinic” in which students worked with volunteer households to produce designs that demonstrated compromise between residents’ self-building intentions and government regulations;
 - (c) a public space “envisioning” exercise in which different degrees of change and intervention as proposed by students, planning authorities and residents were illustrated in photo-edited images of the lane;
 - (d) a set of design guidelines to make explicit the relationship between specific design requirements and the principles underlying them;
 - (e) a technical study of upgrading options that the Planning Bureau has commissioned one member of the Tsinghua-UBC team to prepare as a parallel product; this student ultimately produced for the Bureau a physical upgrading plan that attempted to reconcile both resident priorities for public environment improvements and government priorities for contextual housing design and preservation.



Figure 1. Venue for Community Design in Qinglong Xiang, Quanzhou, Fujian, China, February 2000.



Figure 2. Resident interest group brainstorming priorities in Qinglong Xiang, Quanzhou, Fujian, China, February 2000.

Most of the meetings took place in the neighborhood, in the courtyard of the home of one of the Elders Association leaders that he had also made available to the neighborhood committee and local security patrol and which was open most of the time (Figures 1 and 2). Most of the activities focused on Qinglong Xiang outlined above took place within the first year and half of the start of the project, and concentrated in four visits by the academic partners, two of which lasted nearly a month. The municipal authorities showed remarkable leniency in giving the academic partners access to the community and freedom to organize the schedule of activities and determine who would attend. Indeed, this author is unaware of any planning or design activity in a Chinese city that allowed non-local planners from within China and from abroad such a degree of intimacy with community members.

The exercise demonstrated how each interest group among the residents could be engaged and given voice, but it failed to unify the neighborhood around a single collective priority. Had this happened, the residents might have convinced the government to fund infrastructural and public space improvements while imposing a less draconian design policy on private houses. In the absence of this, the municipal planners were unconvinced that the government investment would be worth it, and the plan was not implemented. It appears that neither the residents nor the planners conceived of the public environment as being worthy of investment in itself, without some major intervention being applied to the housing as well.

Despite this failure, one of the techniques demonstrated at Qinglong Xiang impressed the municipal planners enough to prompt the government to pay from its own budget for a repeat application, but in a different neighborhood in the Old City. This technique, the private housing “design clinic,” proved to be sufficiently architectural to appeal to the backgrounds and skill-sets of the planners and the priorities of municipal leaders, even as it provided them with a new way of communicating with residents. In 2005, the Planning Bureau invited a team of University of Washington students in planning, architecture, and landscape architecture students, under this author’s direction, to return to Quanzhou and use the design clinic with professional design staff from the Beijing-based firm of WuHe International (whose manager had been one of the partners in the Ford-funded work earlier), and residents in another historic street in the Old City, Xi Jie (“West Street”).

Xi Jie passes in front of Quanzhou’s most prominent historic monument, the Kai Yuan Temple. Therefore, like Qinglong Xiang, the street is partially off-limits to large-scale redevelopment. However, unlike Qinglong Xiang, Xi Jie is a much more visible street in the city, and is a priority for some kind of improvement by the municipal government. Moreover, Xi Jie is an historically eclectic street, with no single era or style dominating its identity. Despite many attempts by municipal planners and their consultants – including one of China’s most respected historic preservationists and urban designers, Prof. Ruan Yisan of Tongji University in Shanghai – no one has yet produced a set of designs that could govern a large-scale “restoration” of the street.

The use of a design clinic would involve pairing volunteer homeowners along the street with the student-professional design teams to produce detailed upgrading designs for their houses that would both conform to historic district regulations as well as satisfy the owners’ aspirations for more modern living. The aesthetic result would be to blend old and new elements in each house according to the owner’s and the designer’s decision, thus maintain both the street’s characteristic eclecticism as well as a continuity with the past. The municipal planner responsible for this high-profile project sought to subsidize a few “model” households to demonstrate this approach, in the hope that other property owners along the street would follow suit.⁸ Figures 3, 4 and 5 illustrate some of the design ideas produced in Quanzhou over two weeks by the Sino-American student teams, and then refined by the WuHe staff in Beijing over the following months.



现状



方案一



方案二

Figure 3. One volunteer owner's property in Xi Jie, Quanzhou, shown in existing condition at top, with two alternative remodeling schemes below. Designers: Jin Xin, Man Sha, Lee Roberts.

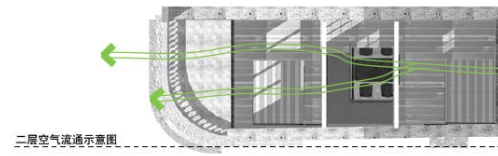
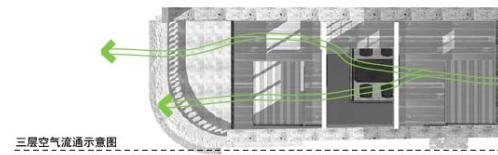
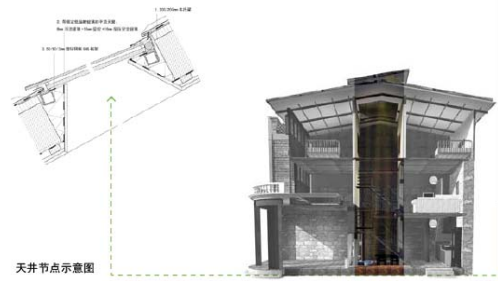


Figure 4. Interior views of remodel scheme for house shown in Figure 3.



