

# Research on Participatory Renewal Design of Extensive Historical Villages in Northeast China

## ---A Case Study of the Conceptual Planning and Design of the Revolution Village in Bei'an City, Heilongjiang Province

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**Key Words:** people's livelihood; extensive historical villages; participatory renewal design

**Abstract:** The research targets at the extensive historical villages which are abounded in the northeast China. Based on the perspective of people's livelihood, the research pointedly puts forward the method of participatory renewal. Also, the research takes the conceptual planning and design in Revolution Village in Bei'an City, Heilongjiang Province as an example, explains the specificity of the participatory renewal design in detail. The specificity refers to breaking down barriers between different fields, respecting for the design of the subject's intention, and pursuing the rational innovation through its characteristics.

### 1 Extensive historical villages and towns

China is a country with a vast territory and long history, whose 5000-thousand-long cultural heritage breeds numerous historical and cultural villages and towns which are reflections of traditional features of certain historical stage. In the process, villages with specific regional and national features are formed such as the river-side towns in Tai Lake Basin, traditional villages in the South of Anhui Province. Many of them have become famous around China after renewal.

Among these hundreds of thousands of villages, most of them are commonly apart from some renowned ones which are rare cases. This research focuses on the ordinary villages that are called "extensive historical villages". Some of them are full of regional features but not prominent; some are rich in historical and cultural elements but lack of a long tradition; and some have renewal value underlies in them but nowhere to start changing. Like hot potatoes, they are tasteless but wasteful to discard.

Because of historical reasons, the Northeast of China has always been inhabited by minorities until the beginning of the 20th century when Han nationality moved in and began reclamation and farming. Based on the historical background, a great many of villages in the Northeast of China are characterized by the features of "extensive historical villages". And the Revolution Village in Bei'an City is a typical example. The Revolution Village in Bei'an City, Heilongjiang Province is located 17 kilometers away in the northeast of Bei'an City, on the rolling hills which connects the south of the Xiao Hinggan Mountains and Songnen Plain. It is a farming village where soybeans are mainly grown, with 17 thousand acres of arable land and 556 households of peasants (Figure 1). On the surface, there is nothing unusual about it. However, it is actually one of the rear bases which are founded by 12th Brigade of 3rd Division in 6th Army of Northeast Anti-Japanese Allied Forces in North Manchuria. As revealed by its name, it also used to be one of the anti-Japanese centers of Longjiang Province during the War of Resistance against Japan and make great contributions to the victory. As a result, it is included in the first revolutionary base areas of Heilongjiang Province.

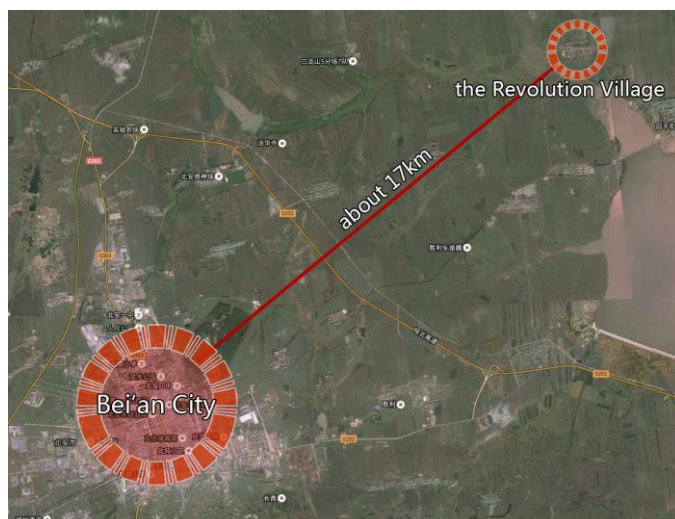


Figure 1. Location

After several decades, the village has become as common as any other ordinary ones in China except for the anti-Japanese heroes' monument built by the village in recent years and a one storey memorial museum of Chinese People's Anti-Japanese War (Figure 2), which reminds people of this particular history. Problems, like the overbalance of age groups, the decrease of the amounts of the young and the rapid aging population, result in the dereliction of the farmhouses and the insufficient use of the public space, which leads to the decrease of cultural activities and the lack of vitality.



Figure 2. The anti-Japanese heroes monument in Revolution Village

## 2 Participatory Renewal Design in the countryside

In the early 21st century, China launched a vigorous campaign called “Building New Socialist Countryside”. It is a brand new research after China has entered into a new stage of “promoting agriculture by industry and supporting rural areas through cities”. The trend is the necessity of the development of the times and building a harmonious society has nothing to blame. The problem arose when the architects and planners adopted some old, traditional planning and design methods and neglected the specific historical and cultural features of extensive historical villages without considering the changes of rural life under the economic development. Therefore, a large amount of generalized and homogenized villages were created (Figure3), and traditional social relationships of countryside collapsed. Fundamentally, it is because of the authoritative and elite's methods dominated by architects and planners have limitations.



