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# The Guidance of Public Value in China's Historic Environment: Research on Regeneration Strategies Using Taiyuan's Bell Tower Street as an Example

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**Abstract:** When profit-driven renewal is difficult to implement, many historic districts in China become "frozen" under protection. In the recent social context of "building cities for the people", public value-oriented renewal of urban historic areas has become crucial in city transformation. This study investigates strategies for historic district regeneration in China by integrating spatial form, urban governance, and public value. We propose a novel framework to analyze the regeneration of historic districts, using Taiyuan's Bell Tower Street as a case study. The framework distinguishes between two dimensions: spatial and economic–social. In the spatial dimension, we focus on the transformation of spatial form to regenerate public value, emphasizing the attribute of "publicness" as central to urban regeneration efforts. This involves a tiered approach to excavating and upgrading historic districts at macro, meso, and micro levels. The economic–social dimension explores urban governance to enhance public value through collaboration between government, market, and societal actors. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, including document reviews, interviews, field observations, and statistical data analysis. The analysis highlights that a public value-oriented approach to heritage regeneration can balance historical preservation with contemporary urban needs, offering a sustainable model for other cities.

**Keywords:** heritage; regeneration; spatial form; urban governance; public value

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## 1. Introduction

Historic districts are invaluable resources, serving as unique areas of the city that fulfil multiple functions and harbor cultural memories. The governance of historic districts has long been a significant social issue [1]. As China's urban development and construction has shifted from an era dominated by incremental (1988 to 2014) growth to an era of high-quality, people-centered development [2,3], urban regeneration has increasingly been seen as a crucial means to achieve high-quality development [4–7]. As an integral part of cities, the regeneration of historic communities has become a key issue in China's current urban development.

Despite their importance, the renewal of historic districts in China faces numerous challenges. Many historic areas, especially those in cities with underdeveloped tourism economies, struggle to generate sufficient market revenue for regeneration. Consequently, these areas often remain "frozen in conservation", becoming relics at risk of degradation [8].

In contrast, when regeneration projects do achieve market success, their models are sometimes inappropriately replicated in different contexts, leading to large-scale "demolition–reconstruction", which can undermine historical integrity. Moreover, urban regeneration of historic environments in China is frequently driven by economic profit, with capital recycling as the primary logic. This approach, while addressing urban decline and social issues to some extent, often fails to maintain social harmony and diversity.

Existing studies have provided many meaningful implications for regeneration of the historic environment. However, significant gaps remain unaddressed. Traditional approaches that focus solely on "heritage preservation" and "economic development" are insufficient for promoting sustainable long-term growth [5]. There is a pressing need for an integrated perspective that incorporates sustainability into regeneration efforts. Additionally, while models like the triangle model used by English Heritage offer a comprehensive framework for measuring the public value of heritage (Figure 1), these models require refinement to be effectively applied in urban planning and heritage protection.

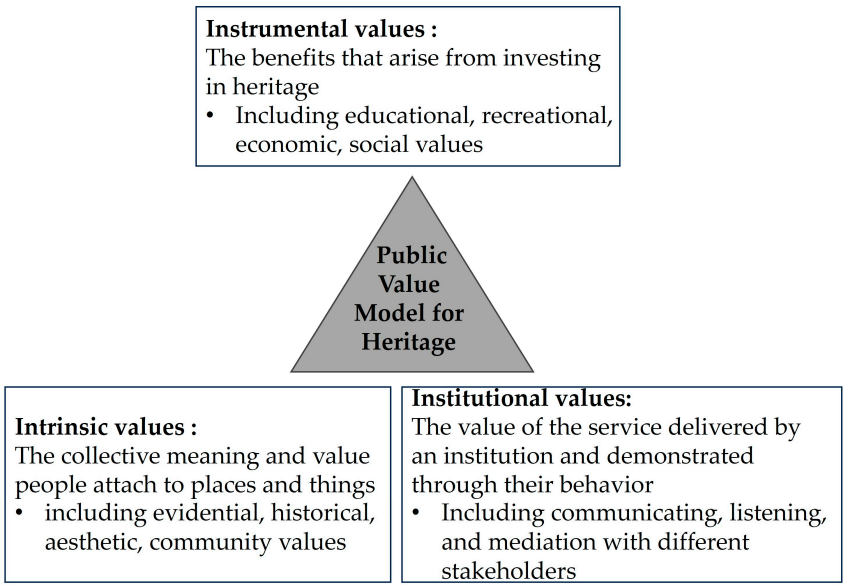



**Figure 1.** Public value model for heritage (Source: adapted from Ref. [9]).

Taiyuan, a lower-tier second-level city in China with a per capita GDP of USD 11,000 in 2022, has an underdeveloped tertiary and tourism economy. Since 2014, the city has been planning to regenerate its historic Bell Tower Street. Despite initial difficulties with developers who anticipated potential losses in the project, the municipality adopted a public value-oriented approach. Completed in 2021, the regeneration received positive feedback from various sectors.

Taking this project as an example, this research aims to propose a novel analytical framework for the regeneration of historic districts. This research integrates secondary and primary sources, combining a literature review and semi-structured interviews to provide a comprehensive analysis. This article focuses on analyzing the regeneration of Taiyuan's Bell Tower Street, applying our proposed framework to understand the reasons behind the project's success, and exploring how spatial form and urban governance strategies have contributed to creating public value in the revitalization.

## 2. Literature Review

Although there are many aspects of historic environment regeneration, being aware of the shift in perception of heritage values is fundamental to this study. It influences the scope and methods of protection and utilization of historic areas. Meanwhile, as part of the public realm, the historic environment has physical (space) and economic–social (activity) dimensions [2].

### *2.1. The Transformation of Heritage Values*

An update to the understanding of heritage value is the basis for achieving contemporary vitality in historic areas. From Alois Riegl (the famous Austrian art historian who for the first time in Western civilization theorized the values of architectural and urban heritage at the beginning of the 20th century) [10], to the *Charter of Athens* (CIAM 1933), the *Venice Charte* (1964), the *Washington Charter* (1987), the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994), and the *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (UNESCO, 2011), heritage protection has undergone significant development in both concept and scope. These texts demonstrate the expanding scope of architectural heritage, with preservation evolving from isolated elements to comprehensive and sustainable strategies. The focus has moved from physical to intangible aspects, and from preserving objects to landscapes, indicating a shift towards dynamic, living conservation that encompasses broader heritage values [11].

