



# Underlying social factors for evaluating heritage conservation in urban renewal districts



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## ABSTRACT

Urban renewal usually involves large scale demolition of areas, which can lead to the destruction of social networks and local character. It has been increasingly recognized that heritage conservation in older districts undergoing urban renewal has a significant impact on enhancing a community's sense of place, identity and development. However, a clear understanding of the social factors which contribute to successful heritage conservation in urban renewal is still lacking. This study aims to identify the social role of heritage conservation in urban renewal. It also investigates whether certain underlying social factors vary among different districts, according to density, socio-demographics and the extent of redevelopment. In order to expose the factors, a survey of three hundred and twelve people in two urban renewal districts in Hong Kong was conducted using questionnaires. The identified social factors provide an evaluation framework for examining the collective impact of conservation of historic buildings, rather than individual historic buildings on a renewal district. The findings reveal that socio-demographics of an area, local characteristics, type of heritage buildings and the extent of urban renewal do not exert a significant influence on the composition of social factors. Several policy recommendations are also provided for urban planners and decision makers incorporating heritage conservation in urban renewal strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

Redevelopment in a city inevitably involves urban renewal processes. Urban renewal is intended to improve the urban environment in accordance with the changing economic and social needs of the people. Urban renewal is considered to be important for many reasons. First, deteriorated buildings and housing stock can be upgraded. Second, historic buildings and structures can be preserved. Third, a city can be reshaped by improving urban layouts, open spaces, road networks and other infrastructures. However, while urban renewal can successfully help maintain the function and vibrancy of urban centres, urban renewal can also lead to potentially negative social issues, including social exclusion, gentrification and discontinuity of social lives, among others (UNESCO, 2004; 2005; He & Wu, 2005). These issues are not only common in a Northern and Western context, but they are also apparent in the Southern sphere and in third world countries,

including South Africa (Visser & Nico Kotze, 2008) and the Middle East (Abu-Dayyeh, 2006). For instance, the lack of community involvement in the renewal process revealed in Istanbul has undermined social justice and equity (Ercan, 2011). Thus, the major problem lies in how a city can carry out successful renewal with a view to attaining overall urban sustainability for the future.

In recent years, urban renewal has transformed from taking a 'growth-first' economic-oriented approach to a more socially conscious approach (Wang, 2011). Urban renewal processes now increasingly incorporate heritage conservation elements in the overall urban renewal plan. Heritage conservation means all the processes involved in looking after a place so as to retain its heritage significance and cultural heritage value (Australia ICOMOS, 1999). In this paper, these heritage places refer to monuments and historic buildings that have historical, architectural, aesthetic and social values and which reflect the living conditions and culture of the people of the cities.

In certain cities, like New York, there has been criticism that historical conservation practices contribute to the proliferation of gentrification in the urban core (Zukin, 1982). Similar critiques of gentrification and identity have been directed at conservation in

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cities undergoing urban renewal, for instance, Malaysia (Idid, 2005; Shamsuddin & Sulaiman, 2002), Singapore (Yeoh & Huang, 1996; Yuen & Hock, 2001) and Bangkok (Siririsak, 2009).

Previous studies have proposed a set of critical factors and corresponding indicators to be considered when undertaking sustainable urban renewal (Chan & Lee, 2007; Couch & Dennemann, 2000; Lee, 2003; Ng, 2002). Phillips and Stein (2013) have provided indicators for a framework that evaluates the impact of heritage conservation on community economic development. Zancheti and Hidaka (2012) propose indicators for measuring the conservation of urban world heritage. However, little work has been done that measures the social effects of a group of heritage conservation projects on an urban renewal district. Given the changing trend of conservation of single buildings to groups of buildings and extending the scope from a project level to a neighborhood and district level (Donaldson & Du Plessis, 2013; Edwards, 2009; Laprise, Lufkin, & Rey, 2015), a more comprehensive representation of the social factors that enhance better heritage conservation is needed.