Figure 3. “the all and the one same” in the new rural construction

The idea of participatory design which gives greater environmental autonomy to villagers is in an urgent need. It is essential that the architects and planners focus on people’s livelihood as well as local differences, become people-oriented and respect regional context.

Participatory design method is a new professional method in the ascendant. It aims at creating a high quality of community environment and implementing the formation of rich and democratic life in the neighborhood. For this purpose, space practitioners ought to learn to deal with realistic practice with different attitudes, for example, understanding the changing of roles in the democratic procedures of administrative planning and handling completely different design procedures etc. The key of participatory design emphasizes the participation of the people in the design and the opportunities offered to people. Meanwhile, the possibility of people’s participation is also of great importance.

In the process of the urbanization in China, the trend of mobility intensified as time goes, which is followed by the phenomenon that a large number of commodity residential areas are being built and the boundaries of the traditional urban communities tend to disappear. In contrast, the vast countryside is suited to the implement of participatory design due to the relative integrity of the village and the concentration and the stability of the sphere of life, boundaries, relationships, identification, important issues and needs. The benefit of participatory design brings also convenience to seek the balance between the government's intention and the people's real life and to explore the rationality of the allocation of resources under the development of society and economy.

This research proposes a participatory renewal method basing on participatory design. It is intended to explore the gradual development of the village with the viewpoint of people’s livelihood through digging the actual demands of villages.

### 3 The Method of Participatory Renewal

#### 3.1 *Breaking down barriers between different fields through the participation of multi domain*

The primary specificity of the participatory renewal design is the function transformation of a planner or a team of architects in the planning and design process, that is, architects have to change the identity from the leader who dominates the design and planning of the traditional villages and towns to the “communicator” in order to combine many different fields.

In the process of the traditional villages and towns planning and design, planners or architects generally go back to the studio to construct the future of the villages and towns after getting the results of the research and learning about the wishes of the administrative organs. In this case, the designing ideas usually reflect too much about the proposals of the architect his own as well as his professional background and experience, etc. That means it may not be the most suitable blueprint for the development of rural space. The reason does not lie in the fact that the planner or architect is not professionally proficient, or the lack of enough attention, but in the difficulty for a single field in overall guidance and direction, facing the complex town planning which multiple areas are involved on the current situation (Figure 4-a). The design industry ought to run through a number of areas in an open manner, and meantime to facilitate each domain opening to the designing field in

order to participate in the design. With the help of that, the design industry could exert resultant force, breaking down barriers between different fields and get the overall planning for villages and towns (Figure 4-b).

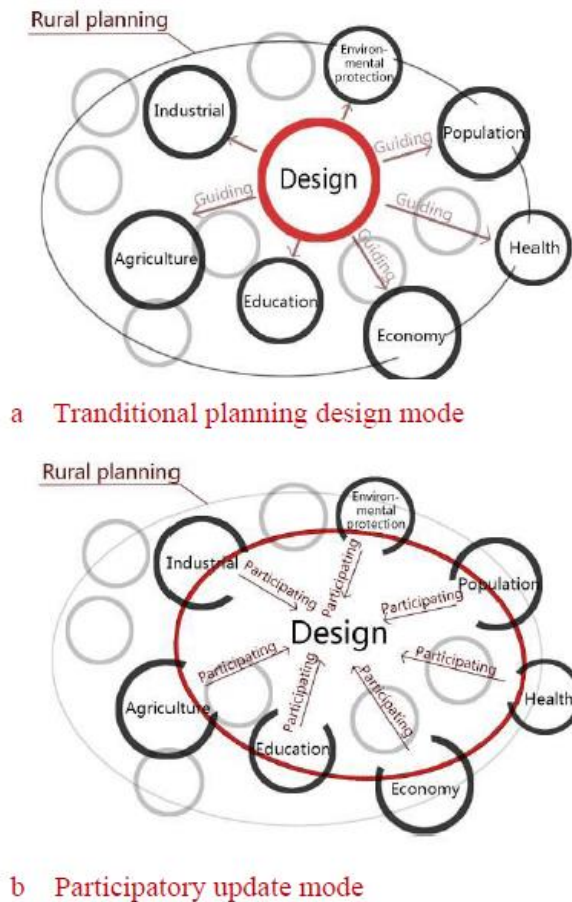


Figure 4. comparison between two modes

In the planning and design of the Revolution Village, the group tries to use the mode of participatory design to build the subject and the object of the participation (Figure 5). This design is led by the Suburban Township Government of Bei'an City and the local government of the Revolution Village, which means the sponsor is the government. The design teams to assist come from two sources. One is the professional student design team from School of Architecture in Harbin Institute of Technology, and the other is adviser team that consists of famous people in local community and staff in zoning commission. On the selection of the participating objects, we choose people whose interests have preferences including granary families, stock raisers and practitioners in the service industry, such as the peasants who run rural holiday inns for tourists. On the other hand, the feelings of disadvantaged group also need to be cared about. Except offspring of revolutionary families, left behind families and poverty families are the main referents.



