

Space, people, city: Reconstructing urban cores for public good

EDITOR'S NOTE

During an inspection tour of Shanghai on July 15, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee Xi Jinping called for efforts to advance high-quality urban renewal. He stressed the need to fully embrace the people-centered philosophy of urban development, emphasizing that urban renewal initiatives should be carried out in a thorough, meticulous, and effective manner to continually enhance the people's sense of fulfillment, happiness, and security. Recently, *CSST* invited scholars from relevant fields to explore, from different perspectives, the theme of "fully embracing the people-centered philosophy of urban development and advancing high-quality urban renewal," with the aim of further deepening and strengthening scholarship on the modernization of cities with Chinese characteristics.

By ZHANG MING

On Nov. 2, 2019, Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee, visited the Yangshupu Waterworks in the Yangpu Binjiang public space during an inspection tour of Shanghai. As he walked along the waterfront boardwalk and surveyed the landscape on both sides of the Huangpu River, he articulated the principle that "the cities are built by the people and are for the people." This important notion established the fundamental values guiding the development and renewal of China's megacities in the



An artist sketches by the water of Yangpu Binjiang. Photo: IC PHOTO

new era. During the visit, General Secretary Xi Jinping praised the transformation of the Yangpu waterfront, noting that the century-old industrial district had successfully evolved from an "industrial rust belt" into a "beautiful, livable zone."

As chief designer of the public space along the southern section of Yangpu Binjiang, I was closely involved in—and witnessed—the entire transformation of this 5.5-kilometer waterfront, from its spatial restructuring to its people-oriented renewal. Through that process, I came to appreciate the central logic of the people-centered philosophy of urban development: It cannot remain an abstract ideal but must take shape in tangible spaces that people can see and experience. The ultimate mission of urban renewal is to return the city's finest and scarcest land and landscape resources to ordinary people.

Connecting waterfront public space
Yangpu Binjiang is the birthplace

of modern Chinese industry. For much of the past century, waterworks, power plants, and textile mills lined the riverfront, while walls surrounding the industrial compounds cut the city off from the Huangpu River. Although residents lived close to the water, they could neither see it nor gain meaningful access to it. In 2015, our team began the comprehensive design of public space along the southern section of Yangpu Binjiang, guided by an approach of "limited intervention, low-impact development, and layered authenticity." By fully preserving the successive layers of the area's industrial heritage, we sought to create a continuous public waterfront accessible to all.

The Yangshupu Waterworks presented a critical bottleneck along the waterfront. It continues to perform the essential task of supplying the city with water, and reconciling heritage conservation, waterworks operations, and public

access posed a complex challenge. Rather than simply demolish and rebuild, we erected a pedestrian trestle bridge several hundred meters long outside the waterworks' flood-control wall. People can now walk above the water, turning the facade of the century-old British-style waterworks into the backdrop for an open urban landscape. The rigid flood-control walls along the waterfront were also redesigned in cross-section. Instead of serving a single protective function, they incorporate layered platforms for rest and sightseeing, combining flood protection, recreation, and passage. Rusted mooring bollards, concrete industrial frames, and aging loading equipment were preserved in place as tangible records of the city's history. Together, these features form a continuous, 5.5-kilometer open-air exhibition of industrial heritage.

Today, the Yangpu Binjiang waterfront is a fully open, shared public space frequented by early-morning exercisers, families, art students sketching by the water, and cyclists. Together they present a vivid tableau in which "buildings are legible, streets are strollable, and the city has warmth."

Promoting composite publicization of urban infrastructure

Gray infrastructure—waterworks, pumping stations, substations, spaces beneath elevated highways, flood-control facilities, and similar structures—is essential to the functioning of any city. Yet these facilities have traditionally been built as enclosed, single-purpose

compounds, often creating negative "patches" that fragment the urban fabric and even provoking "not in my backyard" opposition.

The landmark "Green Hill" on the Yangpu Binjiang waterfront offers a representative example of integrated renewal. Originally a tobacco company's machinery maintenance warehouse, the building was slated for demolition because a planned riverside road would run directly through the site. Instead, we adopted a strategy of "cutting and restructuring, layering and co-existing;" the building's mass was chambered and stepped back, greenery was added across multiple levels, and the municipal road was routed through the ground floor. Its tiered terraces, spiral ramps, and rooftop garden are open around the clock, bringing together an urban road, a multilevel park, viewing platforms, and public service facilities within a single complex. The result is a pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly corridor linking the waterfront to the city's hinterland.

