

Challenges and Pathways for the Aging Neighborhood Renovation from the Perspective of Participatory Governance: A Case Study of X Community in H Street, Yinchuan City

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Abstract

The renovation of aging neighborhoods faces challenges such as governance imbalance and insufficient resident participation, leading to low renovation efficiency. Based on the theory of participatory governance, this paper constructs an analytical framework of "power structure—participation mechanism—governance efficiency" to reveal the causes of dilemmas in the renovation cases of coal sheds and markets in X Community, H Street. The government-led "power structure imbalance" marginalizes residents' demands, the "breakdown of formalized participation mechanisms" exacerbates negotiation failures, and conflicts of diverse interests lead to the "dissipation of governance efficiency." To address these challenges, this study proposes a four-dimensional optimization strategy: adopting differentiated renovation strategies to balance safety concerns and resident needs, establishing a clear legal framework to clarify property rights, building institutionalized consultation platforms to strengthen residents' decision-making power, and promoting community cultural integration to enhance collective recognition. By reconstructing the governance logic of "government-community-residents" co-governance, this study promotes the shift of residents from symbolic participation to substantive decision-making, providing a new paradigm for resolving conflicts of interest and implementation obstacles in aging neighborhood renovation, thereby contributing to the modernization of grassroots governance.

Keywords: participatory governance, aging neighborhood renovation, property rights disputes, consultation mechanism, governance optimization

1. Introduction

In recent years, the aging neighborhood renovation has become a crucial issue in China's urban renewal and the modernization of social governance. At the policy level, the Chinese government has introduced a series of relevant policies, such as the *Guiding Opinions on Comprehensively Promoting the Aging Neighborhood Renovation* and the *14th Five-Year Plan for the Construction of Urban and Rural Community Service Systems*, emphasizing that neighborhood renovation is not only an upgrade of physical spaces but also an essential tool for modernizing grassroots governance.

However, many renovation projects often meet only superficial engineering requirements while neglecting the deeper transformation of actual needs, resulting in the dilemma of "difficult renovation." This is specifically manifested in outdated infrastructure, maintenance difficulties and high renovation complexity, financial constraints, low resident participation, and difficulties in reaching consensus, ultimately leading to post-renovation results that fail to meet residents' expectations.

From the perspective of governance actors, these challenges can be attributed to three main factors: first, the government-led financial planning issues before renovation; second, policy distortions and implementation deviations arising from communities' mechanical execution of administrative directives during renovation; and

third, the marginalization of residents throughout the process, leading to ineffective participation. One of the core difficulties in the aging neighborhood renovation is the lack of effective resident engagement, which results in projects struggling to be implemented or failing to align with residents' actual needs.

Currently, academic research on the aging neighborhood renovation can be broadly categorized into three approaches:

Government-led approach—This examines the government's dominant role in driving renovation and policy implementation. Through centralized financial investment and administrative orders, the government can quickly initiate projects. However, this approach often overlooks grassroots realities, leading to "hollow policies" and fragmented renovation outcomes[1].

Community-coordinated approach – This advocates for treating the community as a governance unit, promoting self-governance and collaborative management through neighborhood committees and community organizations. Studies have found that communities serve as crucial intermediaries between the government and residents, playing an irreplaceable role in coordinating diverse interests and establishing co-governance mechanisms. However, in practice, communities often face challenges such as insufficient organizational capacity and limited resources[2].

Resident-centered approach – This focuses on the importance of direct resident participation. However, in reality, resident involvement often remains superficial due to information asymmetry and the absence of effective consultation mechanisms. This is particularly problematic for elderly residents, who constitute a significant portion of aging neighborhoods. Their limited access to information and weaker negotiation abilities make it difficult for their opinions to be effectively incorporated into decision-making[3].

Existing research on the aging neighborhood renovation by domestic and international scholars has extensively explored three key aspects: the justification for renovation (why renovate), the scope of renovation (what to renovate), and the methodological design (how to renovate). However, there has been a lack of in-depth analysis on the challenges in the renovation process (why renovation is difficult)[4].

Taking X Community in H Street, Yinchuan City, as an example, conflicts arose in the renovation project due to the demolition of coal sheds and the relocation of markets, exposing deficiencies in the current governance model. The main issues include: **Power structure imbalance:** Government-led decision-making limits residents' voices, leading to low acceptance of renovation plans. **Lack of participation mechanisms:** Residents can only express their demands through protests due to the absence of formal consultation channels. **Low governance efficiency:** Due to insufficient communication, renovation plans were repeatedly revised, resulting in slow progress.

