

Design for Neighborhood Amateur Cultural Club – A Community Regeneration Practice in Qinglong Hutong

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Abstract. This paper investigates the role of cultural amateur clubs of residents' community in the traditional neighborhood, and focuses on involving design in community activities to explore the new opportunities and possibilities of community regeneration. With the development of urbanization in China, traditional communities' environment has changed a lot. The mixture of new and old buildings not only broke the traditional residential environment integrity, but also changed the neighborhood relationship in communities. Under the macro-context of social background, understanding the existing problems and situation that residents who live in the modern communities may face when participating in daily cultural activities in the public space, has great practical significance in improving interpersonal relationship's situation, further promoting the development of the social harmonious. Using the Living Lab participatory design method and ethnographic study, we visited and interviewed the residents who live in Qinglong Hutong, Dongcheng District, Beijing, China. First of all, we describe the background, purpose and methods of this research, and then study the current situation of how the residents in Qinglong Community participate in the daily cultural activities. By identifying the persona, sampling investigating and researching on the residents, we create the model on social interaction and network establishment of the amateur cultural activities in the community. The final outcomes of this paper include participatory workshops on Beijing Opera, the applet based on the WeChat, and initiative on cultural regeneration during the Beijing Design Week. The model and sustainable mechanism developed in this paper will be used to support the further community regeneration project.

Keywords: Social innovation · Amateur cultural club · Social interaction · Neighborhood relationship · Community regeneration

1 Introduction

Burley argued that city is highest embodiment and important crystallization of the human culture, and the development of a city depends on both economic and cultural strength. The relationship among the culture, economy and city has been redefined: It is not the city shaping the culture, but the culture that makes the city better; the inputs of culture can be transformed into the outputs of economic and society [1].

However, with the changes of society in big cities, because of the social mobility of residents and the development of migration which reduced the possibility of communication among neighbors, the traditional neighborhood relationship suffered unprecedented the challenge, the cultural life in the big city becomes increasingly barren. Louis Wirth, who is the leading figure in Chicago School Sociology, describes the city as a “Substitution of secondary for primary contacts, the weakening of bonds of kinship, the declining social significance of the family, the disappearance of neighborhood and the undermining of traditional basis of social solidarity” [2].

To the late 1970s and early 1980s, culture is considered as the one of the driving forces for the regeneration of the old city in a number of cities in North America and Western Europe, which set off the upsurge of using the culture to promote the regeneration of the old cities. The cultural capital helped a host of decline areas in developed countries readjust the position and gradually revive in the post-industrial age and new economic environment [3]. Adjusting and improving the function of the old city, enhancing and even rebuilding the vitality and environmental quality of the historic city is the important part of “Urban Revitalization” work [4]. Cultural orientated regeneration of the old city means we should regard the culture as the catalyst and the engine for the regeneration [5]. In order to maintain the sustainable benefits of the regeneration, we should pay attention to develop the “culture based production system” [6].

With the deepening of the process of urbanization, the reconstruction of community culture has become the driving force of the urban regeneration. Amateur cultural clubs turn into the DNA of community culture and an important carrier to fulfill the civic cultural needs. It plays an important role in enhancing residents’ ownership and the centripetal force, creating a friendly cultural environment, improving the cultural quality and the tastes of the residents, fulfilling the demand of the urban culture construction and other aspects [7].

2 Research Methods

2.1 Method and Process

According to the research goals of this paper, we carried out the in-depth field researches and user interviews in Qinglong community many times to find the pain points and residents’ needs.

Discovery of pain points – Using the living lab participatory approach to conduct the research. Living Lab provides the open innovation methods in real life settings. User-driven innovation is also fully integrated in the co-creative process of new services, products and societal infrastructures [8].

Clarifying the needs – Using the ethnographic methods to conduct the qualitative research. Ethnographic investigation is a method which mixed the in-depth observation with the guided interviews, using the participant observation and unstructured interviews to collect the data [9].

Considering that most users are unable to assess their own behavior accurately. We use the qualitative research methods like interviewing stakeholders, interviewing

subject-matter expert (SME), user observation, ethnographic field studies, literature research and so on [10], to clarify the requirement by collecting the first-hand data, and determine the design direction.

