

Research on Architectural Conservation Based on Ethnographic Methods: A Case Study of the Conservation and Renewal of Historic Districts

Ziyue Wang

School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Beijing, China

mail.bucea.edu.cn

Abstract. With the acceleration of the commercialization of historic districts, the traditional commercial blocks represented by Beijing Fang and Dashilar are facing multiple challenges, such as the dissolution of cultural authenticity, the homogenization of business formats, and the squeeze of residents' living space. Based on an ethnographic approach, this study analyzes the business operation patterns and social impacts of the two neighborhoods through participatory observations, questionnaires, and in-depth interviews. The study found that time-honored brands build cultural premiums through strategies such as "intangible cultural heritage experience", but excessive commercialization has led to a significant reduction in historical value. Beijing Fang's modern integration model attracts young consumer groups, but due to the "Internet celebrity", it has caused a controversy of "insufficient Beijing flavor". The living space of residents has been eroded by the tourism economy, and the conflict in the use of public facilities has intensified. The conclusions show that it is necessary to balance cultural preservation and commercial development, establish a community participation mechanism, and explore sustainable renewal paths.

Keywords: Historic Districts, Ethnography, Cultural Capital, Spatial Justice, Urban Renewal.

1. Introduction

The English counterpart of a historic building is "Historic Building", which usually refers to a building that has been built for a period of time and has a certain historical value. The Chinese government and academic circles are constantly deepening the research on the protection of historical buildings, and the definition and value judgment of historical buildings have also changed. [1] Historic districts refer to blocks where cultural relics and historic sites are relatively concentrated, or can more completely reflect the traditional features and ethnic local characteristics of a certain historical period. In modern times, with China's economic development, especially the rise of consumer enthusiasm after the reduction of people's cost of living, this has triggered the rapid rise of tourism. Those historic districts that carry important historical significance in the past are often restored and renovated, and are given commercial value to form a new type of historic commercial district, which attracts a large number of consumers to enjoy historical buildings and feel the history and culture while selling local handicrafts or local food. However, with the success of a historical commercial block, it will lead to the imitation of historical blocks in different places, and under the condition that the current mechanism system for the protection and renewal of historical buildings in China is not perfect, this blind follow-up transformation behavior will inevitably destroy the old buildings in the historic district and lose its original architectural characteristics and humanistic characteristics [1]. Not only that, the business operation model of the historic commercial district formed by the new renovation and renovation is also facing the crisis of simplification and homogenization, which makes consumers feel the same and boring, and thus reduces consumption. This phenomenon has been widely occurring, it not only makes the commercial atmosphere of the neighborhood decline, the flow of customers decreases, the economic benefits decline, the historical buildings in the abuse of abuse, the destruction of the original historical value of the building, and can not regain new value, become the "tears of the times" [2]. Improving the quality of public space

in historic commercial pedestrian blocks and creating meaningful places play a non-negligible role in cultural inheritance [3].

It is a research method and writing text in anthropology that is based on field investigations, first-hand observations and participation in groups of people, descriptions of culture, as a way to understand and explain society and to develop theoretical insights [4]. It requires the researcher to go deep into certain environments to experience and perceive, starting from within, and is characterized by the "authenticity" of the ethnic or cultural content under study [5]. Researchers are required to overcome bias and act respectfully to reduce non-objective results in research. Ethnography is an effective and practical research method, and some scholars believe that ethnography pulls people into the perspective of the user, and encourages people to solve problems in order to be more than just talking about problems [6]. Ethnographic research mainly collects data through observation, interview, and questionnaire methods. Scholars involved in ethnographic research should keep an open mind and an egalitarian mind, and they should look at various social behaviors and phenomena without any value orientation. They should also be a combination of subjective and objective, and they should use scientific and practical methods to analyze and collect local data in addition to having a moderate subjective point of view. As the fundamental principle of ethnographic research, holism means that all research should be considered in the context of the cultural whole, and holism, as a guiding concept, should run through the entire research process such as goal setting, process design, data collection and data analysis [7]. The history of ethnography is generally divided into three stages, and mature ethnographic research methods have been formed with the continuous improvement of scholars. Nowadays, research theories are more "reflective", and anthropologists are beginning to reflect on the political factors and cultural biases they carry and critique [8].

