

Community Identity During Urban Renewal in the Case of Hehuatang Community in Nanjing City, China

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Abstract This study investigates community identity in Nanjing's historic Hehuatang community during urban renewal, revealing tensions between heritage preservation and modernization. Through ethnographic research, three key factors are identified shaping identity: (i) material conditions including series of spatial conflicts around overcrowding, (ii) social tensions such as tenant-aborigine divides and generational misunderstanding, and (iii) institutional governance as top-down policies would exacerbate distrust. Despite 82% of residents expressing place attachment, 67% desire relocation due to deteriorating liveability—a paradox highlighting the failure of China's contemporary performative participation models. The adapted three-layer creativity model underscores the need to reconcile physical renewal with social equity. Findings advocate for co-design processes that integrate resident agency, offering lessons for sustainable urban renewal in rapidly developing contexts.

Keywords Community identity, Urban renewal, Hehuatang community, Nanjing, Heritage preservation, Modernization

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1 General situation of global urban renewal

1.1 The global development of urban renewal

The concept of urban renewal was originated after World War II when the suburbanisation of Western cities led to economic, social and environmental deterioration^[1]. In the 1950s, urban renewal was associated with large-scale demolition and reconstruction projects to improve European city slum's living environment and stimulate economic development^[2]. At the simultaneous period of time in U.S., critics labelled urban renewal as 'the program of demolition'^[3]. Many U.S.' urban renewal projects were seen destroying the ethnic diversity of neighborhoods^[4] by displacing the Black population from centrally accessible communities. According to Martin Anderson's popular critique of urban renewal^[5], only two thousandths of urban renewal projects' gross cost was used for rehabilitation by the end of 1962. Arriving to the 1980s, neotraditional town planning occurred under the banner of new urbanism^[6]. Urban designers and planners started attempts to maintain pre-existed neighborhood environments after urban renewal.

Entering the 21st century, urban renewal activities started adding weight to the human aspect of participation. The power of the masses in city revitalisation became more significant and scholars continued highlighting humane factors'

importance. According to Woodcraft et al.^[6], the sense of community identity and belonging is a combined element of building a sustainably active community. Cities are argued human-centred. Therefore, the traditional approach of passively involving citizens in urban renewal should shift to empower a participatory, multi-actor scheme of co-creating communities' reconstruction^[7]. The practicality of upgrading urban communities is set out differently according to countries' various cultural background and economic progression. While this global shift toward participatory renewal is evident, China's rapid urbanization presents a unique paradox. Despite progressive policies advocating for public engagement, grassroots participation in practice remains largely symbolic. Historical communities like Hehuatang in Nanjing, a Ming-Qing architectural enclave near the city center, exemplify this tension. Here, 73% of residents report spatial conflicts over shared facilities^[8], a symptom of top-down renewal strategies that prioritize physical modernization over community agency. Such conflicts expose how bureaucratic compliance (e.g. meeting consensus quotas) fails to address deeper issues of social cohesion and identity erosion. This divergence from Western participatory models demands a critical reevaluation of 'participation' in non-Western contexts, where physical decay coexists with persistent community attachment, a phenomenon underexplored in current literature.

This essay will delve into this phenomenon by providing a critical reevaluation of 'participation' in non-Western contexts, employing the case of Hehuatang community in Nanjing.

1.2 Public engagement in global urban renewal cases

Public engagement has emerged as an important part of contemporary urban renewal, yet its implementation varies significantly across cultural and institutional contexts. Comparative case studies reveal both progress and persistent gaps in translating participatory rhetoric into practice.

In China, adding lifts to multi-story apartments (ALA) exemplifies this duality. The 2011 Shanghai ALA policy mandates 90% owner consensus^[9], ostensibly promoting inclusivity through its quantifiable threshold. Nonetheless, this procedural rigidity conceals operational paradoxes: elderly residents in top-floor units, the policy's primary beneficiaries, often lack property ownership rights, while ground-floor holdouts veto projects despite minimal impact. The Shanghai Joint Committee's meeting minutes (2012–2015) reveal 89% of discussion topics concerned technical compliance, with zero sessions addressing how lift installations might mitigate intergenerational conflicts or rebuild trust between property owners and renters. The policy's materialist bias is further exposed in Catalonia's Neighborhoods Act^[10], where 72% of participatory budgets were allocated to visible

infrastructure (e.g. pavement repairs), while social cohesion programs received merely 8%. Similarly, Sydney's Neighborhood Improvement Program^[11] demonstrates nominal social care through tenant relocation subsidies, yet post-relocation surveys revealed 63% of displaced households reported weakened neighborhood ties^[12]. These cases clarify a global performative contradiction: while economic models tout participation's sustainability^[13]. Such gains often accrue to absentee landlords rather than reinforcing Hummon's 'territorial community identity'^[14].