2.2 Field Survey

Beijing Dongcheng Qinglong Hutong, formerly known as Qinglong Temple, Copper Factory. Qinglong Hutong is the office location of a multitude of design and cultural innovation companies, but also the home of original inhabitants. It is located in Dongcheng District, which insists on “Strong culture area” strategy raised by the government.

According to the open data, which shows the culture index of 16 districts and counties in Beijing in 2014, we found that Dongcheng District only has 2 public libraries, 7 museums within the Cultural Relics Bureau System, 1 archives, 6 professional art troupes, 18 art venues, 17 street cultural activity centers and more than and 200 community cultural activity rooms [15]. Compared with other districts, the cultural basis of Dongcheng is relatively deeper, but the related supporting services are not well provided.

2.3 Target Group

We did many researches to explore the different aspects of Qinglong community, Dongcheng District. This paper will mainly focus on the Beijing Opera Club, one of grass-roots amateur clubs in Qinglong community.

Our interviewees are mainly 40–80 years old Beijing Opera Club members. The mainly research methods are personal interviews and focus group [10]. We interviewed around 20 common members and 3 key members. For the key members, we did in-depth interview to dig more details. The research lasted about two months and was mainly founded by the Service Design Institute of Tsinghua University.

This research was one of projects in a joint course on the urban sustainable development, which has been carried out for three years, between Tsinghua University and Stanford University. We tried to use interdisciplinary research and tele-cooperation methods to enhance quality of life in urban environments. With the help of Gehua Design Service Center (DSC), we apply a set of activity design method on Qinglong Hutong, which is close by the Gehua Building, to promote the integration of the neighborhood relationship, build a smart and harmonious community at the same time. The whole project was shown in the end of this program in December 7, 2016 at Stanford University, California, USA. We received plenty of precious advices and encouraging words from audiences.

3 Findings

3.1 User Investigation

During the joint class, a sociology student made a community autonomy presentation, which inspired us to start the research from the community activist, who is the key

person to mobilize the enthusiasm of residents to participate in activities. After the deep investigation in community, we found that community activists and leaders exist in some amateur cultural clubs. In the end, we successfully got in touch with the head of Beijing Opera Club in Qinglong Hutong, and conducted the face-to-face interviews with him as well as other members of the club.

3.1.1 Interviews

Mr. Wang, who is the head of Beijing Opera Club, said, *“We’ll make an appointment in advance. Usually, we’ll practice together from 8:50am to 11:00am here (Qinglong Hutong) from Tuesday to Friday, but on Monday we’ll gather at the basement in Bei Guan Ting No. 8. There is no activity at weekend, because their children will visit them at that time. The members volunteer participating the daily activity, even some of them who live far away will take the subway to get here despite of the bad weather. Others may ride a bike or just walk... If there is a temporary change, I’ll call them. Because most of them are retirees, they may not that familiar with the application in the smart phone...”*

He continued to say, *“I’m younger than most of them and totally enamored of Beijing Opera, and then I set up this club to let us practice together. Nowadays, young men have less interest in the traditional culture, so I hope we can make a little contribution to the protection of the Intangible Culture Heritage...”*

Mr. Chen, who is the tutor of the club, said, *“Although they are not that professional, but their enthusiasm touched me deeply, after the performance, I will come here to participate in activities from time to time...”*

Mr. Zhang, who has just retired, said, *“One day, the weather was not that bad, I went to the park, and saw them performing the Beijing Opera. At first, I just sat down and listened to them. After two months, they invited me to sing a few words, and I wasn’t very confidence at the beginning, because I didn’t sing very well...”*

Mr. Liu, who is an 80-year-old retired artillery, said, *“Now, this house is going to be torn down, after that, it’s hard to find such a place for us to practice Beijing Opera...”*

Mr. Li, who plays the drum, said, *“I think we must do something to keep the Beijing Opera alive, and I truly hope there can be more young people in our club...”*

We found that most of the members of the community are retirees, they got the belonging, dignity, and self-fulfillment in club, but this kind of grass-roots cultural amateur clubs still faces a multitude of challenges and problems.