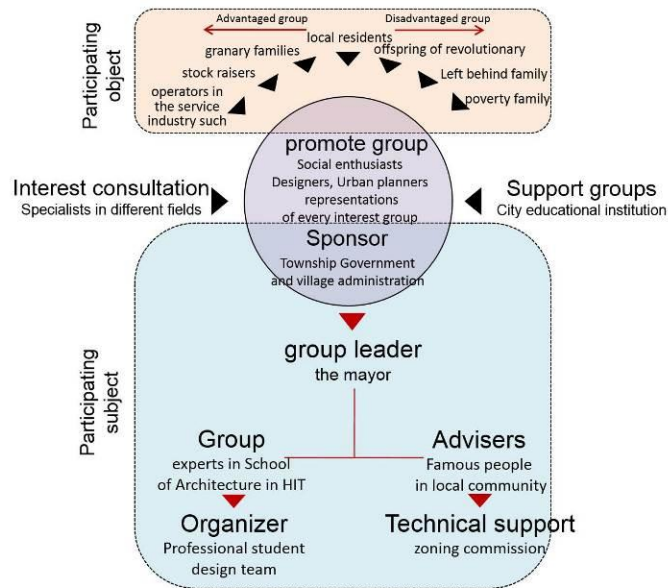


Figure 5. Organization mode of participatory update design in the Revolution Village.

Under such organizing modes, the subjects and the objects are constantly remained in an unstable status and under conversion, thanks to the participation of multi-type groups. Besides, the professional students can be seen as short-term local residents to some extent, as they have stayed in the village for quite a while. On the other hand, when given space to express their opinions positively, the participating objects probably would take part in the detailed designing progress, and as a matter of fact they will become the participating subjects. The transformation contributes to the interaction and exchanges between various groups and fields. And that is the reason why participatory design could guarantee the rural renewal.

### 3.2 Respecting the will of the subject

It refers to the attention to the behavior model, the spirit of the place, and concern for vulnerable people in the participatory design. This is the interpretation and guidance to participatory updating design on a specific level. Based on this idea, the design team put forward the concept of “micro renewal”, which means to start from the small space, carry out appropriate transformation, and then renewal the whole village. The eight micro spaces which are most urgent to be transformed are all chosen by voting, as Fig. 6 shows.

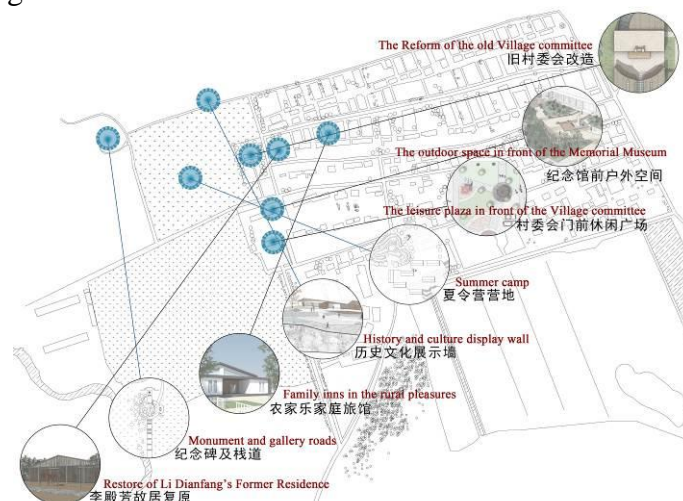


Figure 6. The distribution of the most worth updating micro-space.

One of the original points of the participatory updating design is the behavior pattern, which means through searching for the correspondence between space and crowd behavior patterns to

provide specific group of people a space where a sense of security, comfort, pleasure, convenience and many other psychological attributes can be obtained. For example, in the updating of the outdoor space in front of the Memorial Museum, the two situational routes are designed based on the visiting behavior pattern, which includes a mainline leading to the Memorial Museum and a branch line leading to the outside reading space, with the aim of offering a deeper express in Red Culture to visitors (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Situational route

The Space Spirit is more abstract. It determines the use of space from the other point of view. It is the advanced element that participatory design education needs to focus on. How to determine the specificity of the design space, the feeling of territory from the users, so that the community residents could meet the behavior need at the same time to obtain a certain psychological satisfaction through the process of the participatory design is a very important aspect of humanistic concerns. For example, by integrating the standing space in front of the monument and adding multiple background walls, a sense of majesty at the micro space of the original monument could be fully displayed (Figure 8). Furthermore, the elaborate section design assures unique impression to every position (Figure 9).