Ethnography can help people build a three-dimensional understanding of the "sense of place" of historic and commercial districts, and look at the local area from multiple perspectives such as "local residents", "tourists", and "merchants". It helps people to travel through places as different identities, to experience the reasons for change, to document the reconstruction of neighborhoods. Ethnography is a help and an improvement for historic districts. Through ethnographic methods, people enter the neighborhood to feel the present, understand the history, and change the future with different identities. This paper uses ethnographic methods to deconstruct historic districts, find the "hidden rules" in them, dig into the essence of their operation, and replicate or apply their success.

2. Background

Beijing is the capital of New China and the ancient capital of the Six Dynasties in Chinese history, and is an important witness and bearer of Chinese history and culture. Qianmen Commercial District is a modern open historical commercial district located in Dongcheng District, Beijing, China, on the south side of Zhengyangmen, from Zhengyangmen Arrow Tower in the north to Yong'an Road in the south, located on the central axis of Beijing. In the course of historical changes, it has experienced major historical changes such as fires, earthquakes, the Boxer Rebellion and the invasion of China by the Eight-Nation Alliance, and has very important historical memory and historical value. These include two important commercial streets, Dashilar and Beijing Fang, both of which have been converted from historic buildings.

As an important part of Qianmen Street, Dashilan Street Commercial Street covers an area of about 1.15 square kilometers from South Xinhua Street in the west, Zhushikou West Street in the south, and Qianmen West Street in the north. Dashilar was built in the eighteenth year of Yongle in the Ming Dynasty (1420), when it was called Langfang Sitiao; In the first year of Ming Hongzhi (1488), a fence was set up at the mouth of the alley, so it was renamed "Dashilar"; At the end of the Qing Dynasty, commerce developed here, forming a commercial block. Dashilar is home to many time-honored shops and retains many historical buildings.

Before the founding of the People's Republic of China, Dashilan was a street of simple shops built by a number of merchants, with a large number of merchants operating a variety of stores, including

entertainment and leisure clubs, snack bars and other clothing and grocery stores, and its architectural style showed the characteristics of Western style and integration of East and West. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Dashilar ushered in a major rectification, due to the background of the socialist transformation period of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Dashilar implemented the management of the public-private partnership system for all shops, and introduced the tourism function, continuing its form as a commercial street. After the reform and opening up, Dashilar Commercial Street resumed its store-based business mode, and with the addition of limited companies, Dashilar turned to focus more on the development of "time-honored brands" and "intangible cultural heritage experience", retaining the unique style of store facades and interior design. Today, Dashilar Commercial Street has become a famous Beijing characteristic commercial street, and on top of the basic characteristics of time-honored brands, Dashilar has added a variety of studios and handicraft shops [9].

Beijing Fang Waicheng Eight Squares, now known as the "first three gates" (referring to Zhengyang Gate, Chongwen Gate, Xuanwu Gate) south of the Yongding Gate, its range of "28 miles long" ("Chenyuan Knowledge") are the outer city of old Beijing, also known as "Wailuo City", the old Beijingers also call it "Hat City". After the completion of the second phase of Beijing Fang, it attracted a large number of tourists to visit. Positioned as a younger target group for younger consumers, Beijing Fang has a more bold and avant-garde renovation design, with Academician Wu Liangyong as the general consultant, proposing a "harmony but difference" design style, with more international boutiques or trendy boutiques such as Starbucks, Muji and Pageone Bookstore [10]. The predecessor of Beijing Fang was the "Jingshi Quangong Exhibition Center" under the Ministry of Agriculture and Industry and Commerce, and it was originally designed with a starting point to serve the lives of surrounding residents. During the period of constructing the Beijing Fang architectural complex, it advocated the integration of culture and commerce, added new tourism functions, and built a cultural experience area. Eventually, with the addition of special cultural activities and public art, Beijing Square has become a functional area for multicultural experiences.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Method Introduction