3.1.2 Workshop

With the help of Gehua Design Service Center (DSC), we obtained the permission that we can conduct the activity on 13th floor in Gehua Buiding for whole morning. After that, we inform Mr. Wang, who is the head of Beijing Opera Club, the specific time and place of this activity. At the same time, we published the activity information online. In November 28, 2016, it turned out to be successful according to the feedback and the statics.

3.2 Character Analysis

The permanent members are backbone of the club and they tend to be participants, cultural communicators in daily activities, as well as the strongest driving force in sustainable development of the club.

Most of members in grass-roots cultural amateur clubs of the Qinglong community are retired workers, whose average age is about 60 years old. They are exceedingly willing to communicate with other residents and find a meaningful thing to spend their leisure time.

Key stakeholders (club leaders) are responsible for the organization of the clubs and interaction with the outside world. Their age is relatively smaller than others. Leaders are invariably enthusiastic about the public affairs of club and community, at the same time, their leadership and expertise enable them influence or mobilize other residents. They are always recommended by the leaders of neighborhood offices or neighborhood committees, or you can find them during the research and activities of community [11].

The ordinary residents (bystanders) in club are potential members of clubs, and they are the hidden power of sustainable development to clubs. They don't have much interest in Beijing Opera, but they want to find something to kill time after retirement, so they won't feel that lonely and frustrated. After joining clubs, they can get to know what happened in community, find something meaningful to enrich retirement life and receive the comfort and care from clubs.

3.3 Main Findings and Solutions

Through the follow-up investigation, we found that there are certain patterns in organizing these grass-roots amateur cultural clubs.

3.3.1 Main Findings

Problems and Challenges. Because lacking of support from local government, it's hard to find activities venues due to the soaring city land price. Most members are retired, because other age groups don't have enough time and energy to participate in daily activities of clubs, consequently the clubs may lack vitality and their activities lack appeal and influence to the strangers. So, there is very limited resource for leaders to maintain operation of the club.

Club Management Form. Residents who live in the same community may not know others, and a few members will form a small club though the opinion leader (core figure), permanent members will organize a number of activities now and then to attract new members and enhance relationship with others. During that time, they can find and develop shared interests, begin to socialize with others. With the support from various organizations, the club will have sustainable development. And these policies which strive to protect the interests of the public are often achieved after the agreement between commercial institutions and the government [12] (Fig. 1).

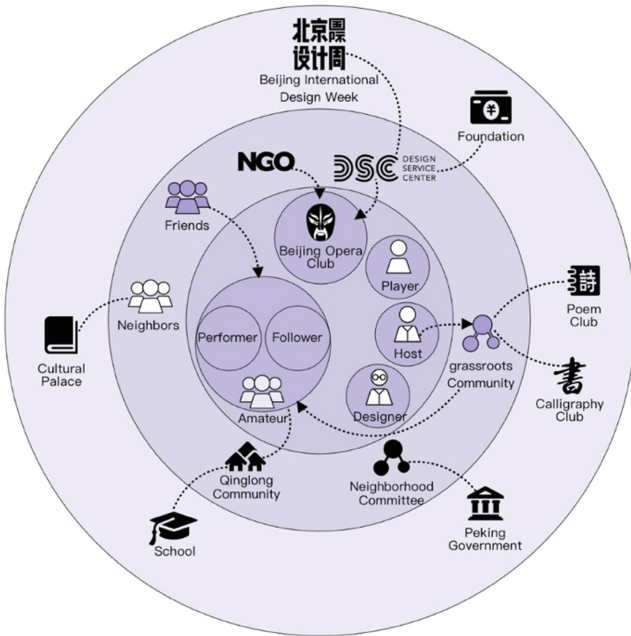


Fig. 1. The amateur cultural clubs’ social connection network

The Participant Roles. The participation is the key to the community engagement. Therefore, there are different promotion ways and skills of community participation to different groups.