The three existing models—government-led, community-coordinated, and resident-centered—identified in previous studies essentially remain within a "center-periphery" governance paradigm. None of them have effectively resolved the issues of insufficient resident participation and low governance efficiency in aging neighborhood renovation.

The theory of participatory governance advocates for a multi-stakeholder governance model that involves the government, community, and residents. By establishing formal consultation platforms and dynamic feedback mechanisms, this approach ensures that residents—particularly the elderly—have their interests fully represented, thereby enhancing the scientific validity and execution efficiency of renovation plans. It offers a new perspective for addressing the current challenges in the aging neighborhood renovation.

Therefore, this study, based on the case of X Community, explores the governance dilemmas in the aging neighborhood renovation and proposes optimization strategies, aiming to provide practical insights for urban renewal[5].

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1 Participatory Governance

Participatory governance, rooted in Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation" theory[6], presents significant advantages over traditional governance models in three key dimensions: empowerment mechanisms, consultation platform development, and governance efficiency feedback. It emphasizes the shift from "symbolic participation" to "substantive decision-making" through empowerment and negotiation mechanisms. This theory advocates constructing a "government-society-residents" collaborative framework[7] to overcome the structural contradictions of "power monopoly" and "participation suspension" in traditional governance.

Participatory governance operates through two interconnected pathways: Institutionalized consultation platforms, Capacity-building for key stakeholders[8]. Its core principles include "openness in governance processes,"

"redistribution of decision-making power"[9], and a closed-loop mechanism of demand identification, resource integration, and consensus building[10]. These aspects aim to activate residents' agency and engagement, mitigating conflicts of interest in the aging neighborhood renovation.

Due to the complexities of property disputes and diverse interest demands, this study adopts the "Power Structure—Participation Mechanism—Governance Efficiency" analytical framework to examine governance dilemmas and explore potential solutions within the context of participatory governance, with the ultimate goal of strengthening community governance capacity.

2.2 The "Power Structure—Participation Mechanism—Governance Efficiency" Analytical Framework

The "Power Structure—Participation Mechanism—Governance Efficiency" analytical framework (as illustrated in Figure 1) focuses on the governance practices and operational logic of aging neighborhood renovation, highlighting the role of participatory governance in these processes. Power Structure refers to the distribution of authority among the government, community organizations, and individual residents. The government is responsible for policy formulation, resource allocation, and regulatory oversight, while community organizations act as intermediaries, facilitating coordination and information dissemination. As the direct beneficiaries of renovation projects, residents' opinions and level of participation directly influence the feasibility and sustainability of renovation plans. Participation Mechanism refers to the formal channels and operational methods through which different stakeholders express their demands and engage in decision-making during the renovation process. These mechanisms include public hearings, surveys, and online consultation platforms, which help break away from traditional top-down governance and enable multi-stakeholder co-governance. Governance Efficiency is evaluated based on the execution of renovation projects from planning to implementation. Key performance indicators include policy alignment, resident satisfaction, and long-term sustainability. Key performance indicators include policy alignment, resident satisfaction, and long-term sustainability.

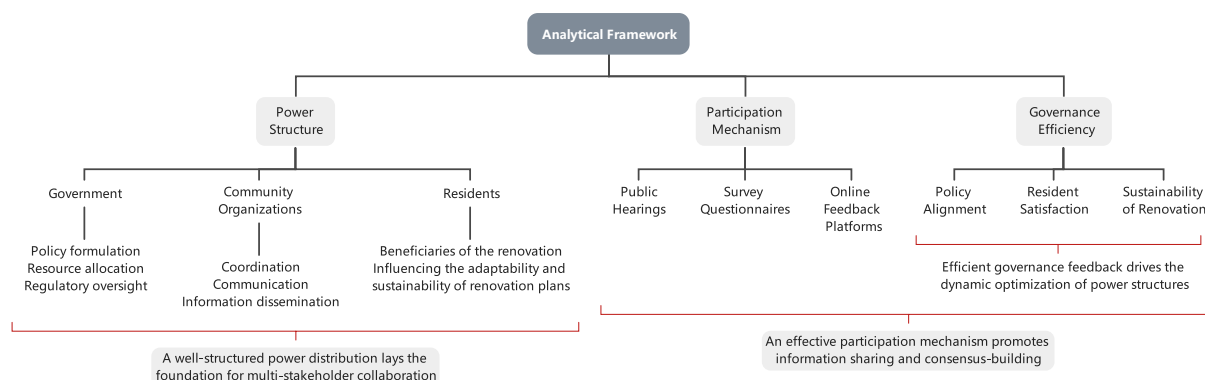


Figure 1. The "Power Structure – Participation Mechanism – Governance Efficiency" Analytical Framework