Figure 5. Exterior rendering for a remodel of a second property in Xi Jie, Quanzhou, emphasizing the combination of contemporary and historic materials and craft. Designers: Chen Lu, Jayde Lin Roberts, Zhang Ying.

The “propaganda value” of this mode of participation cannot be ignored. By employing an international design team, the planners hoped to impress upon local political leaders as well as residents that this process of neighborhood preservation and revitalization represents state-of-the-art professional practice. The use of international expertise to legitimize development decision-making is certainly not unusual in China, but this practice usually supports a globally homogenizing impulse rather than a locally engaged one.⁹

The design clinic is not a tool for collective action; it is more a tool for one-on-one negotiation between residents and planners. However, it is also means of providing a service to residents, and of giving expression to resident aspirations. In the long run, the design clinic may help both residents and government to clarify and harmonize their understanding of the distinction between public/governmental and private/family realms and responsibilities; and residents themselves may find a basis for their own communal interest in revitalizing the neighborhood, regardless of government priorities.

Endnotes

¹The author studied for his Master of Architecture and Master in City Planning degrees at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology while working on the Special Interest Group in Urban Settlements' Poland Housing Initiatives in participatory planning, and wrote his Masters thesis based on this work. In China, he studied for his doctoral degree in Urban Planning at Tsinghua University in Beijing from 1992 through 1997, and continued to work on participatory planning projects in Quanzhou as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia and a faculty member at the University of Washington.

² For a comparison with the Urban Renewal era, see Yan Zhang and Ke Fang, "Is History Repeating Itself? From Urban Renewal in the United States to Inner-City Redevelopment in China," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 23, no. 3 (2004): 286-98. The urban proportion of China's population has likely doubled in the past twenty-five years, and in the 1990s China's urban population may have surpassed either Europe's or North America's, but still the country's rate of urbanization only equals that of the West in the year 1900. For Europe and North America up to 1980, see Paul Bairoch, *Cities and Economic Development: From the Dawn of History to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), Tables 18.1 and 19.1. For China up to 1950, see Alfred Schinz, *Cities in China* (Berlin: G. Borntraeger, 1989), Figures 10 and 19, and pp. 39-43. For China since 1950, and Europe and North America since 1980, see United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2004), Tables A.2 and A.3. The jump in urbanization rate for Europe and North America after 1980 is due to the change in data source from Bairoch (1988) to United Nations (2004); the latter source consistently indicates a higher rate of urbanization for both Europe and North America. The data for Europe do not include Russia/USSR.

³ Daniel Benjamin Abramson, "The 'Studio Abroad' as a Mode of Trans-Cultural Engagement in Urban Planning: A Reflection on Ten Years of Sino-Canadian Educational Exchange," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 25, no. 1 (2005): 89-102.

⁴ Michael Leaf, "Urban Planning and Urban Reality under Chinese Economic Reforms," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 18, no. 2 (1998): 145-53.

⁵ Daniel Abramson, Michael Leaf, and Ying Tan, "Social Research and the Localization of Chinese Urban Planning Practice: Some Ideas from Quanzhou, Fujian," in *The New Chinese City: Globalization and Market Reform*, ed. John R. Logan, *Studies in Urban and Social Change* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 227-45, Michael Leaf and Daniel Abramson, "Global Networks, Civil Society, and the Transformation of the Urban Core in Quanzhou, China," in *Southern California and the World*, ed. Eric John Heikkila and Rafael Pizarro (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002), pp. 153-78.

⁶ Daniel Abramson, Michael Leaf, and the students of UBC Plan 545B, "Urban Development and Redevelopment in Quanzhou, China: A Field Studio Report," (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, Centre for Human Settlements, 2000).

⁷ This author gained experience with this technique in a participatory planning exercise with a housing cooperative in Lublin, Poland, in 1991-1992. Daniel Abramson, "Participatory Planning with a Polish Housing Cooperative: The Context Set by Political Reconstruction," *Open House International* 20, no. 1 (1995): 35-41.

⁸ Yihui Li, "Xijie Zhengzhi Baohu You Le Xin Silu [New Thinking for the Upgrading and Preservation of West Street]," *Haixia dushi bao [Strait News] [Electronic edition]*, 9 November 2005, <http://www.hxdsb.com/news/2005-11-09/20051123151736.html>.

⁹ Kris Olds, *Globalization and Urban Change: Capital, Culture, and Pacific Rim Mega-Projects* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).