For club activists, we give them opportunities to provide the plan and make a multitude of decisions and create the chances of connecting the outside with other groups as well as enhance their leadership satisfaction, and improve residents’ engagement and external support.

For club bystanders: design the activities to expand their ways of participating and make them become the volunteers and contacts to link the interpersonal resources in community.

For club strangers: Provide them the ways of open participation and invite them to come. Capture their attention, as well as provide them detailed information and introduction of the clubs. Understand their concerns and needs through the interaction.

Learning Method. The members learn Beijing Opera still mainly by word of mouth, which lacks systematic and repeatable teaching methods. A host of beginners feel embarrassed to perform in public. Especially they are elders, which can be a huge barrier to them. Most of them are disabled in moving and acting, few elders even have vision and hearing impairment.

Social Engagement. Because of the frequent communication of daily activities, the relationship among members of the club, especially those permanent members, get increasingly close, and they begin to take care of each other in daily life. Similar age, interests and experience makes them become familiar with others quickly.

Activities Promotion. During this activity, we use the Internet as a platform for interaction and promotion. We connect with the members offline and edit and publish the activity online, users can search, collect and enroll the activities they are interested in. Finally, characters can broadcast or share the pictures, videos and their thoughts in WeChat or other applications. Internet makes the influence of activity far wider than before.

3.3.2 Potential Solutions

Designers can help the club activities to be organized more effectively through the integrating, allocating and utilizing the external resources, and designing the flexible plans depends on the specific situation.

Design Space. According to the Fu Si yard community cultural activity center, or the Chaoyang Cultural Center, we hope to find the permanent space to the clubs through acquiring the support from local government [13], or semi-permanent space, like steel structure pavilion during Beijing Design Week in Qinglong Hutong. We can design the space to fit the performance needs.

Activity Organization. With the joint help of the community organizations (neighborhood committees), which are established by the government, as well as the residents' voluntary organization (Beijing Opera Club, Poetry Club, Calligraphy Club), even some commercial organizations, the club activities will be more rich.

Cultural Heritage. WeChat, a very popular social communication tools in China, can play an important role in cultural promotion. How to attract the young people to be participants can be meaningful to be discussed, for example, we can organize the open workshop to facilitate them attend as volunteers, cultivate the spirit of public spirit and the interest to traditional culture as well.

Community Construction. Amateur cultural groups can help to build more strong local network and elderly residents can quickly find a sense of belonging in these interest groups. Through the living lab approach [8], we are able to gather the data from elderly resident, explore the efficient methods to organize the activities and build community autonomy system gradually, after that, we can extend influence of clubs by corporation with various external resources and get the consistent support from local government.

4 Activity Planning

4.1 Activity Overall Planning

Through this activity as well as the follow-up researches, we summarized some top-level activity design, and by means of multilateral cooperation, it enables follow-up activity organization to develop sustainably in a spiral line (Fig. 2).

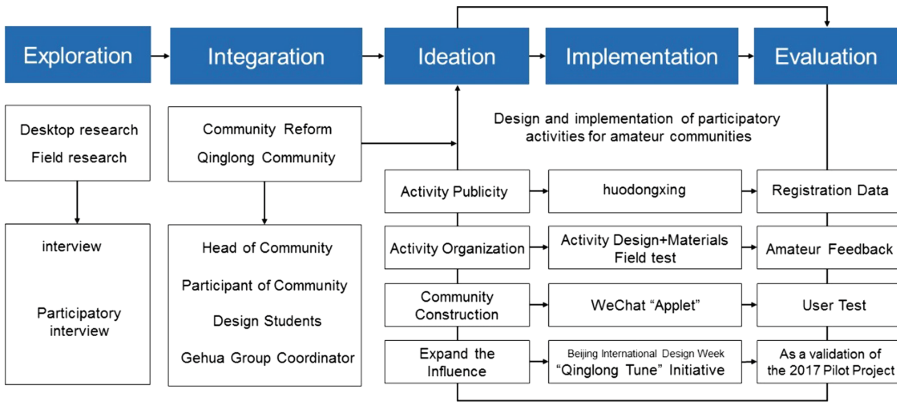


Fig. 2. Using the living lab model to design sustainable activities of amateur clubs