The power structure, participation mechanism, and governance efficiency interact dynamically. A well-allocated power structure lays the foundation for multi-stakeholder collaboration, an effective participation mechanism promotes information sharing and consensus-building, and efficient governance feedback further drives the dynamic optimization of power structures. This interplay provides a holistic and systematic theoretical framework for addressing the deep-seated governance challenges in the aging neighborhood renovation.

3. Practical Cases of Aging Neighborhood Renovation in X Community, H Street

3.1 Coal Shed Renovation

The coal sheds in X Community, H Street, were originally built as supporting facilities for worker residences in the 1970s, primarily for storing heating coal. However, with changes in heating methods, their functionality gradually declined. Some sheds were repurposed by residents into storage rooms, small shops, or even rented out for profit. These coal sheds have long posed fire hazards, illegal expansions, and encroachments on public spaces, making them a key challenge in community governance. Due to limited living space, many residents still rely on these sheds for storage, and some ground-floor residents have even incorporated them into their housing units. The coal shed issue is not only related to residential safety and environmental management but also involves property rights disputes and benefit distribution, making it one of the most difficult challenges in the renovation of aging neighborhoods.

Since 2008, the government has launched multiple initiatives to demolish and renovate the coal sheds. However, ownership disputes, disagreements over compensation standards, and strong resident opposition have consistently hindered progress. In 2021, the community selected Buildings 53 to 56 as a pilot site and conducted a resident survey and policy outreach campaign (see Table 1), proposing a "government compensation + centralized demolition" plan.

However, survey results showed that 57% of residents explicitly opposed demolition, arguing that the coal sheds were their personal property and refusing non-compensated demolition. Some residents also demanded an increase in compensation to over 30,000 RMB. In particular, ground-floor residents were strongly opposed, as their coal sheds had already been integrated into their homes, complete with electricity, water, and heating, making them an essential part of their living space. Meanwhile, some residents agreed to the demolition but were concerned about the post-demolition use of the space, believing that the government had not provided a reasonable alternative plan.

Ultimately, due to widespread opposition, the coal shed renovation project was forced to halt, and the issue remains unresolved.

Table 1. Summary of the Pilot Survey on Coal Shed Demolition

Summary of the Coal Shed Demolition Survey for Residents on the Second Floor and Above in Buildings 53-56, North Gate (Total: 150 Households)				
Demolition Opinion	Staff Housing Employer-Allocated Housing Residents	Self-Purchased Homeowners	Total Households	Percentage(%)
Agree to Demolition	18	22	44	31
Disagree with Demolition	29	51	80	57
Follow the Majority Opinion	11	15	26	13

The renovation of coal sheds is not merely an issue of spatial governance but also reflects deeper disputes over property rights and residents' emotional attachment. The government, citing Article 70 of the Property Law, asserts that the coal sheds are public supporting facilities and should be demolished as public assets. However, residents presented original invoices and payment receipts for these sheds as housing facilities, arguing that they hold personal usage rights. This legal-practical conflict led to a significant divergence in property recognition between the government and residents.

Moreover, for elderly residents, coal sheds are not just storage spaces but an integral part of their life memories. Having lived in the community for decades, they perceive these sheds as symbols of their family history and community identity. Demolishing them would mean a complete disruption of their familiar living environment. Thus, the intense opposition to coal shed renovation stems not only from economic compensation concerns but also from resistance to the disappearance of familiar spaces. The government's failure to adequately address both property rights concerns and emotional needs in the renovation plan resulted in significant obstacles to project implementation.

3.2 Market Renovation

The market in X Community, H Street, initially operated as an open street market, which, despite issues such as road congestion and poor sanitation, was highly convenient and met residents' daily shopping needs. However, community administrators viewed this model as disruptive to traffic and neighborhood cleanliness. Since 2015, three renovation attempts were made to improve market order through centralized management, but none succeeded:

First attempt: A fully enclosed market was established, but its location was inconvenient for residents, leading to poor business performance and eventual abandonment.

