



# A Study on Innovative Strategies for Spatial Renewal Design in the Context of Rapid Urbanization: A Case Study of Nanjing Menxi Area

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## Abstract

**Background and Aim:** Rapid urbanization poses challenges for balancing modern development with the preservation of historical and cultural elements. This study focuses on the Nanjing Menxi area to explore strategies for spatial renewal design that integrate contemporary needs with historical continuity, aiming to enhance urban spaces while preserving cultural heritage.

**Materials and Methods:** A mixed-method approach was used, involving case studies, field observations, and design analysis. Key strategies such as formal language, functional transformation, and contextual continuity were examined in the Menxi area. Interviews with local stakeholders provided insights into community needs and the cultural value of the space.

**Results:** Findings reveal that innovative formal language redefines urban aesthetics, while functional transformation maximizes resource use through multifunctional spaces. The fusion of historical and modern elements via contextual continuity enhances both the character and functionality of urban spaces. Stakeholder engagement and sustainable technologies contributed to the success of the renewal.

**Conclusion:** The study demonstrates that integrating innovative design, community input, and sustainable practices can achieve a balanced approach to urban renewal, offering a model for other historically rich areas undergoing modernization.

**Keywords:** Spatial Renewal; Urbanization; Sustainable Development; Cultural Heritage

## Introduction

Urbanization stands as one of the defining characteristics of contemporary society, dramatically reshaping cities and their landscapes. The rapid development of urban areas, particularly in first-tier cities, poses significant challenges, including environmental degradation, social fragmentation, and the erosion of cultural heritage (Wang 2014). As cities expand, the need for effective spatial renewal strategies becomes critical, not only to enhance urban functionality but also to preserve the historical and cultural narratives that define these spaces.

This study focuses on the Menxi area of Nanjing, a region characterized by a rich cultural history yet facing the pressures of modernization and urban development. The renewal of this area presents a unique opportunity to explore innovative design strategies that reconcile contemporary urban needs with the preservation of cultural identity. Traditional approaches to urban renewal often fall short, leading to design saturation and a loss of individuality in newly developed spaces. Therefore, there is an urgent need to adopt strategies that emphasize the integration of historical, cultural, and environmental elements into the renewal process.

The core aim of this research is to propose innovative strategies for spatial renewal design that facilitate sustainable development while honoring the distinct cultural heritage of Nanjing's Menxi area. By synthesizing theoretical frameworks and practical case analyses, this study seeks to illuminate pathways for effective urban renewal that not only enhance spatial quality but also promote community involvement and strengthen social ties.

Through this exploration, the research aims to contribute valuable insights into the evolving discourse on urban renewal, providing a framework for future initiatives that can navigate the complexities of rapid urbanization. Ultimately, the findings will inform urban planners, designers, and policymakers about the potential of innovative strategies to create vibrant, sustainable urban environments that respect and reflect their historical contexts.





## Objectives

1. To study the challenges of urban renewal in the Nanjing Menxi area, focusing on design saturation and cultural preservation.
2. To analyze existing renewal practices and their impacts on the community and environment.
3. To design innovative spatial renewal strategies that integrate historical and cultural elements, enhancing sustainable development in the area.

## Literature review

Urban spatial renewal in the context of rapid urbanization has been widely studied in recent decades, particularly as cities around the world struggle to balance modernization with cultural preservation. Scholars have explored various approaches to redesigning and revitalizing urban spaces while maintaining historical continuity. The existing literature offers a comprehensive foundation on renewal strategies, emphasizing sustainability, innovation, and historical preservation, all of which are integral to effective urban planning.

Rapid urbanization has brought both opportunities and challenges to city development. On one hand, urban expansion is essential for economic growth and modernization; on the other hand, it risks erasing local cultural identities and historical heritage, especially in cities undergoing fast-paced development. Many first-tier cities have been criticized for design saturation, a term that refers to the widespread adoption of generic architectural forms without regard to local context. As Merleau (2001) notes, many cities prioritize economic growth and modernization over thoughtful design, which often leads to homogenous urban landscapes lacking cultural distinctiveness. This saturation results in cities losing their unique character, diminishing their ability to attract and engage both residents and visitors.

