

# Urban Conservation Through Chinese Local Original Architecture: The Preservation and Renovation of Zhongshan Road in Hangzhou

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**ABSTRACT** How to realise the goal of city revival through the preservation of historic districts is an important issue for all historic cities. This article introduces the Preservation and Renovation Project of Zhongshan Road in Hangzhou regarding its guiding principles, design concepts, and the entire construction process. In this project, the existing historical buildings along Zhongshan Road were preserved by keeping the remains of different historical periods and various lifestyles of the inhabitants. Rather than merely refurbishing the street front only, we reconstructed the Southern Song Dynasty city-block walls along Zhongshan Road and restored the Fangxiang city fabric to create the streetscape of the former Imperial Avenue. Afforested terraced teahouses were built along the road, and the original water system was restored so as to realise the atmosphere of 'watertown'. New buildings were added by adopting local materials and vernacular building forms. The article summarises two strategies for the preservation of a historic district in a large city. One is the comprehensive project planning by research and investigation. The other is the overall design guideline for the street blocks. It also reflects on the disappointing aspects that mainly resulted from time limitations and the poor taste in the refurbishment of shop houses.

**KEYWORDS** Hangzhou, the Southern Song Dynasty Imperial Avenue, redesign of historical district, urban renewal, revival of city culture

The Preservation and Renovation Project of Zhongshan Road is probably the most challenging preservation project during the past 30 years in Hangzhou. Zhongshan Road used to be the Imperial Avenue of the Southern Song Dynasty's capital city Lin'an, marking the North-South central axis of the city. With the commercial centre moving towards the West Lake districts, Zhongshan Road has been falling into decay during the last few decades. The condition of Zhongshan Road is not a sole case, but a representative example in many Chinese cities, which reveals the profound contradiction between the preservation of the historic city and urban development. Besides the shift of the city commercial centre, lack of maintenance even worsens the situation because it is thought that the historic districts and buildings will be abandoned sooner or later.

This preservation and renovation project is particularly difficult because Zhongshan Road has been experiencing a dynamic development process rather than simply being a static historic area. According to the field survey, the area is composed of nearly half new buildings and half old

buildings. The remaining old part is of great importance to the city as nearly 90 percent of the historic buildings in Hangzhou have been demolished since the opening and reform in the 1980s, leaving Zhongshan Road area as the biggest and most important remaining historic area among those remain. On the other hand, the remaining old buildings were neither in good condition at that time nor well preserved. Some local authorities even defined them as 'a pile of shabby houses' (Figure 1).

Although Zhongshan Road is also called 'Imperial Avenue of the Southern Song Dynasty', nothing from the Southern Song Dynasty has remained. The only historic artefacts in this area are the traditional dwellings and commercial buildings built in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic era, and the Western-style shop houses refurbished in the 1920s to meet the visit of Dr Sun Yat-sen. The selection of a historic architectural style was subject of considerable debates before the implementation of the project, as the unification of the streetscape with any single style would destroy the rich historical remains in this area. Should the project only inherits one of the



**Figure 1** Zhongshan Road before the renovation project (Source: the author).

historic styles, the other ones would be damaged. Therefore, how to deal with this complex and mixed historic urban fabric has become the core issue in this project.

As for the living condition, there are still a large number of residents living in this district. Many of them are elderly people, children, and migrant labourers. The quality of the houses and the residents' living conditions is not satisfactory from the first glance. After sufficient communication with the local government, we obtained two common views on how to deal with the historical assets in the Zhongshan Road area.

Firstly, although this area could be deemed as 'a pile of shabby houses', it is one of the few only historic urban districts left in Hangzhou. Therefore, the urban fabric of this area shall be restored as an entity.

Secondly, current living conditions could not be seen solely as negative elements, since the area also has many positive aspects such as the sense of community and traditional living atmosphere which could not be found in the new urban areas of Hangzhou. The fact that local residents live with contentment indicates that such built environment probably is particularly suitable for living. Actually it is an important topic for Hangzhou, since the city is facing the issue of ageing population. Therefore, the main principle of this project is to keep the authenticity of the place, which means that the alterations and additions to the historical buildings made in different time periods and by different groups of people shall all be preserved.

We then proposed three principles for the project. The first one is preserving the historical authenticity. Secondly,

avoiding forced relocation due to our contention that the traditional living atmosphere and its vitality are all originated the local people. Based on this principle, the policy developed by the local government is called 'encouraging voluntary relocation, allowing self-refurbishing'. The third principle is to avoid historic falsification, regardless it is Chinese style or Western style.