Figure 8. The space design in front of the Memorial Museum

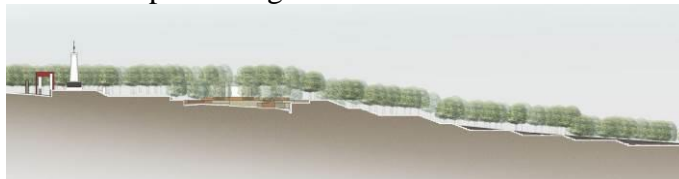


Figure 9. The section of the Monument and gallery roads

Attention to vulnerable groups and special populations is also the focus of this design. During the investigation, stay-at-home children and left-behind elder people could be one of the biggest problems. The lack of schools leads to the phenomenon that young parents move to downtown taking their children. As a result, in the renewal design, the public space where old people and children could use to chat and play is applied to many micro spaces practically.

### 3.3 Seeking the characteristics of the field, carrying on the rational innovation

Except multiple participation and people oriented, participatory renewal design also promotes the design to an innovative development path.

On one hand, in order to form a reasonable strategy, rational, scientific methods, rigorous, logical analysis and design thinking are indispensable. On the other hand, facing to the complex and conflicting situations, conventional ways are difficult to solve the problems successfully. So a certain innovative way, which seeks the characteristics of the field and “think what others do not dare to think”, may be a good approach to transform contradiction.

For the purpose of achieve the rational innovation in the participatory renewal design, open research and discovery, the first step to take is growing ideas on a high degree of freedom. For example, in the research of the revolution village, some fragmented problems can be found through interviews and communication with offspring of revolutionary, former village leaders and major manufactories and discussions with the government. The problems conclude the heritage of the Red Culture, imbalance of economic development, rush in building the monument and memorial museum, improvement of ecological agriculture and so on. In the local observation and life

experience, the unique cognitive map is built by connecting these problems to space and objects (Figure 10).

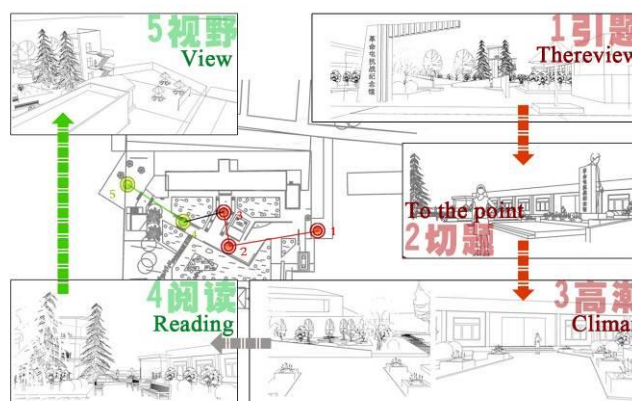


Figure 10. the Cognitive map of the Revolution Village

Based on these key points of the cognitive map, the topic of the renewal — “Continuing the Red Culture, Expanding local industries, Renovating the characteristics of space, Enhancing villagers living” is formed through multiple discussions and communications. “Renovate the characteristics of space” corresponds to the micro space renewal mentioned above. For other points, the team proposed a series of farm tour routes aiming to "edutainment" in an innovative way. These are intended to active micro space and then drive the whole village life by taking various ways. The whole routes design is shown by the following table1.

Table 1 tourist industry mode

Tourism product	Suitable group	Travel time	route
One-day tour	Corporate groups; teachers and students etc.	Half a day or one day	Monument→Culture wall→Old village committee→Li Dianfang's Former Residence→Revolutionary Memorial→leave
Weekend tour	Small families	Weekend holiday	Day1: Special B & B→Farm lunch→Revolutionary Memorial→Monument→Culture wall→Old village committee→dinner & bonfire Day2: Revolutionary story house (local elderly speech)→Vegetables picking→go for a walk in the green space in the east of the village→fishing in the wetland in the east of the village
One-week summer camp	Student groups	Summer vacation a week or so	Special B & B or summer camp, study revolutionary culture deeply; farming with villagers, to experience the joy of labor, get rid of the noise of the city, wash the mind

## 4 Conclusion

The conceptual planning of the revolution village in Bei'an City, Heilongjiang Province is only an attempt to participatory renewal design facing the extensive historical villages. There are plenty of aspects which are not mature enough. But the concept of focusing on people's livelihood, people oriented and pursuit of rational innovation, could be taken as a reference for village planning in extensive historical villages in Northeast of China in the future.

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