1.3 Research on community identity

The limitations of procedural participation call for a deeper examination of community identity—a dynamic construct shaped by material conditions, historical legacies and power relations. Scholars argue that identity acts as both a casualty and catalyst in renewal: spatial conflicts erode belonging, yet involuntary dependencies sustain attachment^[15]. Hehuatang community's situation symbolizes this paradox.

Hehuatang community, Nanjing's best-preserved Ming–Qing residential block, offers a critical site to explore identity negotiation. Nestled within 25 m of the Nanjing Circumvallation, this 125,600 m² living heritage zone encapsulates 14 historical streets, 73 ancient greeneries and 8 protected historical buildings. Hehuatang currently holds 1,805 households, cramming into only 116,000 m² of residential space, yielding a per capita living area smaller than a standard parking spot (19.8 m²)^[16]. This condition amplifies spatial disputes, as evidenced by UPSC's 2023 documentation of 'clothesline wars' in 68% of shared courtyards and illegal parking occupying 42% of alleyway widths.

Hehuatang community's three interlocking crises reveal several systemic failures. (i) Overcrowding's generational toll: With 4 residents typically sharing sub-20m² units, multigenerational households report privacy violations that correlate with a 31% increase in familial conflicts^[17]. (ii) Infrastructural abandonment: Public lavatories, bicycle parks and clinics are displayed very further apart (200–500 m) from one another. This brings living inconvenience which is particularly severe for an aging community.

In addition, many residential houses are in disrepair, increasing risks of rain leakage and building collapsing. (iii) Space appropriation: Only 11% of residents can access the community's sole clinic without navigating motorcycle-clogged lanes, while 73% report abandoning outdoor activities due to hanger congestion in shared spaces^[8].

Hehuatang community's physical deterioration creates a cognitive dissonance: while 82% of long-term residents express strong place identity, 67% simultaneously desire relocation^[8]. Municipal renewal programs have exacerbated this tension through their material focus. The 2022 City Wall Conservation Plan that allocated RMB 37 million budget to physical restoration while omitting social impact assessments^[18]. Hence, Hehuatang's case would underscore limitations of current preservation paradigms. As Zhang^[2] demonstrates, when heritage interventions prioritize architectural authenticity over community needs, they risk transforming historic neighborhoods into 'preserved slums'—physically intact but socially unsustainable. Alternative models, such as the community-led regeneration approach piloted in Suzhou's Pingjiang Quarter^[19], suggest that integrating heritage conservation with participatory place-making can better sustain both physical fabric and social meaning. In Pingjiang's Phase III renewal, resident workshops directly informed the adaptive reuse of 17 traditional courtyard houses, achieving 89% occupant satisfaction while maintaining historical integrity^[20]. This emphasizes the need for taking an ethnographic investigation of the Hehuatang community, where the absence of such participatory mechanisms has amplified spatial conflicts and community fragmentation, which will be detailed in the following sections.

2 Research framework

2.1 Theoretical basis: relational topology of community identity

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognized community identity as a dynamic socio-spatial construct rather than a static attribute^[21]. Building upon this paradigm, our theoretical framework synthesizes two

complementary approaches to analyze identity formation in urban renewal contexts:

2.1.1 Topological spatiality and the production of community. Doel's post-structuralist sense of holding a 'topological appreciation of space'^[22] set up the theoretical foundation for our research in Hehuatang. Topology, in the field of relational geographies, emphasises the connectedness of people, communities and cultures in establishing our society's grounds^[23]. Drawing upon Doel's foundational work^[22], we conceptualize Hehuatang as a topological space where social relations continuously deform and reconfigure amidst physical transformations. This perspective reveals three critical mechanisms: (i) Spatial Negotiation: Residents' everyday practices (e.g., clothing drying, alleyway socialization) reinterpret formal spatial configurations^[24]. (ii) Scale Articulation: Local conflicts become sites where municipal policies and neighborhood realities intersect^[25]. (iii) Temporal Stratification: Historical narratives materially embedded in Ming–Qing architecture mediate contemporary identity claims.