In 1998, B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore proclaimed the advent of the experience economy, where the economic worth of historic areas is emphasized [12]. Consumers in this economy seek sensory and emotional integration during consumption, desiring cultural, historical, scientific, and technological experiences. R.P. Leite discusses how urban policies have turned cultural heritage into a commodity and urban spaces into consumer-driven social relationships [13]. Su examines urban entrepreneurialism's impact on heritage commodification in China [14], while Wright et al. note that densely populated areas' heritage sites have greater economic and social value, with adaptive conservation yielding higher returns than passive protection [15].

UNESCO's 2011 *Recommendation* highlights the adverse effects of urbanization on heritage preservation and the conflicts between safeguarding architectural heritage and pursuing modern urban development, advocating for conservation strategies that align with a city's social and economic backdrop [11,16]. The Heritage Impact Assessment has recently emerged as a conflict-solving tool to improve world heritage conservation in line with sustainable development policies [17]. It is used for identifying and analysing the impacts of human activities on cultural heritage sites, with the aim of finding a balance between the protection of cultural heritage and the needs of urban development in order to achieve sustainable development. Such assessments focus not only on the physical aspects of cultural heritage, but also on its cultural and social values [17].

In conclusion, the recognition of the heritage value of historic areas has transformed the perception and evaluation of objective values, the realization of economic values in markets, and a people-oriented social value system. This is relevant not only to cultural studies and anthropology, but also to urban planning (spatial form and publicness), urban governance, and public rights involved in the preservation and promotion of heritage.

### *2.2. Public Value*

Frequently mentioned in discussions of urban design, the concept of the public realm needs to be clarified. It refers to the physical and social spaces that are accessible to the public and used for communal purposes [8]. The concept of "public value" was originally introduced by Harvard University's public management professor Mark H. Moore in 1995 [18], and it has been well-embedded in Cerda's theory of urbanization of 1867 [19]. Public value refers to the benefit or worth that a government or public organization creates for society [8,20]. The historic environment, as heritage, the essence of what people cherish and aspire to pass on to future generations, is a crucial element of the public realm [9]. The concept of public value supplies a new way to measure the performance of a historic environment that is open to the public.

The challenge lies in discovering a valuation model that effectively integrates the precision of conventional economically derived methods with the less exact values-based approach, providing meaningful and valuable insights. As the authors state, "those things that were easy to measure tended to become objectives and those that count were downplayed or ignored" [9] (p. 2). Robert Hewison and John Holden (2011) proposed a public value model for heritage based on Moore's theory (Figure 1). It was adopted by English

Heritage and the UK's Heritage Lottery Fund and it represents a shift from a traditional fabric-based approach to a public value-based approach in UK heritage practice [9]. In addition, the Accenture Public Service Value Model evaluates the optimization of user experience (including visitor numbers and quality of user experience), impact on the local community (including economic, social, and education aspects) and benefit to the wider population (macroeconomic). Originating from traditional commercial principles like "shareholder value", the model reorients its focus towards citizens, treating them as the primary investors and key stakeholders [9].

However, although, in the field of public management, measuring public value has entered its maturity phase [21], it is still a rough model that needs to be refined when applied in the field of urban planning. Presenting a clearer analytical framework for public value-oriented regeneration of historic districts is what is missing in the current research and is the aim of this study.

### *2.3. Spatial Form*

Spatial form refers to the physical and built environment in which public life occurs, including buildings, streets, parks, and other public spaces. It is the "objectivation of the spirit" of the succession of societies that inhabit it [22] and similarly reflects society's values regarding the historic environment. The design and organization of these spaces can significantly impact the social and cultural life of communities and the degree to which they foster a sense of publicness—that is, a shared sense of identity, belonging, and collective action. Based on geography as represented by Conzen and architecture as represented by Caniggia, Sadeghi argues that a systematic interpretation of the forms and types of man-made urban fabric that have developed over time, combined with social change, can provide a good understanding of the present society and potential needs for future development [23]. Spatial form explains, to some extent, the logic of urban functioning and how it interacts with social conditions to shape public life [24]. This makes the old city an engine of communication and creates value.

### *2.4. Urban Governance*

Urban governance originates from "spatial governance", which in turn originates from the definition of "spatial turn" in social science, where space is both a product of social relations and a producer of social relations [25]. The relationship between space and governance is interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Space shapes governance and governance reconstructs space. Generally, urban governance solves multidimensional problems caused by the uneven distribution of benefits in the spatial production process by coordinating the allocators and methods of urban spatial ownership [26]. Urban governance is an important part of modernizing the national governance system and governance capacity, and it involves the improvement and innovation of urban management [6].

In China, streets and building facades in historic districts are usually considered the public realm [27], while the ownership of property is relatively diverse. This makes the issue of urban governance in historic districts particularly complex. At present, China is in a period of building an urban governance system and governance capacity. The high-level development of urban governance must adhere to the value concept of "putting the people at the center" and respond to the issue of how to build people's cities. This coincides with the idea of public value.

## 3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze the regeneration of Taiyuan's Bell Tower Street. We conducted the research in three phases: (1) During the project preparation stage (2014–2017), we reviewed planning documents and meeting minutes to understand initial project considerations. (2) In the project implementation stage (2020–2021), we conducted semi-structured interviews with key project members and performed field observations to explore implementation strategies and challenges. (3) In the project comple-

tion stage (2021–present), we conducted on-site investigations, stakeholder interviews, and analyzed statistical data and planning documents to assess the outcomes and impacts of the project. This comprehensive approach allowed us to evaluate the project from multiple dimensions, including spatial transformation, economic impacts, and governance structures.

### *3.1. Materials*

This study is supported by a wealth of first-hand information collected from 2015 to 2021 during the authors' working experience at the Taiyuan Urban and Rural Planning Design Institute.

Our research study was conducted in three phases. The first phase, the project preparation stage (2014–2017), focused on exploring how the project was planned and what factors were considered during the planning. During this time, the author worked at the Taiyuan Urban and Rural Planning Design Institute and obtained a large amount of first-hand data on the planning phase of the project through meeting minutes.

The second phase, the project implementation stage (2020–2021), aimed to explore how the project was implemented and the challenges encountered during implementation. During this period, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with numerous project members and leaders, including the Director of the Taiyuan Planning Bureau, the President of the Taiyuan Architectural Design Institute, the Chief Architect and Planner responsible for the project, and Ms. Feng from the Taiyuan Development and Reform Commission.