Theories of sustainable urban renewal focus on rethinking how spaces can serve multiple functions while preserving their historical significance. According to Li, Chen, and Wang (2019), effective renewal integrates local culture, community involvement, and environmental sustainability, creating spaces that address contemporary needs without sacrificing the past. The concept of "contextual continuity" plays a significant role in this process, emphasizing the preservation of traditional elements, such as architecture, urban layout, and cultural landmarks, while innovating to meet modern demands. This framework allows for a hybrid approach to urban design, blending historical identity with contemporary functionality, which has proven successful in cities like Barcelona and Shanghai.

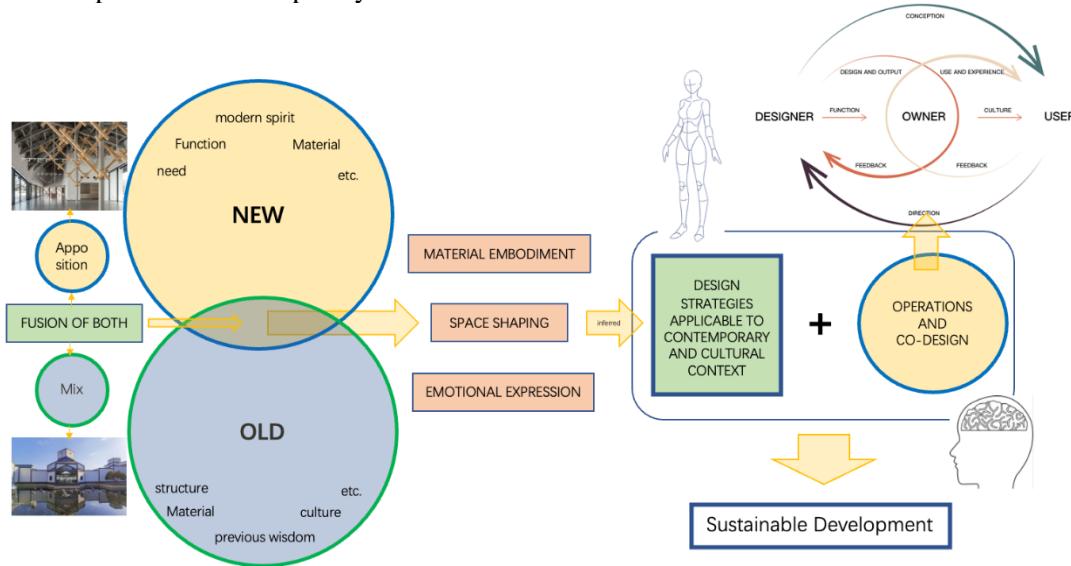
Case studies offer valuable insights into how cities have navigated the challenges of urban renewal. For example, the redevelopment of Barcelona's historic quarters managed to harmonize modern infrastructure with the city's medieval street patterns, thereby enhancing both its aesthetic value and economic vitality (Han, 2022). Similarly, the Xintiandi project in Shanghai stands out as a leading example of how to blend preservation and modernization. (Kimbell, 2011) Describe how old shikumen-style buildings were repurposed into modern commercial spaces without losing their historic charm, which not only revitalized the district but also maintained its cultural essence.

Despite these successful examples, there remain several challenges in the literature on urban renewal. One challenge involves reconciling the needs of rapid development with the preservation of historical environments. While many scholars agree on the importance of contextual continuity, there is less consensus on how to practically implement it in cities facing rapid urban growth, where space is limited and the pressure for economic development is high. Another gap involves the role of community participation in renewal projects. Although community engagement is often cited as a key factor in sustainable urban design, its application in high-density, fast-growing urban environments is underexplored. Additionally, technological integration in renewal projects—particularly the use of smart city infrastructure—while discussed in theory, lacks comprehensive case studies detailing its practical application and long-term benefits.