The integrated use of infrastructure is more than an innovation in design methodology; it represents a significant breakthrough in the regeneration of built-up megacities. By organizing three-dimensional space in layers, it creates more public space without requiring additional land for construction, reconciling the non-negotiable needs of urban operations with residents' demands for recreation.

Zhang Ming is a professor from the College of Architecture and Urban Planning at Tongji University.

Jiangyin exemplifies institutional innovation for responsive urban governance

By LU HUILIN

China's people-centered approach to urban development is shifting its emphasis from spatial expansion to the effectiveness of governance. The success of this transition depends on whether primary-level governance can leverage institutional innovation to translate a people-centered philosophy into practical results that accurately address people's needs.

Jiangyin in east China's Jiangsu Province offers a compelling example of how this can be done at the primary level. As a county-level city in the Yangtze River Delta, Jiangyin has a dual character: It retains the acquaintance networks characteristic of traditional rural society while confronting the challenges common to modern cities, including increasingly diverse public needs and fragmented coordination among administrative departments amid rapid urbanization. This hybrid urban-rural character makes Jiangyin's experience relevant not only to other county-level jurisdictions but also to urban governance more broadly. Its approach—responding to people's needs through institutional in-

novation—does not depend on special policy advantages. Instead, it concentrates on reshaping lines of accountability, integrating technology into governance, and coordinating institutions—fundamental issues that every city must address as it modernizes its governance.

From space renewal to governance innovation: Communities are the basic units of urban governance. Urban renewal may determine whether adequate physical space is available, but whether a city is genuinely good ultimately depends on such practical matters as whether a clogged septic tank is promptly cleared, a broken hallway light gets fixed, and a government department is willing to take the lead in addressing parking shortages.

The structural solution to these problems lies in embedding the political leadership and resource-coordination roles of Party organizations throughout the governance process and building an integrated framework that spans organizational boundaries and mobilizes multiple stakeholders.

Deploying officials to the community level: In Jiangyin, this organizational framework is built

around Party branches in residential communities. All 709 of the city's residential communities have established community-level Party branches, bringing together homeowners' committees, property management companies, and government personnel assigned to the primary level on a single platform.

To curb buck-passing in the handling of service orders from the 12345 hotline, Jiangyin introduced a first-recipient responsibility system. The first department to receive an order must take the lead in coordinating its resolution, closing a loophole that previously allowed orders simply to be "returned."

Complex complaints that cross jurisdictional boundaries are managed through a four-tier coordination system, ensuring their systematic escalation to officials with the authority to resolve them. The "whistle-blowing and response" mechanism has proved effective in breaking down fragmented administration: Villages and residential communities "blow the whistle" to subdistrict offices, subdistrict offices "blow the whistle" to municipal departments, and the relevant departments respond immediately.

At its core, this mechanism mobilizes government agencies around people's needs, replaces slow, hierarchical chains of command with a more direct response, and shifts the focus from departmental jurisdictions to the problem itself, providing reliable organizational safeguards for addressing public concerns.

Using digital tools to improve efficiency: Jiangyin has established an integrated command platform that brings together public requests and reports from multiple channels, including 12345 hotline data, grid-based governance reports, and non-emergency calls to the 110 police hotline. It supports a three-tier coordinated command structure spanning the municipal, township, and village levels. After the platform was piloted, response times fell from three to five days to less than 24 hours, with more than 95% of issues resolved at the village or community level.

For a digital platform to function effectively, it must be backed by cross-departmental coordination. Jiangyin has introduced a "three-lists-and-one-letter" supervision system, using written requirements and firm deadlines to ensure that

directives issued through the platform are received and acted upon.

The city has also incorporated AI into the system. Its smart service-order dispatch tool uses a proprietary large language model trained on more than 100,000 historical service orders, achieving nearly 98% dispatch accuracy and reducing average processing time to 30 seconds per order. A public sentiment analysis and assessment platform has aggregated approximately 5 million event records, helping government departments "act before complaints are filed."

Together, these digital tools have driven three major changes. A unified data network now captures public sentiment, shifting decision-making from experience-based judgments to data-driven analysis; a unified response network provides closed-loop case handling, reducing buck-passing and interagency friction; and a unified evaluation network assesses performance, providing an evidence-based foundation for accountability and evaluation.

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