The third phase, the project completion stage (2021–present), primarily explored the project's outcomes. During this time, the author conducted on-site investigations on Zhonglou Street, interviewing brand shop owners, staff, other shop customers, and tourists. Additionally, the author collected a large amount of official statistical data, planning drawings, news reports, and other relevant information.

### *3.2. The Framework for the Regeneration of Historic Districts*

This study aims to propose an analytical framework for the regeneration of historic districts and evaluate the practical effects at various levels through multidimensional data. To pursue this aim, this study integrated qualitative and quantitative approaches, using semi-structured interviews, on-site investigations, graphic analysis, and data analysis of planning documents and government documents. The methods and hypotheses framework are illustrated in Table 1.

#### 3.2.1. Spatial Dimension

From a value-based perspective, the regeneration of historic environments and the transformation of spatial forms at different scales create distinct values [22]. This study proposes an analytical framework examining spatial form across three scales.

On the macro (urban) scale, we focus on the structural role of historical district revitalization, evaluating its economic value and structural function within the city through the enhancement of the regional economy. This evaluation involves graphic analysis based on the plan of the Old Town, supplemented by economic data, news, and interviews. We posit that the renewal of the historical district has restored its centrality, underscoring its instrumental (economic) value.

On the meso (street) scale, we delve into historical and social values by examining the urban fabric and the publicness of spaces, assessing people's cultural and consumption experiences within the district. This analysis is conducted through graphic analysis based on planning documents and field surveys and interviews about people's experiences. We hypothesize that the spatial arrangement, street layout, and overall size preserve the historical atmosphere while seamlessly integrating modern life, thereby reflecting the intrinsic (historical) value. Additionally, we propose that the transformation of the traditional fishbone-like/tree-like street layout into a more interconnected network enhances publicness, highlighting its instrumental (social) value. The mixed use of land further contributes to increased publicness, emphasizing its instrumental (social) value.

**Table 1.** The framework used to analyze the public value of historic district regeneration (Source: self-drawn by the author).

| Aspects | Analysis Content | Methods | Hypotheses | Public Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Spatial Form** | | | | |
| Macro level (Urban Scale) | Location: Recentralization | • Graphic analysis based on the plan of the Old Town<br>• Economic data, news and interviews | The renewal of the historical district has given back its centrality. | Instrumental (Economic) value |
| Meso level (Street Scale) | Urban Fabric | • Graphic analysis based on planning documents<br>• Field surveys and interviews on people's experience | The spatial arrangement, street layout, and overall size preserve the historical atmosphere and integrate modern life. | Intrinsic (Historical) value |
| | Accessibility to different types of public spaces | | The traditional fishbone-like/tree-like street layout has been transformed into a network that shows more publicness. | Instrumental (Social) value |
| | Mix of land uses | | The mixed use of land also reflects more publicness | |
| Micro level (Architectural Scale) | Restoration measures | • Graphic analysis based on architectural design documents<br>• Interviews with architects and craftspeople<br>• Site investigation and photos | Protection and renewal measures balance the historical, artistic, and use values in preserving buildings to maximize their overall public value. | Intrinsic (historical and aesthetic) value, Instrumental (social and use) value |
| | Architectural style | | | |
| | Space composition and constructive systems | | | |
| **Urban Governance** | | | | |
| Urban renewal mode | Ownership | • Narrative analysis based on minutes of meetings<br>• Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders | Mixed ownership based on public funds determines value orientation. | Institutional Value |
| Roles of Government, market and society | Joint participation | | Shifting from top-down management to participative governance determines value realization. | Institutional Value |

On the micro (plot and building) scale, we analyze historical, aesthetic, and use values within area regeneration through restoration measures, architectural styles, space composition, and construction systems, all informed by people's experiences within these spaces. This involves graphic analysis based on architectural design documents, along with interviews with architects and craftspeople, and thorough site investigations and photographs. We hypothesize that protection and renewal measures can effectively balance historical, artistic, and use values in preserving buildings, maximizing their overall public value. This balance reflects both intrinsic (historical, aesthetic) and instrumental (use) values.

By examining these different scales, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted values generated through the regeneration of historic environments.

3.2.2. Economic–Social Dimension

In China, urban regeneration has been integrated as a mechanism for market development and capital accumulation. Our framework for analyzing urban governance primarily considers the modes of urban regeneration and the roles of government, market, and society. Evaluating the public nature of historic environment regeneration puts emphasis on considering ownership of the means of production [28]. Therefore, funding sources for renovating historic districts determine the environmental value orientation. In addition, public value management encourages the joint participation of multiple entities [20]. The roles of government, market, and society determine whether public value can be realized through joint participation.

This study examines urban renewal modes through narrative analysis based on meeting minutes and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. It hypothesizes that the mixed-ownership model, primarily funded by public funds, determines value orientation, reflecting its institutional value. Furthermore, we posit that the shift from top-down management to participative governance plays a crucial role in realizing value. This transition to joint participation underscores the importance of institutional value by fostering greater collaboration and engagement among stakeholders.

## 4. Case Study

### *4.1. Case Study Area*

Taiyuan, the capital city of Shanxi Province with a rich history spanning over 2500 years, was acknowledged in 2011 by the Chinese State Council as a national historical and cultural city. Taiyuan's Bell Tower (Zhonglou in Chinese) Street (Figure 2), a historic environment covering 10.65 hectares, is located in the southern part of Taiyuan Old Town. It is a famous commercial street with great historical and cultural value, dating back over 1000 years since the city began construction in the Northern Song Dynasty in 982 AD (Figure 3). Since the year 2000, the economic development of Bell Tower Street has been in continuous decline, with serious damage to its historical features, disappearance of cultural characteristics, and intensifying social conflicts. After 2013, the city government planned to protect and renovate Bell Tower Street. After years of planning and discussion, the implementation of the protection and renovation project began in May 2020. The first phase of the project was completed in October 2021 and was opened to tourists.



**Figure 2.** The streetscape of Bell Tower Street during the Republic of China era (Source: Taiyuan City Archives).




**Figure 3.** Historic value assessment of buildings before the regeneration (Source: adapted from a file from Taiyuan Institute of Architecture Design and Research, 2022).

### *4.2. Spatial Dimension*

#### 4.2.1. At Macro (Urban) Scale

The landscape structure of Taiyuan can be described as "surrounded by three mountains in the west, north and east, with the Fen River flowing from north to south on the plain in the middle". Taiyuan's main urban development axis also extends from north to south along the Fen River. Taiyuan Old Town was the center of the city in the 1990s, and after 2000, the center of the city gradually moved south. Bell Tower Street also gradually declined as a commercial street.