2.1.2 The three-layer creativity model. The theoretical framework gains further dimensionality through its adaptation of Cohendet et al.'s three-layer creativity model^[25]. In Cohendet et al.'s study, cities' creativity was formed within intermediate spaces (the middle ground layer), transforming individual ideas (the underground layer) into economic projects (the upper ground layer). Applying the three-layer model to Hehuatang community's identity formation, spatial and institutional dimensions are shown as below:

The three layers interact dialectically, generating the contested spatial politics which will be revealed in Section 3.1. Where Cohendet et al.'s original model examined informal knowledge share among workers, our adaptation reveals parallel processes during which how residents subvert formal spatial orders through unauthorized modifications to living spaces, improvised use of public areas and the strategic interpretation of preservation rules. This reconceptualization preserves the model's core dynamic—the transformative circulation of ideas between layers, while grounding it in the material realities of urban renewal. The model's analytical

Table 1 An application of Cohendet et al.'s three-layer creativity model in the case of Hehuatang community

Layer	The layers' original representation	Community manifestation in Hehuatang
Upperground	Formal institutions and policy frameworks	Municipal preservation ordinances and Urban Planning Society of China's redevelopment guidelines
Middleground	Intermediary organisations in innovation contexts	Neighbourhood's physical and social infrastructure, e.g. alleyways that facilitate informal gatherings
Underground	Grassroot creativity	Hehuatang residents' daily spatial practices

value is particularly evident in its capacity to trace how micro-level spatial conflicts escalate through these layers. For example, a resident's act of drying clothes across an alley (underground) may provoke committee mediation (middleground), ultimately influencing revisions to municipal design standards (upperground). This vertical integration of scales addresses a key limitation in conventional community studies that treat neighborhood dynamics as isolated from broader urban governance systems. This theoretical orientation directly informs the methodological approach detailed in Section 2.2, where ethnographic observation captures underground practices, institutional interviews document middleground negotiations and policy analysis tracks upperground responses. The model's layered structure thus provides both a conceptual framework for understanding community identity and a practical guide for empirical investigation.

2.2 Research introduction

2.2.1 Research background. As one of the two research teams from Nanjing Agricultural University (NJAU), we chose 3 investigation sites in Hehuatang Community: Gaogangli (G1), Chenjiapaifang (C2) and Tongxianggongjing (T3) (as circled in red in Fig.1). The three spots distribute next to each other, yet they manifest different features.

This is a recapitulative summary of the investigation sites: T3 contains mainly public housings with residents' living area ranging from 10-15 square meters. The closest public lavatory from T3 is 300 m apart, making elder residents' living activities inconvenient. T3 may require the highest level of regeneration. In contrast, some G1's streets and houses were renewed in the last 2 decades and therefore are better displayed. C2 locates closest to the City Wall. It does not contain any complete courtyard spaces. Many households in C2 are distributed in deep alleys, allowing our investigating route to extend further in the community. The diversified nature of the three spots will support our team in gaining a more comprehensive view of Hehuatang. This will be shown in the research analysis' section of this essay.

2.2.2 Research method. The ethnographic research method, observations and in-depth interviews^[27] are 2 major components of our investigation. Observation comes before interviews during which we pre-visited our investigation sites. Under the permission of residents,

observation covers: (a) noting descriptive information of the community and (b) taking photos of spots that we find representative in defining the community (Fig. 2). After these, we produce an introductory report integrating the collected information. The report, combining UPSC's provided secondary sources, sets up a solid foundation to portrait questions for the interviews.

Interviewing is a core component of thematic analysis. A systematic introduction to thematic analysis is studied by Braun and Clarke. They defined thematic analysis as 'an essentialist or realist method' that 'reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants'^[27]. They emphasised that thematic analysis is a 'recursive process, where movement is back and forth as needed, throughout the phases'. Our application of thematic analysis is evidenced in the below Table 2.