This study will be carried out mainly in two ways: participatory observation and questionnaire. The researcher will play the role of "traveler" and "local resident" for in-depth field experience. When the researcher is a "traveler", he will look for the Internet celebrity travel routes between the two places in the popular software Xiaohongshu, and set off by public transportation. In addition, researchers also use "travel planning" and "travel reviews" as part of "traveler" behavior, so researchers will look for relevant local reviews (such as "lightning protection" and "Amway" posts in Xiaohongshu, check-in photos in Douyin, and reviews and ratings in Dianping, etc.) before experiencing the experience, so as to understand the needs and dissatisfaction of "travelers". Since the researcher does not really live in the local area, when the researcher is in the "local people", in addition to bringing in the role, the researcher will adopt the method of "in-depth observation" and "discussion with the local people". As a "local resident", the researcher will go deep into the neighborhood, blend in with the local residents, put aside the tourist routes, observe the living habits of the residents in the neighborhood and the surrounding areas, experience the living facilities of the local residents, and after being familiar with the daily consumption and thoughts of the local residents, experience the previous Internet celebrity travel routes, and explore the different feelings and cognitive differences between residents and tourists. "Discussion with local residents" does not have a serious and standardized questionnaire, but adopts a more gentle "small talk" mode to obtain the feelings of local residents in a more real and comprehensive way. It is worth noting that due to the different nature of the shops in the two commercial streets, the researchers will also observe Dashilar in the eyes of the employees of the time-honored Dashilar brand and the owners of the small shops, and as a comparative researcher, they will also observe the clerks of Beijing Fang.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural cognition and preference of different groups of people towards the two representative neighborhoods of Dashilar and Beijing Fang, this study designed and distributed a structured questionnaire to sample the motivation and subjective evaluation of tourists and local residents. For the Dashilar section, the questionnaire consists of four core questions: "(1) Where are you from? (Option: Local Residents / Overseas Tourists); (2) What are you most interested in here? (e.g. time-honored brands, snacks, sense of history, hutong culture, traditional Beijing atmosphere, etc.); (3) Do you recommend others to visit? Please explain why; (4) Do you prefer Dashilar over Beijing Fang? Why? Corresponding to Beijing Fang, the questionnaire also set four questions: "(1) Where are you from? (Same as above); (2) What motivates you to come? (e.g. online recommendations, visual appeal, cultural events, bookstores, etc.); (3) Do you agree with the spatial model of integrating traditional architecture and modern design? (Yes/No); (4) Which place do you prefer compared to Dashilar? Please also explain the reason for your preference."

The questionnaire was distributed offline (on-site in Beijing Square and Dashilar) and carried out simultaneously with online channels, covering local residents, tourists from other places and online users in Beijing. At the same time, the basic information such as the age of the respondents will be recorded, and the subsequent classification statistics and trend analysis will be carried out based on the questionnaire data to present the differences in the perception of urban renewal and cultural space experience of different age and background groups.

The design of the questionnaire questions aims to reveal the multi-dimensional contradictions in the commercial transformation of historic districts through the differentiated perspectives of tourists and residents. Firstly, the respondents' identities are distinguished by "place of origin" (local/foreign) to explore the regional differences in spatial cognition: tourists from other places may pay more attention to the symbolic "impression of old Beijing", while local residents are more sensitive to the convenience of life. Secondly, differentiated options are set up according to the characteristics of the two places: the Dashilar questionnaire focuses on traditional elements such as "time-honored brands" and "hutongs", trying to verify whether the commercial street truly inherits the historical genes; Beijing Fang emphasizes "architectural integration" and "artistic activities" to test whether modern renovation can balance cultural innovation and historical continuity. Finally, a comparison question of "neighborhood preference" was set up to quantify the acceptance of the "traditional integrity" and "modern integration" model of different groups. Together, these questions form an observation network, which can not only capture the driving forces of tourists' consumption behavior (e.g., influencer effect, nostalgia), but also evaluate the substantive impact of commercialization on residents' lives (e.g., space squeezing, cultural identity fragmentation), and ultimately provide an empirical basis for the sustainable renewal of historic districts.

In this study, the researchers selected two research objects with great differences in style, the Beijing Fang Historic Commercial District and the Dashilar Historical Commercial District, in order to explore whether the renovation forms of these two historical buildings can be called successful and can be used for reference. In particular, when visiting Beijing Fang, researchers will focus on whether its commercial operation model can inspire us in new ways, and whether this form of renovation of historic buildings can be accepted by the public, and whether it will become a new direction for the transformation of historic commercial districts. In addition, the researchers also wanted to understand the impact of the introduction of tourism on local residents from different perspectives, such as how local residents live when their lives are squeezed when tourists arrive, and why they still live here if their lives have been severely disturbed by tourism and tourists, and whether they are staying here because of policy disadvantages, or whether they are used to living here. Not only that, the researchers will also obtain relevant policies from the Internet, and extend from this aspect to find out whether the policy orientation of "priority tourism" is convenient for tourists and does not take into account the lives of local residents. In addition to the above macro discussions, the researchers of this project also want to conduct in-depth exploration at the micro level. In particular, when it comes to the issue of the right to speak about "tradition", who is defining "tradition", whether the propaganda we see

about "tradition" is "tradition" in the eyes of locals, or "tradition" that caters to the tastes of tourists for the sake of marketing, and so on.