4.2 Execution of Activity

Topic: Qinglong tune

Time: 9:30am–11:00am, November 28, 2016

Location: 13th floor, Gehua Building, Dongcheng District, Beijing

Agenda:

9:30am	Activity starts and the host addresses to the audience
09:30am–10:00am	Beijing Opera performance (single performance, consists three people)
10:00am–11:30am	Storytelling: the legends behind the lines in Beijing Opera; The memories among the members in this club; Question and Answer
11:30am–12:00am	End of the speech; Taking the group photos; Giving the gifts

Goals: To promote the interaction among neighborhoods in the community by organizing a cultural workshop, and welcome the new members to this club as well.

4.2.1 How to Organize the Activities

By the combination of online and offline tools, it makes the promotion and dissemination of the activities get wider, faster and more convenient (Fig. 3).

The Final Results of This Activity Online. The online release date is November 24th, and just in three days after releasing, the enrollment reached to 10 people, and the access number has grown to over 500 people, 52 of them collected this activity. At the end of the activity, there are 3 new members who join this club, which shows that the Internet tool can be more efficient and flexible than offline methods (Fig. 4).

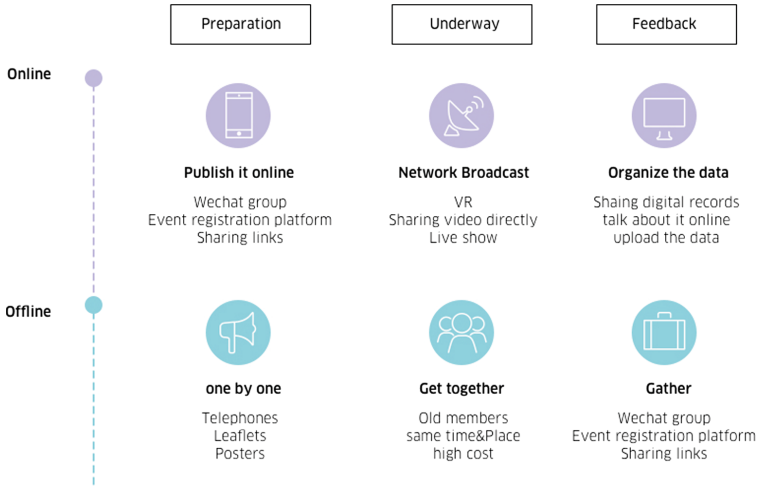


Fig. 3. Online and offline tools for activity promotion



Fig. 4. Online promotion website and statistics about the enrollment

Feedback. Many members in the club said that it was not easy for everyone to get together, because the previous temporary room was not big enough to accommodate all the members. Since the 13th floor of Gehua Building is spacious, all the members were able to attend the activity at the same time thanks to it. Because the activity attracted a lot attention from outside, Gehua Building got more attention than before at the same time, accordingly the clubs in community can have the chance to use the floor space, and the provider is able to receive more exposure.

The new member, Ms. Li, said, *“I don’t know how to find this kind of groups before, as soon as I saw the activity which was published online, I signed up and came here to attend it, at the end of the activity, I added him (the club organizer) in WeChat, I hope I can be involved in the follow-up activities...”* (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Posters and group photos of the “Qinglong Tune”

4.3 The Presentation of Self in Activity

Erving Goffman proposed the framework of dramaturgical theory, which divides the performance area to the three parts, “Front Region”, “Back Stage” and “The Outside” [14]. The “Front Region” includes the setting, such as the stage for performance and personal appearance, which includes personal appearance and behaviors. For example, the actors will sit down or read the lines here. The “Back Stage” is invisible for the audience, which is a part of the area that keeps the audience and outsider out. At the backstage, performers may not pay attention to the limitations of appearance and image, such as the discussing time after performance, everyone is free to talk or discuss with others. “The Outside” may include the audience and other organizations (Fig. 6).