It is shown that the theme 'community identity' roots from initial codes in the interviews' transcribed text. 'Community identity refers to the degree to which individuals identify with the territorial community where they live, mainly a residential area'^[14, 28]. Regarding the heavy involvement of people during the process of urban renewal, 'community identity' contains valuable potentials for in-depth research. Hence, our interview questions are designed focusing on exploring Hehuatang residents' view of community identity. This is to further construe people's level of supportiveness in destructing Hehuatang's existing problems during its process of renewal. The research has the main goal of promoting Hehuatang's residents to trust the community administration and therefore reducing communication barriers during urban renewal.

3 Research analysis

This section of this essay will delve into our interview transcripts, analysing the three main factors that impact Hehuatang's community identity.

In team, we took 12 in-depth interviews and split our interviewees into three groups: residents (A), community officer (B), and university professor (C). We coded the interviewees accordingly. Our interviewees are listed in Table 3.

Through analysing our interview transcripts, it can be concluded that the 3 main points of consideration, in the theme 'community identity', are (3.1) neighborhood relationship, (3.2)

community dependence and (3.3) community management.

3.1 Neighborhood relationship

Among the three mentioned points, neighborhood relationship has the most significant impact on Hehuatang residents' living experience. Many interviewees take embedded depth in evaluating their interactions with neighbours. Modern urban renewal programs increasingly place emphasis on 'humanity'. Thus, the analysis of human characteristics can be crucial.

3.1.1 Identity and background. G1, C2 and T3's residents hold various attitudes to their neighborhood. This corresponds to Hehuatang community's character of having complex property rights. Nonetheless, it is also found that residents' diverse identity backgrounds are significant, leading to many cases of neighborhood conflicts. For example, interviewee A-1-1, a secondary school teacher from G1, commented:

'Environment, in my thinking, is the quality of human. But, in this place, generally speaking, people's quality is not high. If people don't get along well, some can be really bad. Swearing, mouth-fighting...that sort of stuff is not good anyway...' (A-1-1, G1).

Similar content is mentioned by interviewee A-3 from T3:

'For example, the family just next door, this house, he was a drug addict, a drug addict that sold drugs and got money. He sold at nightclubs from time to time. He made millions...but gambling, prostitution...he does all sort of things then loses money. Then he was caught red-handed. Yes, just 1,000 g, but that's a life sentence.' (A-3, T3).

The drug trafficking case leads to decline in the overall public security level in Hehuatang, negatively polluting the community's living environment. A-3 stressed in his interview that such neighbor would 'impact the society badly'. Although A-3 does not disclose any personal conflicts with his neighbor, he showed apparent willingness to move away from the community. Hence, differences in residents' identity background, caused by low education level, will worsen Hehuatang community's neighborhood relationship and reduce the sense of community identity.

3.1.2 Spatial conflict. Alongside identity background, interviewee A-1-1 pointed out other conflicts in the G1 neighborhood, mainly focusing on the crowded use of space:

'We have people around here who pours

dirty water right in the ditches on public streets. Some ditches locate in front of people's doors... disgusting. In addition, drying clothes... if each family puts on a pole and everyone grabs a place in the yard, it would soon be full. Then comes the annoying mouth-fights, as always.' (A-1-1, G1).

Spatial dispute has concrete manifestations in many old neighborhoods. Comparing to new communities, the laggard structural design of Hehutatang creates a blurry sense of social boundaries between its residents. This increases the risk of losing community identity. For A-1-1,

complex neighbourhood relationship is the main causing factor for her to move out of Hehutatang. She emphasized that contradictions come from trivial things in life, yet her 'low-quality' neighbors exaggerate those conflicts. The tension over space use is also evident in the other 2 sites:

'...this place, you see, our clothes have totally no sun exposure due to this four-tier illegal building (pointing). Our clothes are not to be dried up (speaking faster).' (A-4, C2).

'Come, come, look at this window (take us to the window and open it) and you look at

this garbage, can you smell it (the garbage dump is messy and dirty)? Take another picture here please (with anger).' (A-10, T3).

It can be seen that spatial disputes are very common in the Hehutatang community. High population density and obsolete building arrangements are important factors that reduce residents' living quality in Hehutatang. These are very likely to have negative impacts on community identity.

3.1.3 Aborigine-tenant relationship. A-2, an interviewee from C2, expressed similar feelings of disappointment towards his neighbors. Nonetheless, his discomfort comes mostly from the opposition between aborigines' and tenants' lifestyle:

'The migrant population increases; real indigenous people reduce. A lot of the surrounding houses are rented. Then the whole hygiene situation gets really bad. First of all, outsiders are here for a living. They bring a lot of tools, tricycles, blocking the road whilst putting them in a disorderly manner. People's lifestyles are totally different...garbage or sewer disposal is not ideal as well.' (A-2, C2).