## Conceptual Framework

In the context of spatial renewal design, the conceptual framework centers on the organic integration of historical and contemporary elements, fostering a harmonious coexistence that respects tradition while embracing innovation. This approach involves a careful examination of the existing urban fabric, identifying historical features and cultural symbols that define a locale's identity. By reinterpreting these elements through modern design practices, such as the use of contemporary materials, innovative spatial layouts, and advanced technologies, designers can create environments that resonate with both the past and the present. This synthesis not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of urban spaces but also promotes a sense of belonging and continuity among residents. The successful fusion of old and new ultimately contributes to the sustainability and vibrancy of urban renewal projects, ensuring that they are both reflective of cultural heritage and adaptable to contemporary needs.



**Figure 1** Framework of the new and old combination method  
(The picture comes from self-drawing)

## Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach to explore the innovative strategies for spatial renewal design in the context of rapid urbanization, focusing on the Nanjing Menxi area. The research methodology integrates qualitative and quantitative methods, combining case studies, expert interviews, and field observations to provide a comprehensive analysis of how modern and traditional elements can be organically fused in urban design.

### Case Study Analysis

The primary method used is case study analysis, focusing on selected urban renewal projects that demonstrate the successful integration of modern innovations with historical preservation. These case studies are drawn from Nanjing and other cities with similar historical contexts and urbanization challenges. The case study approach allows for a detailed examination of the design strategies, planning processes, and outcomes, offering insights into how different strategies can be applied in practice. Relevant examples include Nanjing's urban renewal projects that prioritize the preservation of cultural landmarks while integrating modern functions into the cityscape.

### Field Observations

Field observations are conducted in the Nanjing Menxi area to document the existing urban fabric, architectural elements, and spatial configurations. These observations provide a first-hand understanding



of the current state of historical buildings, public spaces, and how residents interact with the environment. Data collected through photographic documentation and sketches support the visual analysis of spatial elements and their potential for renewal. Observations focus on areas where historical and modern designs intersect, identifying opportunities for improved integration and revitalization.

### Expert Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with urban planners, architects, and heritage conservation experts who have experience in balancing modern interventions with historical preservation. The interviews aim to gather expert opinions on the practical challenges of integrating new design elements into old urban areas, as well as the strategies they believe are most effective in achieving this balance. Insights from these professionals help to refine the theoretical framework and provide practical recommendations for the renewal of the Nanjing Menxi area.

### Literature Review

A thorough literature review supports the theoretical framework of the study. It involves analyzing academic articles, books, and reports related to urban renewal, architectural design, and cultural preservation. The literature provides context for the case studies and helps identify global trends and best practices in spatial renewal. The review also highlights gaps in current research, which this study aims to address by focusing on the organic fusion of new and old in urban design.

### Comparative Analysis

Comparative analysis is used to evaluate the effectiveness of different spatial renewal strategies. The selected case studies from various cities are compared based on criteria such as design innovation, preservation of historical context, and public engagement. This analysis helps identify which strategies are most effective in achieving a harmonious blend of modernity and tradition, providing a reference for the Nanjing Menxi project.

This mixed-method approach ensures that the research is grounded in both theoretical knowledge and practical experience, providing a comprehensive understanding of how spatial renewal can be achieved in rapidly urbanizing cities. The combination of case studies, fieldwork, expert insights, and literature review allows for a well-rounded exploration of innovative strategies in urban design.

## Results

Based on interviews with five experts, along with field research and literature review, this study has drawn the following results. The insights provided by the experts, combined with the research data, highlight the significance of the organic integration of historical and modern elements in spatial renewal design and emphasize the effectiveness of strategies such as functional transformation and continuity of context in enhancing urban spatial quality. These results offer valuable guidance and reference for future urban renewal practices.

### Formal Language

"The Concept of Dwelling" states that "If an architect wants to create a genuine experience and feeling, they must use and combine forms that can captivate observers and induce them to actively observe." (Rasmussen, 2003) Formal language plays a crucial role in urban spatial renewal design, encompassing various aspects such as architectural appearances, street layouts, and landscape designs. Through a creative design language, it redefines and shapes urban spaces. In the "Nanhuchu Memory" urban renewal project in Nanjing Nanhuchu region, designers combined storefront signage with traditional typography in their visual language, resulting in sustained attraction of considerable foot traffic (Figure 2). Formal language goes beyond spatial visual representation; it reflects urban culture, history, and society. In urban renewal, appropriate formal language can maintain the uniqueness of a city while infusing it with new life and vitality.