In terms of spatial morphology, it can be seen in Figure 4 that Bell Tower Street is located at the intertwined point of the historical and modern spatial structure of the Old Town. Bell Tower Street is located at the intersection of the north–south historical axis that goes through the Shanxi Fuya museum and the east–west historical axis that connects the Imperial Temple and Cong Yang Temple. The area is the center of the civic activities defined by the three landmarks: the City God Temple, the Bell Tower, and the Drum Tower. Meanwhile, Bell Tower Street is located in the middle of the urban development axis and the business axis, only 500 m away from the Taiyuan Municipal Government. The regeneration of Bell Tower Street is an enhancement of the modern city center and a manifestation of the historical pattern of the old city.

As a result of the regeneration, the Bell Tower Street area has reinstated the centrality it lost during the latter half of the 20th century. Daily foot traffic reaches between 30,000 and 60,000 people, surging to around 100,000 people during holidays (Source: News Office of Taiyuan Municipal People's Government), significantly boosting the business revenues and tax income of traditional commercial environments like Liuxiang and the food street in Taiyuan (Ms. Feng, Researcher at the Taiyuan Municipal Development and Reform Commission). During the 2023 Mid-Autumn Festival and National Day holidays, Bell Tower Street ranked as the fifth most popular street among 111 nationally recognized tourism and leisure districts across the country (Source: Shanxi Provincial Department of

Culture and Tourism). "Taiyuan has gradually transformed from being merely a tourist distribution center to a full-fledged tourist destination. The city of Taiyuan intends to further focus on Bell Tower Street as a pivotal point for the development of the urban cultural tourism industry," said Ms. Feng. However, according to the shopkeepers, most people just come to visit and take pictures but do not make purchases. Due to the economic downturn and the mismatch of commercial positioning, the businesses are operating at a low level. The huge foot traffic has brought about a 30% increase in the business income of neighboring shopping districts such as the food street and Liuxiang Lane (Source: Dean of Design Institute). Thus, it can be said that the operation of Bell Tower Street itself is not profitable or even losing money, and its driving effect on the surrounding area exceeds the economic value of Bell Tower Street itself.

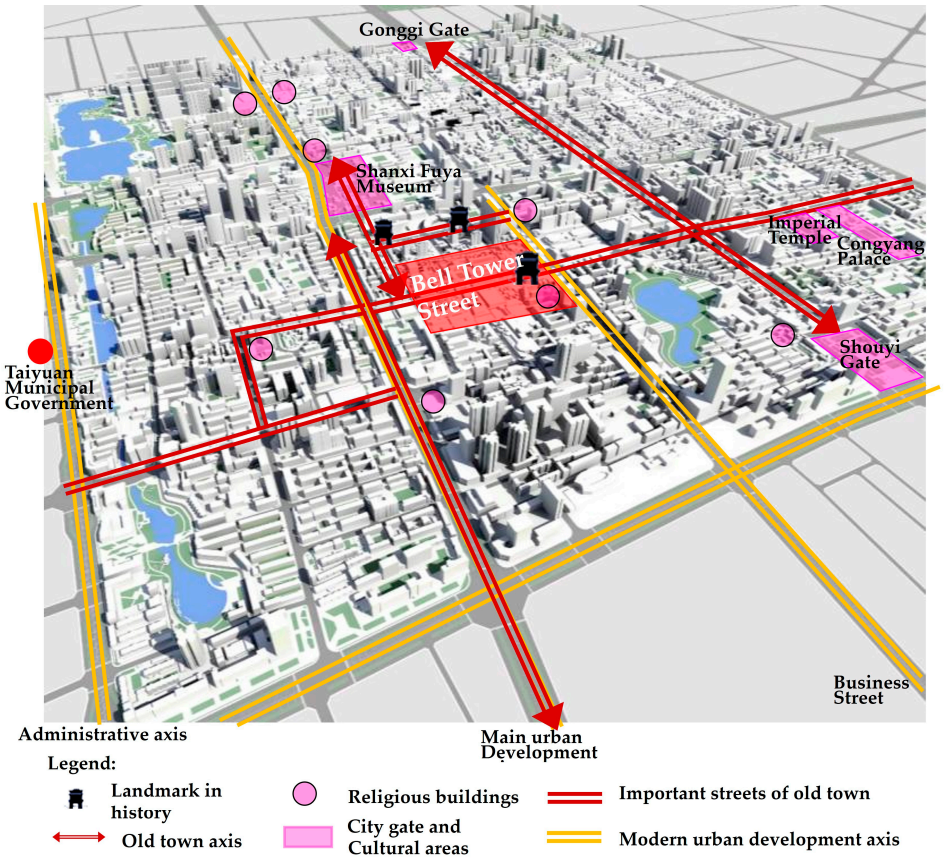



**Figure 4.** Spatial structure analysis diagram of Bell Tower Street in the Old Town (Source: self-drawn by the author).

#### 4.2.2. At Meso (Street) Scale

Urban fabric is an important aspect that reflects historical values based on authenticity. Social value refers to generating community and association, configuring links between people and spaces by their mere existence and helping people to identify with a community. Social value is an objectified value expressed in collective practices, in social memory, which are intangible or materialized in objects and built spaces and in the landscape in its deepest meaning [29]. Historical and social value can be measured in terms of urban fabric [8], accessibility to different types of public spaces [30], and mix of land use [30,31].

**Urban fabric** (Figure 5): The spatial texture representing historical value has been effectively preserved during the regeneration. The spatial arrangement, street layout, and overall size all maintain the distinctive features specific to Bell Tower Street. Through the author's on-site observations, within these familiar streets, visitors display dynamic scenes that blend a sense of familiarity with historical ambiance and modern-day life, showcasing

the diverse and vibrant lifestyle of Bell Tower Street. This is a way of reflecting social values while preserving historical values in terms of the urban fabric.




**Figure 5.** The figures of urban fabric before (**left**) and after (**right**) regeneration (Source: self-drawn by the author).