In A-2's survey, the phrases 'migrant population' and 'indigenous people' have a high repetition rate. He continuously distinguishes the 2 stakeholders to highlight their different living habits. The interview respondent has a strong opinion on tenants when pointing out their abundant production of household wastes:



Fig.1 A satellite image of the modern Hehutatang Community (2023)



Fig.2 Photo showing telegraph poles' crossing distribution at G1

'Their livelihood tools will cause road congestion and make the streets' sanitary condition poorer'. However, parts of A-2's views on neighbourhood relation are at odds from the mentioned interviewees. When asked of the most impressive thing about the Hehuatang community, A-2 answered without hesitation:

'That would be the harmonious neighbourhood relationship during the 1980s. When my children were young, neighbors next door will take care of them when me and my wife go outside working. There are no issues around responsibility because all our old residents treat children as their own.' (A-2, C2).

A-2 was born in an ancestral household in C2 and had been living in the Hehuatang community for about 60 years. It can be seen through his case that the condition of neighbor relationships is affected by complex factors: communal divisions, family atmosphere, residents' educational background and time variations.

A-2's viewpoints are not fully reflective of the overall neighbourhood conditions in Hehuatang. Supportive reasons include: (i) Time scale: The 'harmonious' neighbourhood, as described by A-2, came from 40 years ago. (ii) Spatial scale: A-2's daily activities in Hehuatang are centered within C2 area only. When asked about the situation of his adjacent block G1, A-2 showed signs of ignorance: 'We just came from Gaogangli. We heard that Gaogangli seemed to own some private houses and the government's administration offices have paid for their construction since the 80s.' (Interviewer 1).

I know nothing about that.' (A-2, C2).

It can therefore be seen that A-2's evaluation

of 'harmonious neighbourhood relations' in the street is to be more accurately viewed as his personal nostalgia for the traditional living mode in Chenjiapafang (C2). This is not an objective evaluation of the current neighbourhood relationship conditions in Hehuatang as a whole.

Considering all interviewees' words, it can still be concluded that neighbourhood conflicts in Hehuatang community should be prominent in the past 10 years. This will continue to weaken the community identity of Hehuatang's residents.

3.2 Causes of community dependence

According to 3.1, neighbourhood relationship in Hehuatang is tense. However, it cannot fully represent residents' sense of community identity as most of the interviewees maintain varying degrees of dependence on their community. They choose the option of 'move back in place' after Hehuatang's urban renewal. Residents' attachment to Hehuatang is generated from: (i) their financial abilities, (ii) households' geographical distribution within the community, and (iii) time span.

3.2.1 Objective limitations. The first group of residents' community dependence is forced. This emotion comes from some fundamental needs for survival, rather than yearning for improvement in life quality or trusting the urban renewal project. A representative sample from this group is A-4, an interviewee who expressed strong dissatisfaction with his residence and its surrounding environment:

'Can I take a picture? Just this corner here.' (Interviewer 1).

'Oh, isn't it ugly? Take pictures, anyway, this is our life, like a coffin.' (A-4, C2).

Although A-4 repeatedly uses 'ugly' to

describe his community, he insisted on choosing the option 'move back in place' after renewal. When asked about his expectations to urban renewal, A-4 replied:

'I haven't really thought about it. You must understand that as normal people we don't have that much disposable income. I retired from the textile industry, that makes my life harder. And I'm also single. I haven't lived in those gated new communities and have never left this place... urban renewal...I can't really provide a view.' (A-4, C2).

It can be concluded 2 main points from A-4's transcript: (i) Financial limitations prevent A-4 from seeking a costly living environment. Emphasizing his 'lack of disposable(s)' in the interview, it could be suggested that A-4's choice of staying in Hehuatang is compelling. (ii) Cognitive limitations prevent A-4 from understanding the new concepts of urban renewal. Key supportive phrases are: 'haven't thought about'; 'haven't lived in...new communities'; 'never left this place' and 'can't... provide a view'. Hence, moving back becomes the only option. This does not correlate to positive recognitions on the community.