**Figure 2** Visual Language Update Design Case  
(The picture comes from XHS)

In the context of spatial renewal, the application of formal language necessitates the careful fusion of history and modernity. Through the reinterpretation of traditional elements, such as architectural styles, material selections, and decorative details, the continuity of historical context can be achieved. Simultaneously, the infusion of modern innovation into formal language injects a contemporary essence, catering to contemporary needs. This fusion of history and modernity enriches urban spaces with profound meaning and reflects the sustainable development of urban renewal.

Phenomenology of Perception emphasizes the interpretation of human perception through the body as a medium, asserting that the eyes are not mere tools of perception. (Merleau,2001) The design of formal language should emphasize the creation of spatial sequences and the guidance of visual cues. Through thoughtful layout and design, a seamless spatial sequence can be crafted, enchanting individuals to linger in the city. Visual cues, facilitated by architectural forms, colors, scales, and other elements, direct gazes and steps, generating a delightful spatial experience. This visual guidance holds particular significance in urban renewal, instilling a sense of order and vibrancy within the city.

The design of formal language requires the consideration of cross-scale and multilayered requirements. It involves not only the appearance of individual buildings but also their relationship with the surrounding environment and their coordination within the urban context. Unity and diversity across different scales contribute to a richer experience of urban spatial renewal. Simultaneously, multilayered design thinking facilitates the diversification of urban spatial functions, meeting the needs of various demographic groups.

In the realm of spatial renewal design, the application of formal language necessitates the comprehensive consideration of multiple factors, including history, culture, environment, and functionality, to achieve a comprehensive upgrade and enhancement of urban spaces. Through innovative formal language, cities can rejuvenate with newfound vitality, crafting a more desirable living environment for their citizens.

### Functional Transformation

Functional transformation serves as a critical strategy in urban spatial renewal, emphasizing the redefinition and adjustment of spatial functions to maximize resource utilization and optimize the urban environment. In urban renewal, old buildings, sites, or areas often fall into disuse due to outdated functions.

Through functional transformation, these resources can be revitalized, contributing to the city's sustainable development.

The core of functional transformation lies in the transition from single-function to multifunction spaces. Historically, urban spatial functions were confined to specific purposes, yet with the diversification of urban needs, this singularity increasingly fails to meet the multifaceted demands of urban residents. By redesigning and transforming existing structures, sites, or areas, they can adapt to various functional requirements, thereby maximizing resource utilization. For example, in the context of traditional residential renewal design, where the original function was residential, after undergoing renewal design, the function could evolve into that of a library, gallery, or community center (Figure 3).



**Figure 3** Schematic diagram of function conversion  
(The picture comes from self-drawing)

In the realm of functional transformation, innovative technologies play a crucial role. Modern technologies such as smart systems, sustainable energy, and digitization can introduce fresh perspectives and possibilities to spatial renewal design. For instance, transforming aging industrial factories into creative industry parks, while incorporating intelligent technologies, achieves functional transformation and introduces new economic growth points to the city.

The success of functional transformation requires the participation and support of stakeholders. Community residents play a significant role in functional transformation, as they possess insights into the historical and cultural significance of spaces, thus offering valuable suggestions. Simultaneously, both residents and external individuals become users of the renewed spaces, necessitating the consideration of

multifaceted interests in spatial design. In this design, the placement of villagers' activities within the same space as the library (Figure 4) safeguards multiple stakeholder interests. Furthermore, functional transformation should be aligned with principles of sustainable development, ensuring the renewed spaces are economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable.



**Figure 4** Functional Transformation Applied to Design  
(The picture comes from self-drawing)

In conclusion, functional transformation, as a pivotal strategy in urban spatial renewal, emphasizes the maximization of resource utilization and optimization of the urban environment. The transition from single-function to multifunction spaces, application of innovative technologies, community participation, and alignment with sustainable development principles collectively facilitate a comprehensive upgrade and enhancement of urban spaces.