Based on the three principles, I proposed the design concept which I would call it 'city revival' meaning not simply the preservation of the physical environment of the street. Despite its poor condition, the street has the most traditional living atmosphere of the city which indicates that this place also has enormous cultural value guarding the soul of the city. On the contrary, the newly built areas in Hangzhou with wider roads and building setbacks are similar to the suburbs in the Western world, where street vitality completely lost. From this aspect, the project of Zhongshan Road could be seen as a showcase to show the public how a vibrant urban place should look like. On this account, this project is more than just urban heritage conservation, but proper city revival. This concept is highly appreciated by the local authority and the initial idea of transformation has been upgraded to 'city revival'. In accordance to such theme, the most important thing is to keep the walkable street system and small-scale buildings alongside so as to preserve the lively urban atmosphere. Since 1927, the standard width of Zhongshan Road was established in 12 m, but some sections had been widened to 24 m according to the local plan. According to the site visit, those buildings along the street built in the last two





Figure 2 Intervention on the block wall and the street (Source: the author).

decades comply with the new setback building regulations, while those old houses still situated along the street lack any setback. Therefore, Zhongshan Road was partially widened, while other parts were still relatively narrow. We decided that a row of two-storey new buildings would be added alongside the widened parts to keep the walkable 12-metre road width. This proposal of narrowing a road instead of widening it is unprecedented in the modern history of Chinese cities.

Our design strategy concerning architecture is ‘coexistence of the old and the new, and harmony in diversity’. ‘Coexistence of the old and the new’ means the existing historical buildings along Zhongshan Road should be preserved by keeping the remains of different time periods and various lifestyles of the inhabitants rather than by restoring to the so-called ‘original’ architectural style. Furthermore, the project team decided to preserve also some illegal buildings which were deemed to properly fit the built environment. The conservation of the historic district cannot solely rely on the preservation of the old matter, otherwise the historic district would result in a static situation without life. Therefore, new original Chinese local architecture should be an important element for the conservation work as a catalyst to stimulate the development of the historic district. Such new buildings should be added by adopting local materials and identical vernacular building forms to integrate the spirit of local architecture. Another important principle for the buildings is that the new creation could be done based on the historic background, but fake antiques in either western or traditional Chinese style would not allowed in Zhongshan Road project. Fortunately, all the stakeholders involved in this project reached consensus on this issue, which indicated that the perception on urban conservation and development has been changing in the last five years.

The project also has several other important tasks especially about sorting the historic problems out and redesign.

The first strategy is to renovate the entire street block rather than simply refurbishing the street fronts. When local authorities approached the project team at the initial stage, the original idea was to refurbish the street front in a relatively short time span, which is common practice in many Chinese cities. Regarding to this request, the project team argued that good urban places have their depth, and that small alleys and yards along the major streets should also be taken into consideration in the renovation project. This idea is called ‘in-depth renovation’ by the project team and actually the refurbishment of the street front is just the superficial part of this idea. This in-depth renovation has largely increased not only the workload, but also implied difficulties and raised economic cost. Considering such disadvantages, a normal design institute probably will not choose this approach in the real practice. However, with an academic background from the university, the team insisted in adopting such approach even it was more difficult to ensure a better result.

Compared to decorative elements such as building façades, the restoration of the traditional urban fabric raises higher concerns. Therefore, the second strategy is to restore the streetscape of the former Imperial Avenue by reconstructing the city-block walls according to the Southern Song Dynasty *fangxiang* (literally means block and alleyway) system. Such *fangxiang* system is an important part of the character of Hangzhou historic city and largely exemplified the local identity. It has been always in the history of the city and even today local people can recognise *fang* as a certain place in the city such as Qinghefang and Sanyuan-fang. Therefore, the reconstruction of the city block wall, as a significant symbol of *fang*, was