3.2. As a "Traveler". Record of the Visit

In order to better simulate the characteristics of tourists, the researchers shortened the visit time to one morning and adjusted the travel route according to the time. In the end, a complete route was formed and put into practice. The researchers first took Line 2 to Qianmen Street, and then walked south for a short time to reach the intersection of Dashilan Street, known as the Old Beijing Street. At the entrance to the street, the researchers visited the Internet celebrity check-in spots in turn and entered various time-honored shops. Similar to Dashilar, this is also the first research to establish a preliminary understanding of Beijing Fang through major evaluation software. After that, the researchers visited the area.

3.3. As a "Resident" Life Recording

The researchers, as "residents", will walk through the hutongs near Dashilar and experience their lifestyles, such as caring about the same kind and only using public toilets. In addition, the researchers also conducted interviews with local residents to understand their cost of living and the convenience of living in Dashilar. They were also asked what they thought of the conversation between the travelers and the surrounding area. The researchers also paid close attention to the composition of local neighborhood committees and had a general understanding of the main functions of local government agencies. Life as a "resident" of the historic commercial district of Beijing Fang is similar. The local residents of Beijing Fang are mainly from the surrounding hutong community, so the researchers visited the surrounding hutongs.

4. Research Results

During the visit, it was found that time-honored brands such as Tong Ren Tang are sold at a premium, and compared with stores outside the scenic area, Tong Ren Tang's medicines here will be 50% to 70% higher or even more, and unsuspecting tourists will buy other goods here at inflated prices. There are fewer people buying, and most young people come to the store mainly to take photos. The people who buy are mainly out of brand feelings, which are mostly for the elderly, and their general "complex" for the clothes they wore when they were young and "unaccustomed to wearing clothes now" are the main reasons why they buy here. There are also a small number of people who value the brand value and give time-honored products as gifts with a "sense of history".

Many of the seemingly "innovative moves" of Dashilar's time-honored brands have not caused new revenues, but have attracted a lot of criticism. In order to cater to the commercial street, many time-honored stores have launched new experience projects and handmade models in front of the store to attract tourists, but have not achieved very significant results, such as the inline shoe store on the second floor to open a mille-feuille DIY workshop experience, charging 198 per hour, but not successfully attracting many tourists to experience. Many brands are too commercial and forget about their brand focus. As a famous shop of traditional pickles in Beijing, Liubiju has been widely praised for its brand museum in Dashilar, allowing visitors to understand the history of Liubiju and the traditional pickle production process. However, the "sauce jar sun drying method" advertised as a brand did not appear on the assembly line that has been converted into an industrial production line.

As a new type of commercial block that attracts young consumer groups, Beijing Square has a more fashionable and youthful design, which makes some consumers feel that "Beijing flavor is not enough" here. Beijing Fang has adopted many emerging technologies, and visitors can scan the QR code of the exhibits with their mobile phones, and AR technology will be used to place the projection on the granite floor. This way of interweaving history and modernity attracts a kind of young people to come and check in. The consumption pattern of Beijing Fang accurately attracts the view of young people who "pay for the atmosphere". The glass on the northeast side of PageOne Bookstore frames

the front door of Beijing, echoing the bookstore's minimalist atmosphere and becoming a well-known check-in spot. It also allows people to read books in an atmosphere of history, creating a unique bookstore atmosphere. The rooftop terrace of the MUJI Hotel has also become a popular spot for everyone to check in, thanks to the higher floors, where people can overlook the People's Square and the Forbidden City. Especially in the evening, the scenery is especially beautiful.

But these have also labeled Beijing Fang as "excessive consumption" and "Internet celebrity economics", and the prices of the goods here are also inflated, under the name of "paying for emotional value", the latte art pattern of "Peking Coffee" can be sold for 35 yuan a cup. In social software like Xiaohongshu, the topic of "how to make a film in Beijing Fang" has already exceeded 10,000 views, attracting many people to take pictures. But a lot of people here only take pictures, not consume. In the midst of the influx of tourists, the first thing local residents feel is that they are facing a huge population density, and the large number of tourists crowded into the narrow alleys causes inconvenience to the local residents. Many residents also said that the excessive number of tourists broke the otherwise quiet streets, bringing noise pollution, and some residents said that tourists in the commercial streets would continue to stay until late before leaving, which seriously affected the quality of living for the locals. In addition, the problem of "conflict between the use of public toilets" between residents and tourists is particularly significant, and the long queues caused by tourists are caused by local residents having to stagger the use of tourists during peak hours, and some elderly people use portable toilets instead.