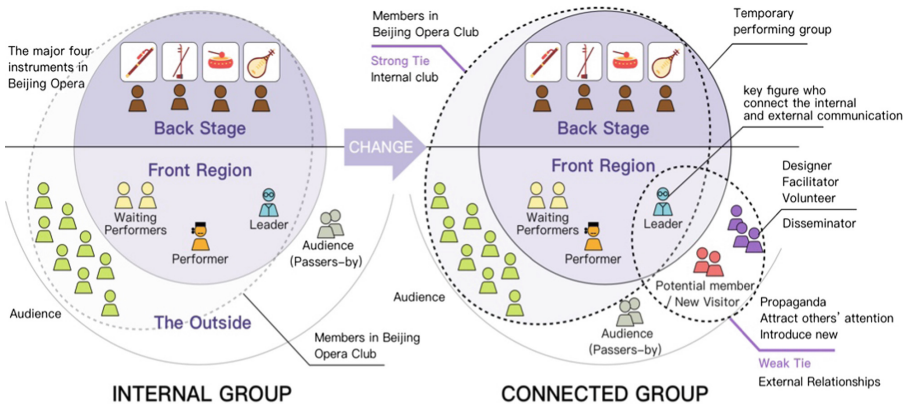


Fig. 6. The role map during the activity

Before Activity. The leader gave us a warm-up performance at first, quite a few members whispered to sing along or just beat time softly following the rhythm. Others drifted in during that time.

During Activity. The members performed one by one, the leader will encourage members who itched to perform on stage, he gave them some suggestions about the performed works, at the same time he would adjust the schedule of the activity.

After Activity. Under the guidance of the host, members of the club began to chat with others about the earlier performance and told us about their own stories, for example, Mr. Li thanked others who cared for him during his illness. In the end, the leader summarized the experience of this activity, proposed the next plan and made, if not most, work arrangement.

5 Outcomes and Discussion

5.1 Outcomes

Use New Technology to Organize Activities. Because it is not easy for local residents to get the information of community activities, which results the lack of