In addition to A-4's view, A-2 expressed distrusts to correlative management organizations:

'The factory that I worked went bankrupt and the government told us to buyout seniority. They gave us 10,000 RMB and said that our endowment insurance is more than enough to be paid. Now our insurance price increases year by year. Social promises will not be kept after social changes. I will never easily trust again in front of these issues.' (A-2, C2).

When the community officer B-1 comes for

Table 2 An application of phases of standard thematic analysis^[27] in the case of Hehuatang Community

Phase	Standard Process from Thematic analysis	Process during our research of Hehuatang community
1.Familiarising with data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce interview outlines (questions and extended questions) Interview community participants (residents, officers, university professors) and record Use Lark to transcribe audio-recordings into text: define colloquial expressions and fix wrong transcriptions
2.Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the transcribed text repeatedly Use short phrases to summarise 'chunks' of literal data Conclude the short phrases into initial codes
3.Theme Search	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sort the initial codes into larger themes Determine the final theme ('community identity') for report analysis
4.Theme Review	Checking if the themes work in relation to coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of analysis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the final theme, assess its feasibility according to criteria—data support; whether including subtopics etc. If not feasible, repeat phase 3
5.Theme Defining and Naming	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summarise the inclusions and exclusions of the final theme Assess whether the theme fits the research objective
6.Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> According to research objective, initial codes and transcribed text, write up the report Reassess sufficiency between literal data and report analysis, ensure they closely interlink with each other

a signature on an updated renewal investigation contract, A-2 showed incoordinate attitude and a reluctance to sign. Therefore, alongside financial and cognitive limitations, if residents form a tense attitude with the community managements, they will increase the tendency to maintain their normal living conditions, producing community dependence. This slows down the rate of urban renewal.

3.2.2 Geographical distributions. The second group of residents' community dependence originates from their satisfaction to Hehutatang's location in the city. Hehutatang's residents are mostly aging. They show the same dependence on the community's nearby infrastructures: hospitals, supermarkets and banks:

'What if I move to a place that requires taking a bus to buy veggies? The transportation cost is huge. How can you (the government) move me before giving compensations?' (A-10, G1).

An important reason for group 2 residents to continue living in Hehutatang community is that they find it difficult to choose a replacement housing in the nearby geographical location. When being asked of whether choosing to move back, A-4 replied:

'This is a must. My father's not well. Now we take a taxi to the city hospital...ten minutes ride. Dad's very satisfied, when mentioning leaving, he said: "I'm not leaving, don't kill me." (A-4, C2).

The father of A-4 is over 90 and in declining health condition. He is extremely dependent on municipal hospitals near Hehutatang, therefore, moving away is a "death" choice. It can be seen that Hehutatang community has a valuable geographical location, making it very suitable for the aging population to reside. A few groups 2 residents overlap with that of group 1. A-4

is one of them: although she has a forced dependency on Hehutatang community, the geographical location of Hehutatang does satisfy her relatives to access medical services. From the micro point of view, Hehutatang's residents have spatial disputes over the use of inner public area. From the macro point of view, the spatial characteristic of Hehutatang area in Nanjing city meets the living needs of its vast majority of residents. Ultimately, the drawback and benefit of Hehutatang community coexist, affecting residents' sense of community identity from two opposite perceptions.

3.3 Community management

Community management units include the housing management office, urban construction administration and medical stations. They complement each other to serve Hehutatang residents' daily living.

According to our interview, most residents are dissatisfied with these departments' services. From their description, various community management units do not meet the true needs of residents:

'The housing authority makes it even worse. The workers do come. For example, if I ask for a roof repair, the worker comes and carries the linoleum, rubs, and then he's gone. Just five minutes. After two days, it leaks again.' (A-3, T3).

'They mended that road. They followed the renewal method used by Laomendong (neighbor community which has been regenerated). They covered the road with stones, you see, we can't even ride a bike.' (A-3, T3).

'The doctors who came to monitor our blood pressure. I think they're just volunteers. They cannot answer anything you ask...not qualified at all.' (A-4, C2).

It can be concluded that: (i) The quality of repair services from the housing man-

agement offices is low with a short period of effectiveness. It does not really solve the housing problem of residents. (ii) The urban construction unit does not truly understand the living needs of residents. They directly imitate other urban renewal projects. As a result, some road reconstruction makes it more inconvenient for residents. (iii) The quality of medical services provided are off standard. Residents doubted on the staff's professions.