Accessibility to different types of public spaces (Figure 6): This is the most basic and important point that affect people's perception of a specific public environment. Compared to before, when Bell Tower Street was mixed with people and vehicles causing congestion and clutter, three main levels of public spaces have been formed after the regeneration. Firstly, all the streets and lanes were changed to pedestrian-only, with much higher quality. Based on historical records, the streets were connected into a network (some of the streets that existed historically and were later blocked were restored). Secondly, some of the transitional spaces between buildings and streets were enlarged into small squares. Thirdly, the courtyards of buildings in the traditional Chinese courtyard form are open to the public, which is an important carrier of people's perception of the historic environment and lifestyle. Meanwhile, as verified through the author's field research, all the public spaces are accessible to all people. Visitors travel through the streets and courtyards, enjoying the historical environment as a stage for historical, cultural, and emotional experiences. This is conducive to improving the vitality and social value of the space.

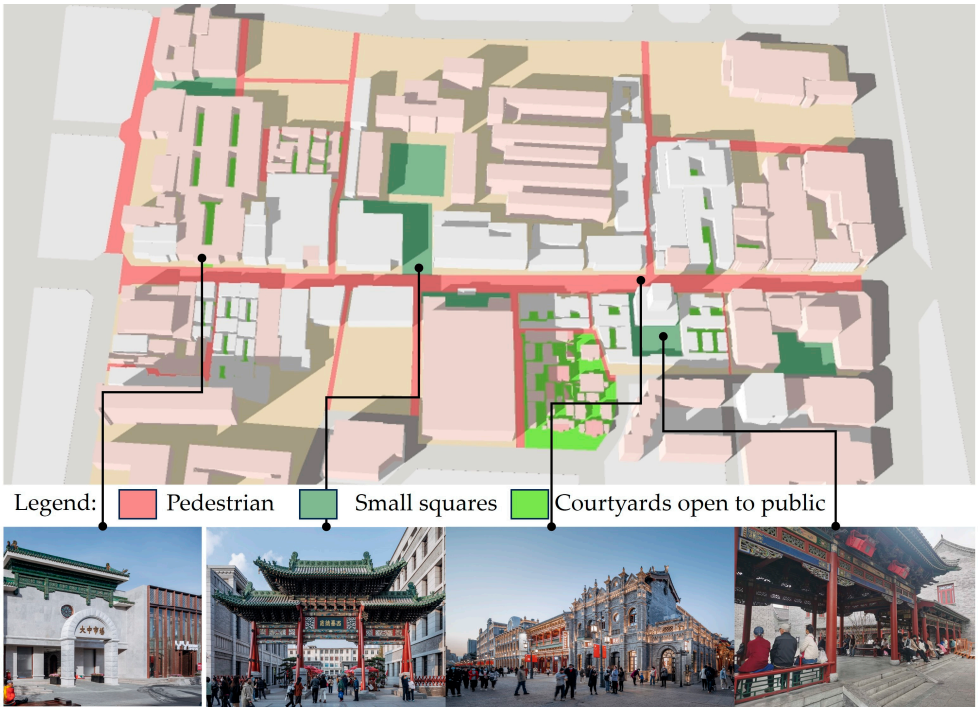



**Figure 6.** Diagram of analysis of accessibility to different types of public spaces (Source: self-drawn by the author).

The mix of land uses (Figure 7): Public green space, land for cultural facilities, cultural relics and monuments, commerce, and municipal facilities have been increased. Residential land has been greatly reduced. It can be said that the residential function for the original residents has been reduced while the public function for citizens has been increased. During the project planning phase, there was debate regarding whether the original residential area should be transformed into cultural and commercial spaces, which would have meant most of the residents would have had to move out. This could have led to gentrification by some academic definitions. However, experts and citizen representatives believe that its traditional historical and cultural resources should be made accessible to all people, including visitors. If the local residents do not move out, the area will turn into an affluent enclave where residents enjoy the fruits of regeneration and the historical district cannot become a true public space.

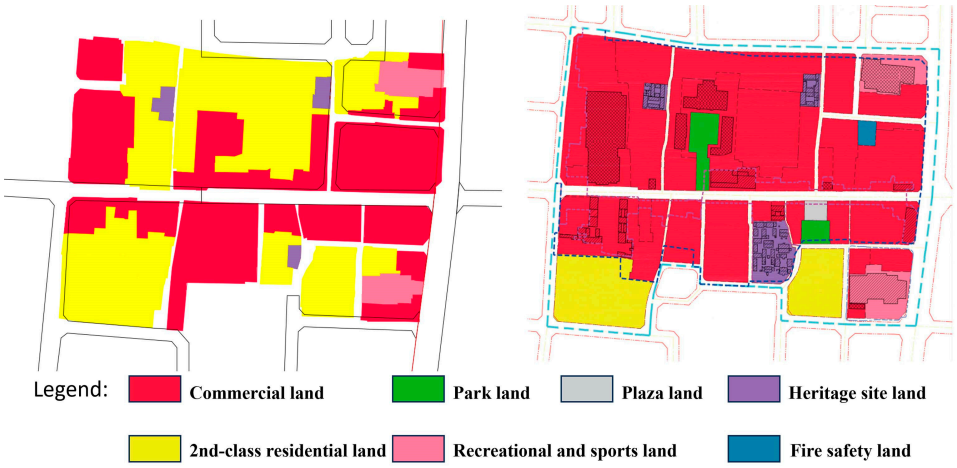



**Figure 7.** Mix of land uses analysis diagrams before (**left**) and after (**right**) regeneration (Source: the left one is self-drawn by the author; the right one is from the Taiyuan Municipal Planning Bureau Planning Public Notice Website https://ghzy.taiyuan.gov.cn/pqgs/20200522/953746.html (accessed on 27 September 2021)).

#### 4.2.3. At Micro (Plot and Building) Scale

At the micro level (architectural scale), the research focuses on restoration measures, architectural style, space composition, and constructive systems, to study how to balance the historical, artistic, and use values in preserving a building to maximize its overall public value.

Restoration measures: At the practical level, with the principle of "restoring the old as the old",[1] restoration measures were assigned to historical buildings based on comprehensive evaluation factors such as protection classification, age classification, number of building floors, structural classification, and building quality. Although the assessments were based on single buildings, the measures were delimited by plots. Different restoration measures for the buildings were determined (Figure 8), including new construction at the original site, appearance restoration, maintenance and improvement, exterior maintenance, and demolition. Among them, the two measures of appearance restoration and maintenance and improvement were aimed at historic buildings.

New construction at the original site needs to be explained in detail. For buildings with landmark and symbolic significance, such as the Bell Tower (built in 1583, demolished in 1935) and the Anchasi memorial archway, reconstruction was conducted based on written records and image data, following the principle of the original location, height, appearance, and construction techniques (Figure 9 Case 1). For some other buildings like Daning Hall, due to the identification of the main structure of the building as a Class D (the highest level) dangerous building, demolition and reconstruction was carried out. From the Western perspective of authenticity, the newly constructed historical buildings are forgeries. R.P.