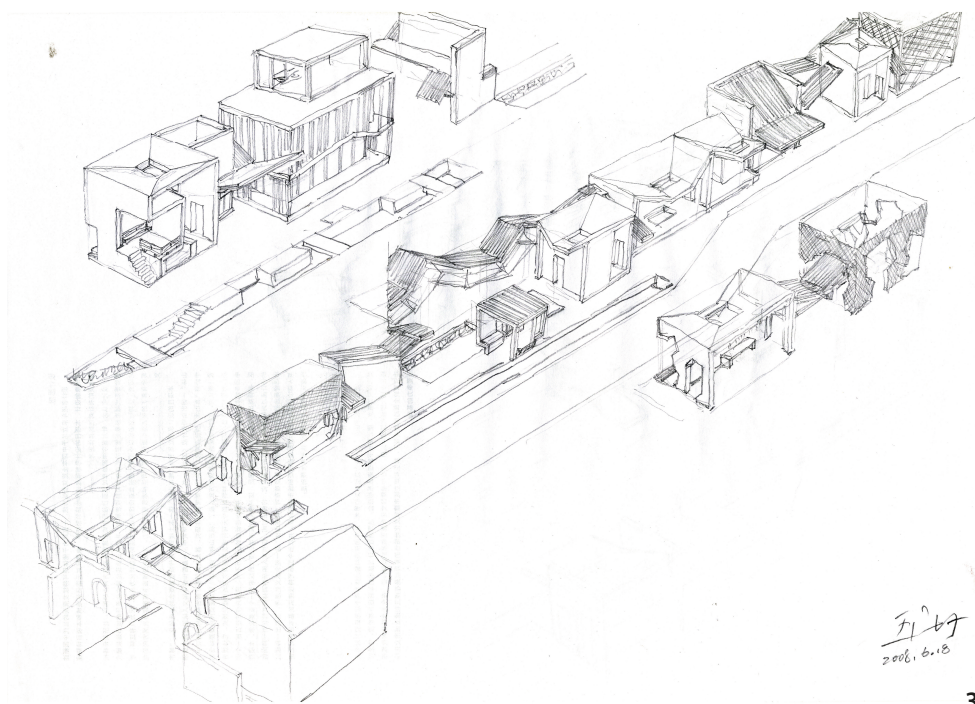


Figure 3 Sketch of buildings along the street (Drawn by the author).

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deemed necessary (Figure 2). Although it arouse some controversies during the construction, the rebuilding of the city-block walls was appreciated as a creative approach and achieved a good result in creating an enclosed atmosphere in the block without high expenditure.

Another important part of this project is the original design reinterpreting the traditional local architectural features (Figure 3, Figure 4). The project team a variety of new buildings based on this idea, serving as open landscaped tearooms. However, the local authorities showed little understanding for this feature. Once the design concept of recalling the traditional city image was outlined, the key question was how to integrate those traditional elements from the local landscape into the streetscape. Therefore, the project team decided to work on the most distinctive elements, water and mountain, because water is a common urban feature shared by cities in the southern Yangtze River region and the mountain is a unique element of Hangzhou, infrequent in the cities in this region. The reconstruction of the water network was essential to recall the traditional watertown image. However, this reconstruction has been contested by the experts and local residents because there was no watercourse along with this street in history. In fact, according to some historical archives there used to be two narrow ditches called Taiping-gou (literally ditches for peace) along the street for fire prevention purposes. The middle portion of this street used to be fenced and reserved exclusively for the

emperor as it also called imperial Avenue of the Southern Song Dynasty, while normal people just walked under the long veranda along the ditches. This is the classic image of this street in the ancient times. Thus, the construction of the watercourse is based on the idea of Taiping-gou together with the typical practice of watercourse construction in this region. Taking advantage of the existing topology which is lowered from Wushan Mountain to the West Lake Avenue, the water is able to flow naturally through the street without the help of mechanical infrastructures. One of the requests from local authorities was to allow the pedestrians to hear the sound of the water flowing while walking along the street. This aspect has been achieved by this project, especially in the section of Hengfang Street. The watertown atmosphere has been brought back to this area thanks to the flow of the water (Figure 5). The traditional elements from the mountain landscape have been reinterpreted and applied to the design of new buildings along the Zhongshan Road. For instance, the style of the masonry in the newly designed open landscaped tearooms were inspired by the Wushan Mountain. The open landscaped tearooms are also typical in Southern Song Dynasty culture. In addition, this tearoom also imitated the shape of the giant Taihu Lake Stone which is commonly seen in the Southern Song Dynasty's architecture and landscape painting. Unlike the small Taihu Lake Stone in Classic Suzhou Gardens, the Taihu Lake Stone in Hangzhou normally has a much larger volume and they still can





Figure 4 Small buildings along the street after completion (Source: the author).



Figure 5 Reconstruction of the water network (Source: the author).

be seen on the Fenghuang Mountain near Hangzhou. By using the Southern Song Dynasty cultural elements and reinterpreting the landscape, the traditional city image has been, at least partially, brought back to this area. Due to the complicated situation of the street, different elements from different periods have been applied in this project, creating a built environment composed by different styles rather than a uniform appearance which is a high creative approach.