#### Continuity of Context

The continuity of context represents a crucial strategy within urban spatial renewal design, emphasizing the integration of historical, cultural, and environmental characteristics into renewal design to respect and continue the city's historical context. This strategy evokes an emotional resonance with users that transcends mere physical pleasure, delving into spiritual delight. (Kimbrell, 2011) By retaining and inheriting historical traces within renewal design, the city can preserve its distinctiveness and continuity while providing users with emotional experiences connected to the past.

Continuity of context demands an organic fusion of urban history with contemporary needs. Within spatial renewal, preserving historical architecture and elements while integrating modern technology and functions can create spaces that possess both historical depth and contemporary utility. This fusion extends beyond mere form, encompassing spatial ambiance and cultural significance. In this design, even though modern materials like metal were used in the modern wooden roof (Figure 5), it forms a contrast with the traditional "liangzhu" system on the other side of the building (Figure 6), triggering associations with traditional residences. This design balances heritage and innovation.



**Figure 5** Inheriting culture through design  
(The picture comes from self-drawing)



**Figure 6** Sectional view  
(The picture comes from self-drawing)

The design strategy of continuity of context aims to organically merge the inheritance of urban culture with innovation. Traditional cultural elements serve as more than just unique symbols; they represent the core of urban culture. By appropriately integrating traditional cultural symbols, icons, and activities into renewal design, a cultural atmosphere can be cultivated in the city, fostering a sense of belonging and identity among its residents.

In the design process of continuity of context, a balance between public involvement and historical value must be struck. Public participation brings diverse opinions and perspectives, contributing to the



protection of historical context. Nevertheless, while safeguarding historical value, excessive alteration and interference must be avoided to maintain the authenticity and purity of historical heritage.

To conclude, continuity of context, as a core strategy in urban spatial renewal design, emphasizes the preservation of historical cultural heritage and the continuation of the city's uniqueness and continuity. Through the integration of urban history with contemporary needs, the inheritance and innovation of urban culture, the balance between public involvement and historical value, and the sustainable development of urban spaces and cultural heritage can be achieved.

## Discussion

In this section analyze and interpret the results obtained from the application of the three core strategies—formal language, functional transformation, and continuity of context—in the spatial renewal of Nanjing Menxi Area. This analysis not only emphasizes the strengths and challenges of each approach but also reflects on their broader implications for urban renewal under the pressures of rapid urbanization.

First, the use of formal language has proven to be an essential tool for creating a meaningful connection between the past and the present. By combining traditional architectural elements with modern design techniques, urban spaces gain a fresh identity while maintaining their historical significance. This synthesis allows for a visually engaging environment that appeals to both residents and visitors, as evidenced by the increased foot traffic in the "Nanhuchu Memory" project. However, one challenge with formal language is balancing aesthetic innovation with cultural authenticity. Excessive modernization risks diluting the historical essence of a space, which may disconnect users from the cultural context they expect to experience.

Second, functional transformation highlights the critical role of adaptive reuse in urban renewal. The transition from single-function to multifunctional spaces not only enhances resource efficiency but also addresses evolving social needs. By redesigning old structures for new purposes, cities can maximize the utility of limited urban spaces. For example, transforming traditional residential spaces into community centers or galleries has revitalized underutilized areas. A key observation here is that functional transformation relies heavily on stakeholder engagement—both residents and external users—to ensure that the new functions meet diverse community needs. However, one potential drawback is the risk of over-commercialization, which might compromise the cultural and social fabric of the area.

Finally, the strategy of continuity of context underscores the importance of preserving a city's historical and cultural identity during renewal projects. By integrating historical traces and symbols with modern design, a unique spatial narrative is created that fosters a sense of belonging among residents. This approach, however, poses a challenge: how to achieve innovation without compromising the integrity of cultural heritage. Balancing public involvement with historical preservation is crucial, as too much intervention might alter the authenticity of the space, while insufficient engagement risks neglecting the community's evolving needs.