Second attempt: A semi-enclosed model was introduced with designated stalls within the community, but stall locations did not align with residents' shopping habits, and merchants opposed fixed rental fees, leading to the model's abandonment.

Third attempt: A regulated stall system was introduced, restricting business hours and implementing stricter sanitation controls. However, merchants felt this limited their operational flexibility, and customer traffic did not significantly improve, making this model difficult to sustain.

After three failed attempts, the community administration failed to find a balance between governance requirements and business sustainability. As a result, the market never established a stable management model, and merchants returned to street vending, rendering governance efforts ineffective.

During the renovation process in X Community, communication and coordination between merchants, residents, and the community administration were significantly lacking. A survey revealed that all 15 fixed-stall merchants opposed the government's market renovation plan. Their primary concern was their long-standing dependence on street vending, which aligned with residents' daily routines—most residents preferred making quick purchases on their way home rather than traveling to a closed market. As a result, the centralized market model failed to generate sufficient foot traffic, while the enclosed stall layout restricted merchants' operational flexibility, directly affecting their profitability. Additionally, elderly residents showed low support for the enclosed market model. While it improved sanitation, it lacked shopping convenience, leading to a significant gap between residents' expectations and the actual outcomes of the renovation plan.

4. Governance Challenges in the Renovation of X Community, H Street

4.1 Imbalance in Power Structure

In the coal shed renovation project, the government, as the primary decision-maker, relied on the H Street Office List of Responsibilities to define a hierarchical division of duties between government departments and community organizations. The higher authorities led the renovation plan, taking charge of policy formulation, resource allocation, and supervision, with a strong emphasis on demolishing illegal structures and improving public safety. Community organizations were responsible for reporting, coordination, and publicity. However, during the initial survey on coal shed demolition, these organizations unilaterally endorsed the demolition and attempted to persuade residents to accept it. This approach provoked strong opposition, leading to repeated protests and disturbances. As a result, the community organizations lost residents' trust, making future negotiations increasingly difficult and preventing them from playing their intended role as intermediaries.

Residents, as direct stakeholders, had long relied on coal sheds for storage or running small businesses. However, the government's decision-making process prioritized visible infrastructure projects as key performance indicators (KPIs), while community organizations focused on fulfilling government-mandated renovation tasks, ignoring residents' concerns about property rights and the historical significance of the coal sheds.

A similar power imbalance occurred in the market renovation. The government aimed to regulate market operations, but the community organizations only implemented a formalized management approach. Merchants were required to operate in designated areas, with no flexibility. Residents and merchants were only allowed to select a location for the new market in a survey, but their opinions on the centralized market model itself were never considered. This ignored the merchants' existing business models and residents' daily shopping habits, particularly their reliance on purchasing goods along their commuting routes[11]. Merchants naturally tended to set up stalls along high-traffic commuting paths and frequently visited areas. Most residents were accustomed to making quick purchases on their way home rather than traveling to a distant enclosed market[12].

However, community organizations failed to accommodate these behavioral patterns, nor did they delegate power or responsibilities to merchants and residents. Ultimately, the unequal distribution of power left residents and merchants with little real influence in decision-making. This led to a renovation plan that lacked broad public support, creating a "strong government, weak residents" governance structure that hindered the overall progress of the renovation.

4.2 Breakdown of Participation Mechanisms

Although public hearings, household surveys, and online questionnaires were formally implemented during the renovation process, actual participation mechanisms were fundamentally flawed.

In the coal shed renovation project, community organizations used a "public notice–survey–home visits" approach to collect opinions. However, under the existing autonomous governance model of the street office and neighborhood committee, resident participation was reduced to a mere formality, essentially serving as a one-way notification and opinion collection process. The unidirectional flow of information and the absence of feedback mechanisms meant that concerns from vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, were largely ignored[13]. The lack of effective participation channels resulted in low engagement from residents, making them increasingly passive

and resistant to the renovation project. Without institutionalized negotiation mechanisms, residents could only express dissatisfaction through protests, relying on non-institutionalized resistance rather than formal dialogue.