The series of problems cause residents to distrust and refuse to cooperate with the community management department. They do not think that their opinions would receive effective feedback. This is a major obstacle to obtain residents' ideas during interviews.

Through communicating with an officer from the housing management team, it can be seen that external departments are aware of upgrading their traditional urban renewal approach:

'It used to be simple. The government used to only leave residents with the option of leaving their homes and therefore maximizing their own benefits. Now they consider whether some would want to stay after regenerating. Now they take at least 3 rounds of surveys before starting the actual thing. Urban renewal, throughout my 30 years of career working in the industry, is progressing from Keynesianism to Liberalism.' (B-1).

In the interview with Professor Xiao Fu from the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at Nanjing University, he mentioned the similar opinion:

'Citizens' right to speak in urban renewal projects is strengthening over time. In terms of architectural design, the public participation is also clearly increasing year by year.' (C-1).

However, hearing the professionals' words, the time lag from information penetration requires to be considered. The lower-middle class lacked recognition of their increasing power position in the field of urban renewal. In Hehutatang, residents see more on the inadequacy of relevant service facilities and the inaction of management departments. This still harms the overall figure of community identity.

3.4 Results

The analysis of interview data from Hehutatang community reveals three core dimensions shaping residents' community identity during urban renewal:

(i) Neighborhood Relationships: Spatial conflicts (e.g., overcrowding, disputes over

Table 3 Table showing our interviewees' sequential coding

Sequence Number	Interviewees' Last Name	Serial Number
1	Ding, Ding (Couple)	A-1-1; A-1-2
2	Liu	A-2
3	Li	A-3
4	Xu	A-4
5	Zhu, Shi (Couple)	A-5-1; A-5-2
6	Sun, Yang (Couple)	A-6-1; A-6-2
7	Bai	A-7
8	Han, Shi (Couple)	A-8-1; A-8-2
9	Zhao	A-9
10	Li	A-10
11	Wang	B-1
12	Fu	C-1

shared facilities) and socio-cultural differences (e.g., tenant-aborigine tensions, low education levels) significantly weaken social cohesion. While some elderly residents express nostalgia for past harmony, contemporary community environment is marked by mistrust, particularly due to deteriorating living conditions.

(ii) Community Dependence: Financial constraints and lack of alternatives force many residents to remain settling in Hehuatang despite dissatisfaction. The community's central location in the city with easy accessibility to essential services (e.g., hospitals, markets) create pragmatic attachment, particularly among aging populations. This creates a paradox as when physical and social conditions degrade, functional reliance on the community persists.

(iii) Community Management: Residents perceive management efforts (e.g., housing repairs, road renovations) as superficial, misaligning with their needs and therefore deepening distrust from residents to authorities. Despite policy shifts towards participatory renewal (e.g., multiple surveys before redevelopment), implementation remains top-down with limited meaningful engagement.

These findings underscore the tension between physical decay and persistent attachment in Hehuatang, highlighting the limitations of current renewal strategies that prioritize infrastructure over social sustainability.

4 Conclusions

This study interrogates the construction of community identity amid urban renewal, using Hehuatang as a lens to examine the gaps between participatory rhetoric and lived reality. The research demonstrates that community identity is not merely a static attribute but a dynamic negotiation shaped by (i) material conditions, (ii) social relations and (iii) institutional governance. In the case of Hehuatang, these refer to (i) overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure, (ii) intergenerational conflicts and tenant-aborigine divides, and (iii) the disconnection between policy and practice. The adapted three-layer creativity model^[20] proves instrumental in tracing how grassroots practices collide with municipal policies, revealing systematic failures in intermediation. Key implication include: (i) Beyond Physical Renewal: Heritage preservation must integrate social needs (e.g., privacy, shared facilities) to avoid 'preserved slums'^[2]. (ii) Participatory Reframing: Tokenistic surveys must

evolve into co-design processes, empowering residents to shape spatial and social outcomes. (iii) Temporal Sensitivity: Policymakers should address both historical legacies (generational ties) and contemporary inequities (tenant rights).

Ultimately, the case of Hehuatang calls for a paradigm shift, from renewal as reconstruction to reconciliation, where community identity is not eroded but reconstituted through inclusive governance. Future research could explore comparative models to identify scalable solutions for China's rapidly urbanizing neighborhoods.

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