Overall, the strategies of formal language, functional transformation, and continuity of context demonstrate a holistic approach to urban renewal that aligns with the sustainable development goals of modern cities. However, challenges such as maintaining cultural authenticity, avoiding over-commercialization, and striking the right balance between innovation and preservation must be carefully managed. These findings contribute to a growing body of research on how cities can adapt to rapid urbanization while preserving their historical and cultural heritage. The discussion reveals that successful spatial renewal hinges on an integrative approach that respects the past while embracing future possibilities.

## Conclusion

The study on innovative strategies for spatial renewal design in the context of rapid urbanization, focusing on the Nanjing Menxi area, reveals that balancing the preservation of historical and cultural heritage with the demands of modern urban development is both necessary and feasible. By applying the strategies of formal language, functional transformation, and continuity of context, the renewal process can harmoniously integrate the old with the new, resulting in spaces that are not only visually and functionally appealing but also culturally rich and socially inclusive.

The use of formal language allows cities to reimagine their spatial identity, merging historical elements with contemporary design, creating environments that engage the public and retain cultural significance. Functional transformation emphasizes the importance of adaptive reuse, ensuring that urban spaces remain relevant and efficient in meeting evolving societal needs. Meanwhile, continuity of context ensures that urban renewal projects respect and enhance a city's unique historical and cultural narrative, fostering a sense of community and belonging.



The challenges, such as maintaining cultural authenticity, avoiding over-commercialization, and effectively involving stakeholders, must be addressed to ensure sustainable and meaningful urban renewal. This study underscores the importance of a holistic and context-sensitive approach to urban renewal, one that respects a city's past while positioning it for future growth and vitality.

In conclusion, the findings of this research contribute to the broader understanding of how cities undergoing rapid urbanization can leverage innovative strategies to achieve sustainable development. The case of Nanjing Menxi area serves as a valuable model for other historic urban enclaves facing similar challenges. Future urban renewal efforts should continue to explore and refine these strategies, ensuring that urban spaces remain vibrant, functional, and reflective of their rich heritage.

## Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study on innovative strategies for spatial renewal design in the Nanjing Menxi area, several recommendations can be made for future urban renewal projects, particularly those in rapidly urbanizing regions:

### 1. Adopt a Holistic Design Approach

Urban renewal projects should integrate formal language, functional transformation, and continuity of context. This approach will ensure that design solutions are not only visually appealing but also address cultural, social, and functional aspects of the urban environment. By incorporating traditional elements into modern design and ensuring functional flexibility, renewed spaces can cater to contemporary needs while preserving cultural heritage.

### 2. Encourage Stakeholder Participation

Successful spatial renewal requires the involvement of diverse stakeholders, including local communities, urban planners, designers, and policymakers. It is essential to engage community members from the planning stage to understand their needs, cultural values, and historical connections to the space. By fostering collaboration, urban renewal projects can achieve a balanced development that respects local history and promotes long-term community engagement.

### 3. Implement Smart and Sustainable Technologies

Incorporating modern technologies, such as smart systems and sustainable energy solutions, into renewal projects will enhance the functionality and environmental sustainability of urban spaces. Technologies like energy-efficient lighting, smart waste management, and green building materials can contribute to resource efficiency and align with the goals of sustainable urban development.

### 4. Promote Adaptive Reuse

Reusing existing structures in innovative ways should be prioritized to minimize waste and optimize resource use. Buildings with historical significance should be transformed to serve multifunctional purposes, ensuring their longevity and relevance. Adaptive reuse not only preserves the physical character of the city but also provides flexible spaces that meet the evolving demands of urban residents.

### 5. Balance Heritage Preservation and Economic Growth

Cities should avoid over-commercializing renewed spaces at the expense of cultural authenticity. While economic growth is crucial, it should not undermine the historical and cultural integrity of urban spaces. Striking a balance between heritage preservation and urban development will ensure that cities maintain their unique identity while benefiting from modernization.

By following these recommendations, urban renewal projects can create spaces that are sustainable, culturally vibrant, and capable of meeting the demands of modern urban life while maintaining a connection to the past. These strategies can serve as a model for other cities undergoing similar transformations due to rapid urbanization.

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