Thus, this paper aims to develop a set of social evaluation factors that should be considered when assessing the social impact of conserving groups of heritage buildings in urban renewal districts. Hong Kong has been chosen as a case study since it is a dense urban city that is in the process of undertaking many redevelopment projects in its old decayed districts. Two urban renewal districts, Wan Chai and Sham Shui Po, were selected for the study. Although neither of them is designated conservation areas, the compact form of the areas and the close proximity of different historic buildings scattered within the districts has a significant effect on the local neighborhoods. The study also intends to examine whether different socio-demographics and the extent of redevelopment plans in the two urban renewal districts might affect people's evaluation of the social impact of heritage conservation on the community.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Interplay between heritage conservation and urban renewal

Urban renewal involves the demolition or restoration of decayed and obsolete buildings so as to create better living environments. Inevitably, urban renewal plans often involve large scale redevelopment projects. Although urban renewal has gradually changed from the bulldozer approach to regeneration and revitalization, emphasizing a social consciousness that includes economic, physical, and environmental conditions (Zheng et al., 2014), there are still many social issues that should be taken into consideration, such as the discontinuation of everyday community life, loss of sense of identity and loss of collective memories (Hayden, 1995). For instance, forced eviction of the original inhabitants and traditional businesses is a common occurrence (Cheung & Leung, 2012; Ng, 2005). Moreover, urban renewal tends to prioritize economic growth and physical improvement. This can lead to the homogeneity of urban renewal districts and thus lack of identity of place.

After years of wide-spread demolition, slum clearance and physical redevelopment in urban areas, and the realization of the social problems inherent in such actions, the urban renewal process has increasingly incorporated a heritage conservation approach in the overall planning and revitalization of older urban areas so as to create a better place identity (Couch, Sykes, & Boerstinghaus, 2011; Yuen & Hock, 2001). At the same time, heritage conservation has begun advocating the importance of district-wide approaches that not only focus on individual historic buildings, but also on the urban fabric as a whole (Cohen, 1999; White, 1999).

UNESCO has initiated the Historic Urban Landscape approach

which advocates looking beyond the boundaries of built heritage sites to include a broader urban context, thereby highlighting the importance of social and cultural practices and values, economic processes and the intangible dimensions of heritage as related to diversity and identity (Definition 9, UNESCO, 2011). For instance, in many areas, urban renewal districts contain local neighborhoods where many historic buildings are not classified as monuments or listed as buildings of international or national significance. Nor are they considered to be beautiful or of historic importance (Lowenthal, 1979). However, for the residents, they are associated with treasured memories and the history of the local community (Delafons, 1997; Lamei, 2005). In these cases, urban renewal and heritage conservation can compliment and support each other, resulting in the local people building new place attachments and having a sense of belonging. In doing so, this new approach to heritage conservation contributes to the physical fabric and character of a surrounding environment. As such, the role this plays in engendering a sense of place identity and place attachment among local people and social networks in different renewed districts is worthy of detailed investigation (Yuen, 2006).

### 2.2. Social factors of heritage conservation

The literature on conservation around the world discusses the ways that heritage conservation can contribute to the social well-being of people in urban renewal and regeneration districts. However, the existence of heritage buildings in a community does not mean that they always have a positive impact on communities, quality of life and sustainable development (Phillips & Stein, 2013). The following section briefly explains the social benefits of heritage conservation, which form the theoretical framework of this research study. These social factors have five major facets.

#### 2.2.1. Sense of community and cultural identity

Sense of community can be defined as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together.” (McMillan & Chavis, 1999). Heritage conservation can enrich people's understanding of their community (English Heritage, 2005). It contributes to a unique sense of place and community tradition. As a result, people's sense of community and of belonging is strengthened. Within a community, people usually share collective memories, defined by Halbwachs (1980) as the social construct shaped by the political, economic and social concerns of the present. When a heritage building is torn down, people's collective reaction to that loss can be that of deep bereavement (Fried, 1963).

A heritage site is also a common means/ground to link people to their roots. It helps develop and enrich the cultural identity of individuals as coherent groups within different locations, history, aesthetics, religious beliefs, etc. (Ashworth, Graham & Tunbridge, 2007; Guibernau, 1996).

#### 2.2.2. Social interaction and social networks

It is recognized that a heritage resource contributes to enhancing contemporary social interaction in a community (Feilden & Jokilehto, 1998, pp. 11–21). This can be achieved by broadening access to historic sites for present and future generations through encouraging visitation and by educating the public on the history of the people, the places and the events connected with the district (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001; English Heritage, 1997; Atkins & IFA, 2004).

On the other hand, the forced evictions that often occur during the process of conservation can be direct threats to social networks. For example, when the reuse of a historic building involves forced

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