Leite views this as the spectacularization of culture intended to turn history and culture into consumable commodities through a strong visual appeal [13]. However, some important historical landmarks in China have indeed undergone several reconstructions in history. Bell Tower is still the "objectivation of the spirit" of the succession [32] of Taiyuan Citizens, which has social benefits such as aesthetic, cultural, and educational significance.

Compared with the past, the direct impact of the regeneration on the lives of citizens is that the people of Taiyuan now have places to visit on weekends, or where they can take friends visiting from other places to showcase Taiyuan's characteristics. It aroused the pride of the once-prosperous people of Taiyuan in history and the identity of the citizens of Taiyuan.

Architectural style: Apart from preserving cultural heritage sites and historic buildings, important Ming and Qing dynasty architecture was reconstructed, most Republican-era buildings were restored, some post-1949 buildings were retained, and a small number of modern buildings were inserted. Ultimately, a comprehensive architectural style was formed that was mainly based on the Republican-era style, while also being compatible with the styles of various periods, reflecting the overall development of and changes to the city.

Regarding the external style of the buildings, traditional facades of small and medium-sized commercial buildings were added to the buildings, and the traditional roof combination of the quadrangle courtyard was used. Skilled craftspeople were gathered for construction technology. Provincial intangible cultural heritage inheritors and masters of arts and crafts in Shanxi province were invited to decorate traditional buildings with brick carving, wood carving, and painting.

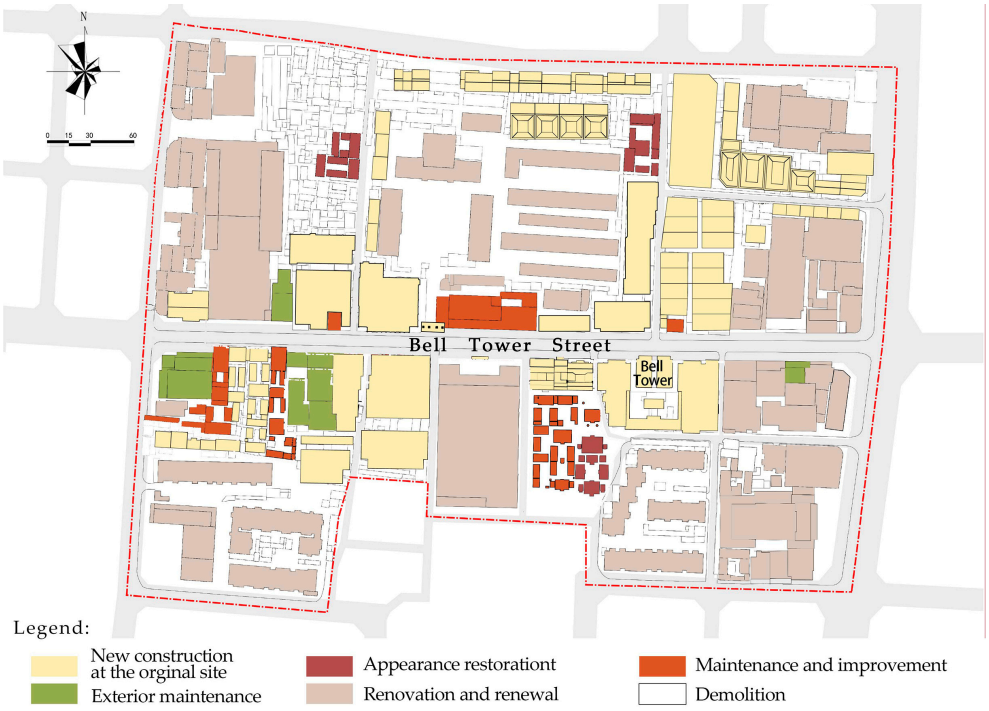



**Figure 8.** Analysis chart for classified preservation and renovation of buildings (Source: adapted from a file from Taiyuan Institute of Architecture Design and Research, 2022).

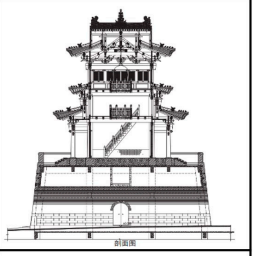
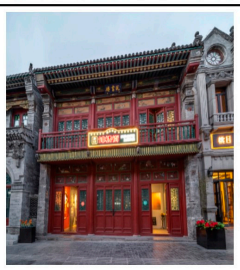
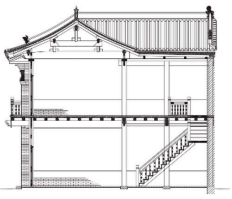
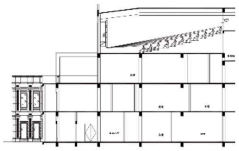
| Cases | Pictures before regeneration or historic pictures | Pictures after regeneration | Constructive system |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1 New con-Struction at the original site: (Bell Tower)** |  |  |  |
| **2 Protection &repair (Story telling building)** |  |  |  |
| **3.Renovation (Kaihua Temple Market)** |  |  |  |
| **4.Appearanc e restoration** |  |  | Building structure unchanged; facade renovated |

**Figure 9.** Examples of space composition and constructive systems (Source: adapted from a file from Taiyuan Institute of Architecture Design and Research, 2022).

Space composition and constructive systems: Large spaces that meet modern commercial needs were used as much as possible. For the reconstruction and protection of historic buildings, it was important to restore the original architectural structure as much as possible based on historical records (Figure 9 Cases 1 and 2). For the renovated buildings, the main strategy was combining brick and wood construction to frame the structure, blending modern commercial space with traditional architectural styles. For example, in Figure 9, Cases 3 and 4 added a traditional-style porch to the street-facing facade.

### *4.3. Economic–Social Dimension*

#### 4.3.1. Exploration of Regeneration Mode and Urban Governance Strategies

For the regeneration mode of the area, the government clearly positioned the Bell Tower block as a "cultural and commercial district, a cultural name card of the city" in various policy documents from 2014 to 2015. The municipal government adopted a "comprehensive regeneration, demolition, and reconstruction" mode for the Bell Tower Street plan. Only officially protected monuments and sites, traditional buildings with protection value, and the original street and lane layout of the block were retained. All other buildings were demolished, and large-scale underground space development was planned to obtain development funds. The block style selected was the transition period from the Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, when Bell Tower Street was prosperous. The local traditional courtyard unit form was collaged and replicated in space, finally creating the image of a "historical space".