In addition to the inconveniences caused by daily life, the researchers' greatest feelings about local residents have caused their living space to be encroached upon. Prior to its construction, the residents of the Beijing Square were relocated to other locations. In the depths of Dashilar's hutongs, well-located houses (such as houses with light and convenient street access) have been transformed into commercial establishments such as bars and restaurants, and the indigenous people are forced to squeeze into the depths of the poorly lit hutongs. It is understood that the local government has adopted a policy of relocation and relocation of local residents outside Beijing's Fifth Ring Road to take residents away from this crowded place, but the lifestyle and living convenience of the new place are far less than the residents' old houses.

When researchers observed a booming tourism industry in the area and thought that local residents would receive some economic dividends, the opposite was true. Resident Response: No. Tourism has brought more about the disintegration of the local traditional economy. Targeting the needs of tourists, more and more merchants have opened many "souvenir shops" or nostalgic cultural and creative goods stores with "traditional" names and "childhood memories", which are decoupled from the daily needs of local residents.

Since the local residents are witnesses to the historical changes of Dashilar and Beijing Fang, the researchers focused on asking local residents about their thoughts on the transformation of these two places. Many residents said that "it is not the same as when they were young", and also considered the government's act of painting the hutongs with the same paint color and adding uniform patterns to the doors and windows in order to unify the form as a "cookie-cutter antique transformation"

5. Conclusion

The study finds that the commercial transformation of historic districts presents a contradiction between the coexistence of "cultural capital appreciation" and "community space squeezing": time-honored brands attract consumption through symbolic performances, but lose the depth of skill inheritance; Although the modern design of Beijing Square has stimulated the young market, it has severed the continuity between architecture and history. This process has exposed the shortcomings of "emphasizing tourism over people's livelihood" in the policy orientation, and residents' living space and traditional cultural memory have been marginalized. In the future, it is necessary to establish a dynamic assessment system, incorporate residents' participation into planning decision-making, and explore a "low-impact development" model. At the same time, with the help of digital technology, a

cultural memory database will be built to promote the sustainable regeneration of historic districts, so that conservation can truly serve the people and the city

References

- [1] Zhou Zhi. Research on the protection and repair technology and operation system of the façade of modern historical buildingsDDD. Tianjin: Tianjin University, 2013.
- [2] Wu Yiwei, Chen Yuanyuan, Li Ming. Research on the renewal of commercial space from the perspective of affordance theory: A case study of Beijing FangJJJ. *Urban Architectural Space*, 2024, 31 (10): 64–67.
- [3] Wang Lu, Bi Ying. Post-use evaluation model of public space in historic commercial blocks based on placemaking: A case study of Qianmen commercial blocksJJJ. *Settlements*, 2024 (02): 106–114.
- [4] Chang Yanrong, Cai Qi. Ethnographic methods and communication researchJJJ. *Journal of Hunan Mass Media Vocational and Technical College*, 2005 (02): 22–25.
- [5] Peng Zhaorong. Multiple forms of "authenticity" in ethnographic perspectivesJJJ. *Social Sciences in China*, 2006 (02): 125–138+207–208.
- [6] Gui Luomin. Ethnographic methods and library user research: A case study of the University of Rochester Library ProjectJJJ. *Documentation, Information & Knowledge*, 2015 (02): 50–57.
- [7] Malinowski. *Cultural Explanations of ScienceMMM*. Translated by Huang Jianbo. Beijing: Minzu University of China Press, 1999: 132.
- [8] Gao Bingzhong. Three epochs of ethnographic developmentJJJ. *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science)*, 2006 (03): 58–63.
- [9] Wei Jing, Li Sheng. Analysis of the evolution path of historical commercial streets in the world's first-tier cities: A case study of Qianmen Commercial Blocks in BeijingJJJ. *Journal of Business Economics*, 2022 (01): 12–16.
- [10] Li Sheng, Xin Shibo. Analysis of influencing factors of customer satisfaction in historic commercial districts in first-tier cities in the world: A case study of Beijing FangJJJ. *Journal of Business Economics*, 2021 (24): 81–85.