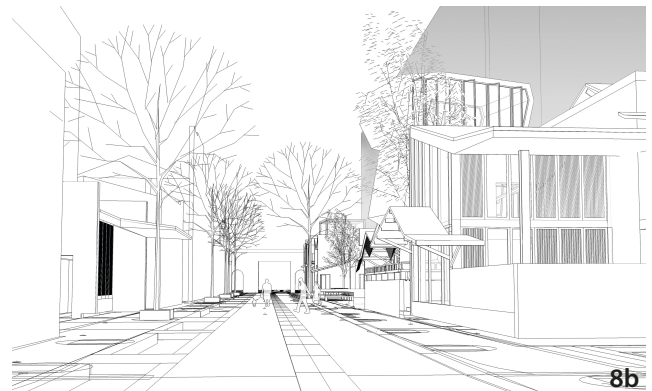
The design also found inspiration in the natural and cultural heritage of Hangzhou, including the landscape of Wushan Mountain, the design of Zhonghe waterway, the elements from the Southern Song Dynasty paintings, combined with our previous experience mixing the vernacular architectural style with principles of contemporary design. Old buildings were well preserved, while new buildings were carefully added in a renovated but harmonious way (Figure 6). This complied with the ad hoc doctrines of the China Academy of Arts, and was representative of local and international trends of innovation of local architecture. From this point of view, we consider the preservation and renovation process achieved a satisfactory result.

This has been the first time for the China Academy of Arts to intervene in the large scale of city development. The project offers a valuable experience for the preservation of historic districts both for Hangzhou as well as for other large cities in China. One is the comprehensive project planning based in research and investigation. Among all the urban regeneration projects of similar scale

developed in Hangzhou city, the preservation and renovation project of Zhongshan Road is the first one to incorporate a long phase of research and planning at initial stage. It has emphasised how all the historic and living traces must not be simplified and erased by the so-called 'design concept and style'. The local authorities argued the choice of our proposal for its in-depth insight, academic spirit and feasible plan. The other reason was the overall design guideline for the street blocks. To guarantee the quality of the project and strictly apply the principle of 'coexistence of the old and the new, and harmony in diversity' the design team also implemented innovations from the original prerequisites. For example, instead of including whole length of Zhongshan Road (6 km in total) into this project as it was originally requested by the local authorities at the beginning, the project team made a detailed plan for only one portion of Zhongshan Road (1km) as a showcase and developed design guidelines for the rest (Figure 7). Using such guidelines to control the master plan and design has been a historical achievement in the development of Hangzhou city.

Our team also gained experience in the avoidance of forced relocations during the construction process pushing forward the building implementation in an efficient way. This was quite challenging and some problems encountered during the project were far beyond expectation. For example, almost no historic information about the old buildings along Zhongshan was available in any city archive, and also information about more recent buildings





**Figure 6** Mixture of the old and the new buildings (Source: the author).  
**Figure 7** North entrance of the pedestrian street (Source: the author).  
**Figure 8a** A portion of Zhongshan Road before the renewal project (Source: the author).  
**Figure 8b** The design sketch for Zhongshan Road renewal project (Source: the author).  
**Figure 8c** Zhongshan Road after the completion of project (Source: the author).

was partial. It brought huge difficulties to the renovation project and therefore the project team had to conduct the mapping and survey from scratch. As a consequence of avoiding forced relocation, some local residents were willing to move, while others insisted to stay. Therefore, the construction schedule had to be modified for several times according to the relocation process. Should the local government promote future initiatives with high quality standards, it will probably face a similar situation. In this case, we hope that the Zhongshan Road project will be considered a useful test site. (Figure 8).

An overall evaluation of the project reveals several hardships as well. Firstly, the project was undertaken

too fast leaving negative impact on the historic buildings along the street. Although the team managed to keep the old buildings in different styles, they were all almost repainted against our original design concept. This proves better than demolishing the old and building fake antiques, but still cannot be considered a successful practice. The second problem refers to the lack of effective city management after the completion of the project, which was prevented from achieving the expected outcome. For instance, disharmonious flowerpots were installed along the street two days after the project was completed, although they do not fit into the environment. Another example of ineffective management is that many shop

owners refurbished and decorated their shops just according to their own taste, without considering the surroundings. On the other hand, it also revealed that the aesthetic perception of the general public still lags behind. These two examples show that once the quality of a place has been upgraded, how to maintain such quality is an essential task for city management. The limited design and construction time also contributed to the referred unsatisfactory condition.

In conclusion, architecture plays a major role in the formation of a beautiful city, and to the same extent, vulgar architecture in the city will affect its people and make them become vulgar as well. From this perspective about Hangzhou, there are five important aspects upon which we may evaluate its aesthetics. The first is the distinctive character of a city which, makes it different from other cities and cannot be simply judged by one single standard. Second is the general condition of the buildings in the city. Third is the quality and diversity of the city's lifestyle. The fourth are the rich layers of culture accumulated in the history of the city. Last but not the least, is the readiness of a city to assume change. In sum, these five aspects could conform the criteria upon which to define a city's cultural creativity.

Despite the difficulties, we consider that the Zhongshan Road renovation project is successful and unique, as it gives a response to the five conditions referred above.

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