For regeneration funding, since state-owned capital was insufficient, the municipal government explored joint development options, engaging partners and attracting capable developers. Discussions were held with the real estate firms Beijing A Company and Shenzhen B Company in 2014 and 2015. However, after assessing business income and market potential, these companies concluded that the project would not yield profits. Consequently, the attempt to lure developers for commercial investment and renovation funds proved unsuccessful. In terms of public participation, traditional brand owners, as stakeholders, have undergone a transition from individuals to a collective group, from passive to active participation. In the process of bargaining with the government, merchants gradually realized that they were the carriers and exhibitors of traditional commercial and cultural characteristics, and should have greater rights. In 2014, the main shop owners established the "Autonomous Renovation Committee" spontaneously, which took responsibility for ensuring that shop owners and residents expressed their demands to the government reasonably.

In the 2017 annual work report, the municipal government once again included the Bell Tower Street project, positioning it as a "cultural business card and cultural living room" and removing the commercial positioning, emphasizing the cultural positioning. This indicates a change in the government's positioning of Bell Tower Street. However, from 2014 to 2017, the municipal government was unable to find a satisfactory regeneration plan that balanced development and protection.

#### 4.3.2. Transformation of Urban Regeneration Mode in 2020

Financial security is the fundamental constraint for advancing urban regeneration. At the same time, the source of funding is also an important factor affecting the quality of the project: urban regeneration that relies entirely on government investment is not sustainable, but fully market-driven operations find it difficult to achieve financial balance. Moreover, excessive reliance on capital may cause project planners to fall into the trap of maximizing profits, leading to a decline in project quality. In 2020, the municipal government finally determined the funding source and regeneration model for the renovation of Bell Tower Street. This came from the year the state allowed national bonds and special loans for the renovation of older neighborhoods (Table 2). This project adopts a multi-channel investment approach—a combination of government investment and market-oriented operations. This approach not only solves the funding problem and promotes the rapid completion of the project in the short term, but also establishes government leadership to ensure the accuracy and completeness of achieving the project goals.

**Table 2.** The source and use of the funds for the regeneration project (Source: self-drawn by the author).

| | Source of Funds | Use of Funds |
|---|---|---|
| Government investment | (1) Special funds for urban construction<br>(2) Special national bonds for the renovation of old residential areas<br>(3) Special loans for the renovation of coal-burning shantytowns | The construction of 24 urban roads and municipal supporting facilities in the area and surrounding areas.<br>Construction of social welfare and cultural facilities<br>Renovation of the appearance of old residential areas within the area<br>Restoration of important cultural heritage buildings<br>Reconstruction of important historical buildings, street history museums, fire stations, etc. |
| Market-oriented investment | (1) Government platform asset management company's own funding<br>(2) Loans from the China Development Bank<br>(3) Social capital | Acquire ownership of approximately half of the houses and expropriate the usage right of approximately one-fourth of them.<br>Construction of commercial and rental properties.<br>Interior decoration and commercial operation within the project. |

The government platform's market investments aim for financial balance rather than profit. The total investment in the project (Table 2) was about RMB 3 billion, of which approximately RMB 1 billion was used for infrastructure construction (for instance, urban networks for supply services). This portion of expenditure was government-funded and not included in the calculation of the financial balance. If it had been included, the project would have resulted in a loss. For financial balance, approximately half of the rights to use land and houses and one-fourth of the rights to use the houses were nationalized through expropriation. Afterward, the government platform used these expropriated rights as collateral for loans to be repaid through 25–30 years of rent. The remaining one-fourth of ownership remained with traditional brands or former state-owned enterprises (Source: Dean of Design Institute). The property rights after the renovation of the Bell Tower Street historic district are based on a mixed-ownership structure, mainly belonging to the public authority.

Compared to the 2014–2017 renovation model, the 2020 model is different in that most of the land usage rights were sold to developers in the former, while in the latter the land is still owned by the government. The proportion of building demolition was higher in the former than in the latter. The latter invested more in infrastructure, public welfare, and cultural facilities than the former. The investment is mainly from the government and a state-owned Investment and Financing Company, and the operating profit goes back to the company, which is a platform. Therefore, it can be concluded that Taiyuan's Bell Tower Street has public-oriented ownership of the means of production and the ways the space is used.

#### 4.3.3. Roles of Government, Market, and Society

Roles of government: The roles of the central and provincial governments are primarily about institutional constraints, policy guidance, supervision, and inspection. For example, they enact relevant laws and regulations to constrain the behaviour of local governments in the protection and regeneration of historical streets; they are not directly involved in local government urban regeneration efforts, but supervise and inspect the protection and regeneration work.

The municipal and district governments mainly organize, coordinate, and participate in implementation. Specifically, the municipal government proposes a motion for the regeneration of historic neighborhoods, organizes the preparation of plans; establishes regeneration organizations, determines funding sources, organizes public participation, and introduces regeneration policies. The Yingze district government follows the instructions of the municipal government to complete basic information surveys of the neighborhood, conduct surveys of residents' and merchants' opinions, participate in the formulation of regeneration policies, and carry out demolition and resettlement work.

Roles of the market: Two main companies are involved on the market side: the state-owned investment and financing company (Yingze District Asset Management Company, Taiyuan, China) and China Resources Real Estate Development Co., Ltd., Taiyuan, China, as a business partner. The former acts as the development department of the project, responsible for the construction and financing of the project on behalf of the government, with profit as a secondary objective. At the same time, the latter is responsible for brand business attraction and operation on the commercial side.

Roles of society: Stakeholders of society are collaborators and protestors in the regeneration of Bell Tower Street, including owners of historical protected buildings, traditional brand shop owners, other residents of the neighborhood, the design institute, experts, media, and other citizens.

Owners of historical protected buildings: Some property owners agreed to have their property rights expropriated by the government. However, some others, after several rounds of negotiation, still did not agree with or protested against the expropriation plan. In the end, the property owners kept their property rights and agreed to carry out the building renovation work on their own.

Traditional brand shop owners: With support from the government and the chance of regeneration, the traditional brand shop owners promoted the development of the brands.

Other residents of the neighborhood: Public housing residents, who have no property rights, had to unconditionally implement the government's policy of "relocation to other places". Private property residents adopted the mode of "relocation to other places, compensation with money, and relocation nearby".

