

Reconstruction project looks suspiciously like destruction

By ZHANG KUN in Shanghai
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Is the 100-year-old Taohuawu neighborhood in downtown Suzhou, Jiangsu province, being renovated or destroyed?

That's a question now circulating on the Internet. The reconstruction of Taohuawu, which literally translates as "the Peach Blossom Dock", was announced two years ago. The project was intended to refurbish antique buildings, improve locals' living conditions and promote tourism.

But this past May, Song Weijian, an architect and vice-director of the Architectural Society of China's interior design branch, had an experience that cast doubt on whether those aims were being strictly pursued.

At a construction site, he came upon fine-crafted antique wood columns and screen doors with elaborate carvings. Curious about their origin, he later learned, to his disgust, that they had come from dismantled buildings in Taohuawu.

"They are pulling down historical buildings that should be protected," Song said on Tuesday. He took pictures showing destroyed houses and scattered debris in the Taohuawu neighborhood and posted them on his micro blog. He also condemned those who had removed parts of antique buildings.

His words and images attracted tens of thousands of comments and stirred up concerns about the destruction of Taohuawu and the historical buildings.

A house in the neighborhood has since become one of the chief topics of discussion related to the reconstruction project. The structure, No 4 Datie Lane, has a frame made of *nammu*, a precious wood that has been traditionally valued in China, and dates back to the mid-1800s. The owners of the house, a pair of brothers named Ye Peiji and Ye Peikun, have refused to leave the residence to make way for the reconstruction project.

On Aug 6, the local People's Court of the Pingjiang district, Suzhou, held a hearing about the house. The government agency in charge of the Taohuawu reconstruction said it had a legal license to undertake the project and the Ye family will have to give up their house.

"Some rumors on the Internet said we are tearing down the house at No 4 Datie Lane, but that's not true," said Cao Qinliang, manager of the Taohuawu Development Co Ltd. "The people living there should be removed, but the house won't be."

Cao said more than 1,400 of the 1,503 households living in the neighborhood have moved.

"Some houses have to be dismantled to make way for road construction, parking spaces — necessary public accommodations," he said. "But no historical buildings will be removed."

He declined to say what the house will be used for after the reconstruction.

Ye Peikun argued that his family has legal ownership of the house, saying it is a historical antiquity and therefore

HISTORICAL THEATER WAS FIRST LEFT OUT OF PLAN

Professor Ruan Yisan was infuriated when he learned that an 80-year-old cinema near the People's Square was to be torn down to make way for a new cultural square compound.

The building, Zhejiang Cinema, originally named Chekiang Theater, was created by Laszlo Hudec in the 1920s, as one of the more than 60 projects the Hungarian architect designed in Shanghai.

The cultural square developer announced soon that the cinema would not be dismantled, but refurbished and used as a cinema.

Ruan, however, was dissatisfied. The professor of Tongji University and ardent advocate of historical building protection

believes that the building, like hundreds of others, should have been included in a list of the city's protected historical buildings.

A staff member of the estate developer, Shanghai Jinfu Properties Co Ltd, who declined to give his name, said that there should be an open discussion about which buildings should be preserved. "You can't call it off just because one professor said so. Many other buildings, some highly valuable communities in the area, disappeared a long time ago."

That's exactly why the cinema should be preserved, because few such buildings are still standing, Ruan said.

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should be protected.

"We are capable of protecting our own home, as long as the government allows us to."

Ye presented 150-year-old legal papers to the court showing his family has had legal ownership of the house since 1863. "Our ancestors purchased the house at that time, and the house itself dates back even further," he said.

Architectural Society of China's Song, an experienced architect who has worked on restoring numerous old buildings, said the Ye family should be allowed to stay on

its own property.

"Protecting a historical neighborhood means you should keep its original look and original way of life," Song said. "Driving people away and keeping an empty shell of a house is almost tantamount to producing a fake."

Song said the construction company has removed many old structures and kept various "valuable" buildings.

"A few ancient buildings scattered among skyscrapers can't make a historical town," Song said.

No conclusion was reached in last week's court hearing.



An ancient village in Suzhou, Jiangsu province.

QI ZHENLIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Ancient villages welcome investors

By XU JUNQIAN in Shanghai
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New regulations on the protection of ancient villages will allow more private capital to be invested in historically important sites in Suzhou, Jiangsu province which is home to the largest number of century-old villages in China.

According to the regulations, historical houses in these villages can be acquired from the original inhabitants by the government or State-owned enterprises and then turned over to private investors for either renovation or repurchase.

The regulations state that this system will better protect the houses and allow them to be turned into small enterprises, such as tourist attractions, to raise money for their continual upkeep.

With more than 17 nationally and provincially authorized "ancient villages", Suzhou was, in 2005, one of the first cities in China to open the door to private capital to protect its historical sites. The city government said private investment can make up any financial shortfall to help

preserve the ancient villages.

A total of 150 million yuan (\$23.5 million) has been spent by the local government on renovation and infrastructure works to preserve the ancient villages over the past seven years.

Ancient villages are defined as one or a cluster of hamlets that feature at least 10 characteristic residences, temples or other forms of architecture, and were formed before 1911.

"The new policy is definitely good news for the villages," said Xu Gangyi, a retired member of the Suzhou government think tank on historical relic protection.

"This capital, if used well, can bring a new life to the dying houses," he said. "But the main (conservation) body must still be the government so as to prevent the villages from becoming overly commercial."

The protection of ancient villages has been a nationwide problem. Feng Jicai, chairman of the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Society has warned that 300 villages in China are dying every day because of urbanization. A total of 900,000 villages were destroyed over the past decade, and a large number of

them were ancient villages.

Xu believes the reason behind such "vast extinction" is the lack of attention, both from the government and those "cashed-up people".

"Of course, we accept the new policy with open arms," said Yu Feng, vice-chairman of the Collectors' Association of Yiwu, Zhejiang province.

For several decades, Yu, together with his association members, mostly wealthy businessmen from Yiwu, has been searching for old houses across the country. Yu has a personal interest in the houses, but also views them as lucrative investments.

"I believe the private capital in the affluent Yangtze River Delta is abundant enough to cover the restoration and protection of old houses. And there is a keen interest in the field," said Yu.

"But I think it is more ideal to have local businessmen invest in the houses, as they are more familiar with the local culture and traditions and therefore best preserve the original," he said.

Zhou Qinan contributed to the story.

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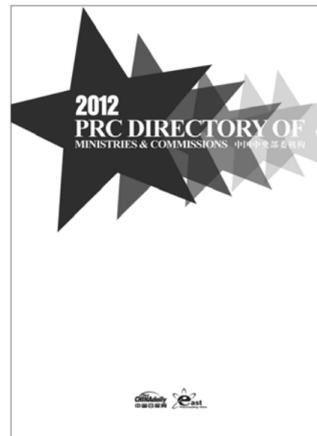
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