A similar issue arose in the market renovation. Community organizations attempted to implement a fixed-stall system and a closed-market model, but the approach failed to integrate merchants' and residents' actual needs. Multiple merchant protests occurred during the public consultation phase, signaling deep-seated opposition. In a survey of 122 residents and 15 stall merchants, the community organization did not ask about their overall satisfaction with or opinions on the centralized market model. Instead, they were only given the option to select a location for the new market, effectively excluding them from the fundamental decision-making process. The household survey was ultimately abandoned because all merchants opposed the centralized market plan.

As a result, participation channels remained largely symbolic, and feedback mechanisms were entirely disconnected, making it impossible for residents' and merchants' actual concerns to influence the renovation plan. This led to frequent policy adjustments and delays, ultimately preventing the renovation project from being effectively implemented.

4.3 Dissipation of Governance Efficiency

The imbalance in power structure and the breakdown of participation mechanisms directly contributed to governance inefficiency.

In the coal shed renovation project, the policy failed to align with residents' needs: Residents' demands for property rights recognition and control over their living spaces were marginalized. The renovation plan underwent repeated revisions, and resident opposition increased from 60% to 73%. Ultimately, the pilot renovation failed, and the coal shed issue remained unresolved as a historical problem.

Similarly, in the market renovation, merchants' and residents' priorities conflicted with the government's governance objectives: Merchants prioritized business flexibility and customer traffic, while the government focused on environmental order and regulatory control. This misalignment of goals led to fragmented stakeholder interests, eroding mutual trust and cooperation. The enclosed market model resulted in declining merchant revenues and insufficient foot traffic, forcing vendors to return to street vending, rendering the renovation ineffective. Beyond wasted administrative resources, governance inefficiency also significantly undermined trust between the community and residents:

Future renovation projects faced repeated mass protests, as residents became increasingly skeptical of government-led initiatives. When residents resorted to collective resistance to force policy adjustments, renovation projects fell into a cycle of "repeated revisions–reapproval–renewed opposition." This delayed response not only wasted resources but also weakened the authority of grassroots governance[14].

4.4 Governance Failure: The Paradox of Policy Implementation

This case study demonstrates that residents' strong demands for property rights recognition and the preservation of market functions fundamentally reflect an assertion of "sovereignty over living spaces."

When renovation projects are treated as administrative tasks rather than public affairs, residents are reduced to passive governance subjects. This role misalignment is reinforced through three mechanisms: Technocratic discourse constructs residents' concerns as "irrational resistance," leading to the devaluation of their demands at a cognitive level. Community grid-based management fragments individual concerns, preventing the formation of collective action. Project evaluations prioritize quantifiable KPIs, pressuring officials to focus on visible infrastructure while neglecting deeper social needs, such as elderly-friendly renovations and public space enhancements[15].

This structural dilemma exposes a fundamental paradox: Although aging neighborhood renovation is intended to improve residents' well-being, policymakers often reduce public participation to a risk-control strategy rather than treating it as a core governance value.

As a result, renovation projects become a stage for power display, where the government spends money to meet KPI targets, while residents resist to defend their living spaces. This ultimately leads to "governance failure," where government spending results in public dissatisfaction. To break out of this cycle, it is essential to reconstruct the governance link between power, participation, and efficiency.

5. Optimization Strategies for Aging Neighborhood Renovation

5.1 Innovative Differentiated Renovation: Optimizing Power Allocation and Enhancing Adaptability

In the coal shed renovation of X Community, H Street, the one-size-fits-all demolition plan failed to consider residents' actual usage needs, leading to strong opposition. To address this, the power structure should transition from a top-down administrative directive to a collaborative governance model involving the government, community organizations, and residents. The government should provide resources and establish renovation standards, while community organizations act as intermediaries to coordinate resident concerns, and residents actively participate in decision-making through consultation mechanisms[16].

Specifically, the community can categorize coal sheds based on resident input—demolishing and repurposing sheds that pose severe safety hazards or have been long abandoned, converting the space into green areas or parking lots, while upgrading sheds that are still used for storage but are aging, transforming them into standardized public storage units or small commercial spaces. A resident participation platform should be established to ensure that residents have a real say in decisions regarding shed categorization, compensation schemes, and alternative facility locations, making policies more rational and enforceable. This approach has proven effective in Shanghai's Y Community, where a similar strategy of differentiated renovation increased resident support by 40%. Such an approach balances safety concerns with residents' actual needs, reduces opposition rates, improves project implementation, and minimizes frequent policy revisions and resource waste[17].