Design institute: Completing the preparation work of planning and design and the statutory procedures; using design concepts and professional knowledge to support government intentions; acting as a coordinating role among all parties as needed during implementation [33].

Experts: During different stages of the protection and renovation process, the government organized several expert seminars, in which experts provided third-party consulting advice on heritage protection, renovation models, business planning, etc.

Media: Assisting the government in positive publicity and guidance of the project at different stages.

Other citizens: The high levels of concern of citizens play a supervisory and promotional role in the regeneration of Bell Tower Street.

#### 4.3.4. From Informal to Formal Channels, the Rights of All Stakeholders Were Exercised as Guided by Public Value

From 2014 to 2017, under the government and enterprise-led model, some stakeholders maintained their rights through informal channels. Informal approaches included the establishment of an "Autonomous Renovation Committee" by some traditional brand merchants with the tacit approval of the government. Some people expressed their protests by writing letters to the municipal government or collectively petitioning in front of the city hall. In 2020, under a governance model combining government leadership and public participation, the government, guided by public values, aligned the values of various stakeholders and gained cohesion. At the same time, guiding public participation can not only mobilize the enthusiasm of relevant parties and ensure the smooth progress of the project but also integrate social resources and improve the professionalism and precision of the project. This ensures that the project moves toward achieving social and economic benefits.

## 5. Discussion

This study contributes to the literature in two significant ways: (1) It establishes a theoretical framework from the perspective of public value, and (2) it provides a detailed analysis of the regeneration of Taiyuan's Bell Tower Street. However, to enhance the critical analysis, it is essential to interpret indicators such as accessibility, mobility, and restoration measures and explain how they contribute to public value and benefit society and locals through urban governance.

Accessibility and Recentralization: Accessibility improvements were a crucial part of the regeneration project. The transformation of Bell Tower Street into a pedestrian-friendly area with enhanced public spaces has significantly increased its accessibility. This change not only made the area more inviting for tourists and locals but also facilitated social interactions and cultural exchanges, consistent with Gehl's findings on the importance of public spaces for social life [34]. The opening of traditional courtyards and the creation of small squares provided new venues for public gatherings, contributing to the social cohesion and cultural richness of the community, as also noted by Whyte in his studies on urban social behavior [35]. The increased foot traffic, as evidenced by the daily counts ranging from 30,000 to 60,000 people, indicates that the improvements in accessibility have restored the street's centrality in the city, thus enhancing its public value.

Mobility and Economic Effect: Improved mobility within the regenerated area, achieved by transforming previously vehicle-congested streets into pedestrian zones, has enhanced the flow of visitors and boosted local businesses. The resulting increase in foot traffic

has led to higher business revenues and tax incomes in surrounding commercial areas, such as Liuxiang and the food street. This observation is consistent with Jacobs' findings on the economic benefits of pedestrian-friendly urban environments [36]. During peak periods, such as the Mid-Autumn Festival and National Day holidays, Bell Tower Street's popularity surged, demonstrating its economic revitalization. The street's ability to attract large crowds and stimulate economic activity underscores its success as a regenerated public space.

Restoration Measures and Social Value: The carefully planned classified renovation measures for buildings on Bell Tower Street have preserved its historical ambiance while integrating modern amenities. This balance has maintained the area's cultural heritage and provided new functions that cater to contemporary needs, consistent with Tiesdell et al.'s findings on the importance of integrating heritage preservation with modern urban needs [37]. For instance, the mix of public green spaces, cultural facilities, and commercial areas has created a vibrant and multifunctional urban environment. The social value of these changes is reflected in the increased sense of pride and identity among residents, who now have a revitalized space that honors their heritage and supports their daily lives.

Contributions to Society and Locals: The regeneration of Bell Tower Street has had a profound impact on the local community. By preserving historical buildings and enhancing public spaces, the project has strengthened the cultural identity of Taiyuan. Local residents benefit from improved urban infrastructure, more recreational spaces, and increased economic opportunities, as highlighted by Moore's findings on the creation of public value through strategic management in government [18]. Additionally, the joint-participation focus on public value has ensured that the benefits of regeneration are shared broadly, rather than concentrated among a few stakeholders.

Limitations and Future Research: While this study provides valuable insights into the regeneration of historic districts, it has certain limitations. The analysis primarily relies on qualitative methods and case-specific observations, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could benefit from the application of quantitative analysis tools such as Space Syntax and ArcGIS to provide a more comprehensive spatial analysis. These tools can help in understanding the spatial configurations and movement patterns within the regenerated area, offering deeper insights into the impact of design interventions on urban dynamics. Additionally, further studies could explore longitudinal impacts to assess the sustainability of the regeneration efforts over time.

## 6. Conclusions

This study explored the complexities of historic district regeneration through the concept of public value, focusing on Taiyuan's Bell Tower Street as a case study. Our findings demonstrate that successful regeneration requires more than just spatial transformation; it necessitates a reconfiguration of social dynamics and governance structures. Public value serves as a crucial framework for understanding the diverse objectives and outcomes of such projects.

Our analysis of Taiyuan's Bell Tower Street underscores the importance of a nuanced approach that honors the historical significance of the site while meeting contemporary needs. Notable improvements included enhanced accessibility, with daily foot traffic increasing from 30,000 to 60,000 people, and up to 100,000 during peak periods. Economically, local business revenues rose by approximately 30%, along with a significant increase in tax income from the surrounding areas. Additionally, the project preserved the historical ambiance while integrating modern amenities, which strengthened social cohesion and cultural identity among local residents.

This case study highlights the necessity of context-specific solutions in the regeneration of historic environments. It contributes to a broader understanding of how public value can be leveraged to guide such endeavors. The success of the Taiyuan Bell Tower Street regeneration project illustrates that achieving a balance between spatial considerations and effective urban governance is key. The insights from this study emphasize the need

for a comprehensive assessment of public value and a tripartite governance approach that balances the interests of the government, market, and local residents. These findings offer valuable lessons for policymakers and urban planners aiming to undertake similar regeneration projects in other cities.

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## Notes

[1] The principle of "restoring the old as the old" in heritage protection refers to a conservation approach where historical structures or artifacts are repaired, maintained, or restored in a manner that preserves their original historical appearance and character as much as possible. This principle emphasizes the importance of retaining the authenticity and integrity of cultural heritage sites and items, ensuring that any interventions are minimal and respectful of the original fabric and design.

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