5.2 Clarifying the Scope of Property Rights: Establishing a Clear Legal Framework for Rights and Responsibilities

The dispute over coal shed ownership is the core obstacle to the renovation of X Community. From a power structure perspective, the government should take the lead in improving the legal framework while granting community organizations a certain degree of property rights coordination authority to reduce conflicts between administrative enforcement and residents' perceptions. Drawing from the experience of Shanghai Yangpu District's "Housing Reform Legacy Hearing," a property rights assessment committee should be established, composed of government representatives, legal experts, community organizations, and resident representatives[18]. This committee should determine the ownership status of the coal sheds based on purchase contracts, historical documents, and on-site investigations, deciding which sheds should be demolished as public facilities and which should be preserved and repurposed for functional upgrades, with the results compiled into an official report to serve as the basis for compensation and renovation policies.

In terms of participation mechanisms, the community should establish a legal consultation platform and organize policy discussion forums to ensure residents fully understand the legal basis of renovation policies while developing a standardized procedure for resolving property disputes. Making the property rights assessment process transparent and legally grounded would help reduce resident resistance, enhance the legitimacy of renovation policies, and improve their implementation efficiency.

5.3 Establishing a Community Consultation Mechanism: Strengthening Institutional Guarantees for Resident Participation

During the renovation process, residents' opinions are often reduced to mere notifications and questionnaire collections by community organizations, leaving their participation at a superficial level. From a power structure perspective, a multi-stakeholder coordination mechanism should be established to break the government's unilateral decision-making model and enable partial delegation of decision-making power[19]. The community can form a consultation committee composed of residents, merchants, community organizations, and government representatives, with a fixed agenda and schedule to institutionalize resident participation in policy-making. In terms of participation mechanisms, diverse channels should be adopted to enhance resident engagement, such as publicly recruiting resident representatives, holding regular online and offline meetings, and establishing a transparent renovation information-sharing system.

Regarding governance efficiency, the pilot program in Qinhuai District, Nanjing, demonstrated that by transferring 40% of decision-making power to the community co-governance committee, the alignment between renovation plans and resident demands increased from 32% to 68%, and the project timeline was reduced by 41%[20]. This approach minimizes policy revisions caused by information asymmetry and superficial participation, ensuring a more efficient and transparent renovation process.

5.4 Strengthening Community Cultural Construction: Enhancing Renovation Sustainability through a Sense of Belonging

The renovation of X Community in H Street faced resistance partly due to residents' long-term reliance on coal sheds and markets, which have acquired social and cultural significance. From a power structure perspective, the

government can empower community organizations to take the lead in cultural development, integrating residents' collective memories into renovation plans to reduce psychological resistance to change. Specific measures include establishing community history exhibition areas and multifunctional activity centers, while incorporating community identity elements into renovated public spaces, such as cultural walls and historical photo displays[21].

In terms of participation mechanisms, residents, especially the elderly, should be encouraged to actively engage in cultural development through activities such as community festivals and cultural lectures, fostering a stronger sense of belonging to the renewed neighborhood. Regarding governance efficiency, the case of Tielu Community in Guiyi Town, Miluo, demonstrated that promoting community identity through cultural activities increased resident satisfaction by approximately 35%, effectively facilitating the smooth implementation of renovation projects.

6. Conclusion

The renovation of aging neighborhoods is not only an effort to improve physical spaces and living environments but also an essential field for modernizing grassroots governance. Through an in-depth analysis of the coal shed and market renovation cases in X Community, H Street, this study found that imbalances in the power structure among the government, community, and residents led to the marginalization of residents' demands, the formalization of participation mechanisms, and ultimately the dissipation of governance efficiency. While government-led "power monopoly" can accelerate decision-making, neglecting resident empowerment triggers strong resistance, ultimately undermining governance effectiveness. This finding validates the core premise of participatory governance theory—that substantive resident participation is the key to achieving co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits.

Future research could expand to other aging neighborhood renovation projects, exploring the unique challenges and solutions faced by different regions and community types. Additionally, further attention should be given to evaluating the long-term impact of renovations and developing sustainable community governance mechanisms to ensure that renovation outcomes are preserved and continuously improved. By continuously summarizing experiences and exploring innovative approaches, this research aims to provide a more comprehensive and in-depth theoretical foundation and practical guidance for urban renewal and community development.

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