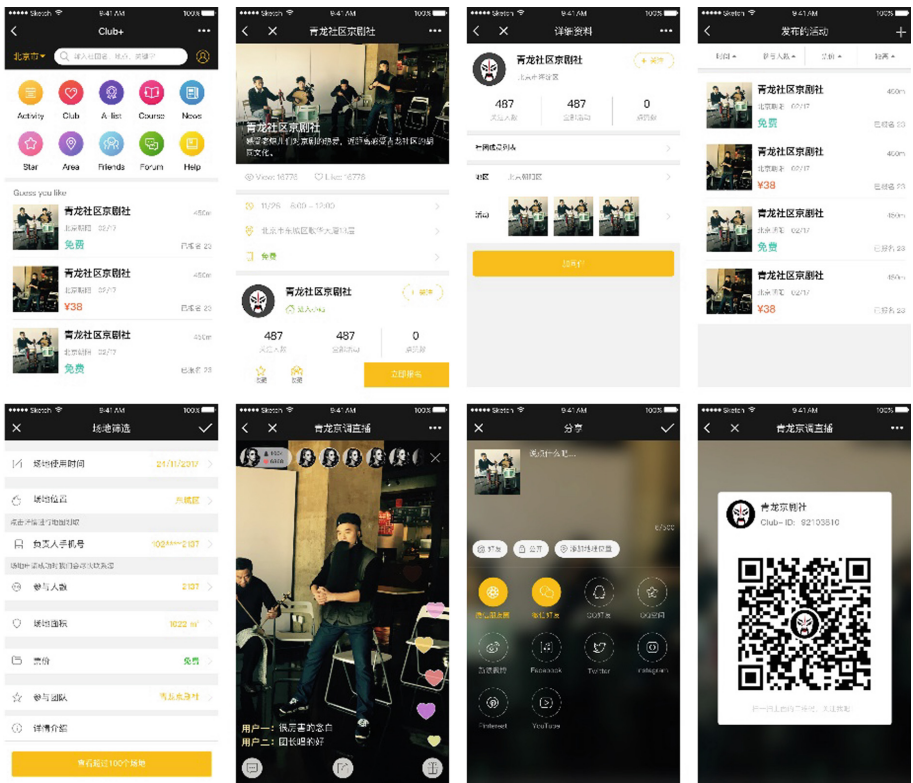


Fig. 7. The role map during the activity

community participation, So one of the outcome of this research is Club+, which is an applet in WeChat, a very popular app in Chinese, even in the elderly. We designed an applet called Club+ in WeChat based on the Html 5 to facilitate the management and organization of activities and clubs for different stakeholders. It can help the residents find or post the activities based on their interest and location. As for beginners, they can learn more about the clubs before attending the activities. Through put a reward button on WeChat article, people who are interested in the activity can fund little money to support the daily operation of the club. The leader of club can also initiate the crowdfunding to find the suitable activity space (Fig. 7).

New Media Promotion to Connect Audiences. For promoting the activity, we passed out the booklets with QR code to encourage residents, audiences, especially the young people to scan the code, so they can subscribe the WeChat Official Accounts, which will introduce Beijing Opera and the basic information of this club, then encourage them to participate in the follow-up experiencing activities and even the volunteer work.

5.2 Discussion

Interdisciplinary Approach. The students from design, computer science and civic engineering work together in this project. Design thinking on social innovation tools is used to support the team to touch the core of urbanization development the urbanization, and gave them the common language to move the project from concept to production. This project also shows how collective intelligence can make a comprehensive and sustainable outcome.

Evaluate the Activity from Different Perspectives. To evaluate a successful activity, the sustainable influence and transmission effect are the same important as the increasing number of new members. Moreover, after presenting the “Qinglong Hutong project” at Stanford University, we also received the comments and suggestions from cross-cultural perspectives, which more focus on online life-long learning and community autonomy.

Role of Design. Designers provide social innovation approaches based on their ability to collaborate and communicate with different stakeholders and resources. The role of design is to create a way among the different stakeholders to collaborate and communicate and a bridge to connect the local club with different resources. Designers also need to build a sustainable mechanism to foster community self-organization after the completion of pilot project.

Partner Ecosystem. In this project, the cooperation among universities, Gehua Group and Qinglong Community create a partner ecosystem. With the help of the academic institutions, local government can manage the community public service in a more scientific way. Academic institutions also have the chance to validate the methods in laboratory in the real context. These joint efforts from various stakeholders can make the community more habitable, innovative and lively. We look for promote this model to more urban communities in the future (Fig. 8).

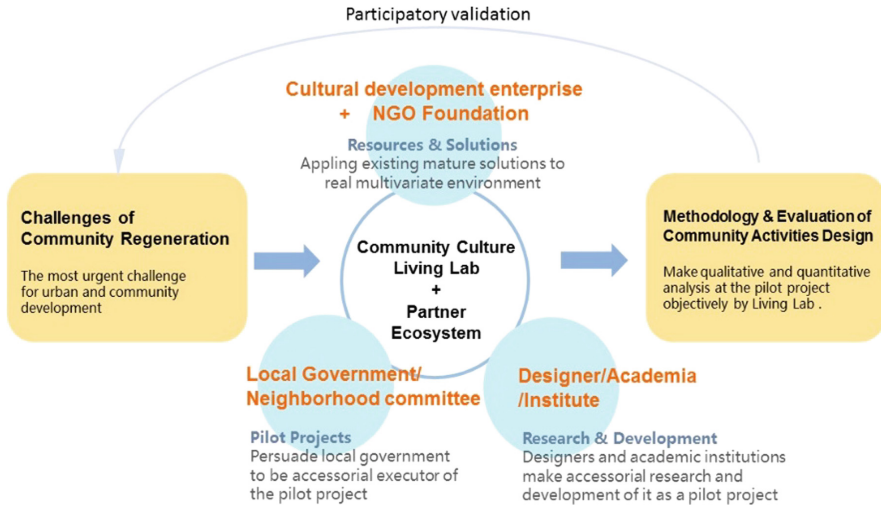


Fig. 8. The cooperation model among different stakeholders

6 Conclusion

This paper investigates the Beijing Opera clubs in QinglongHuton and explores participatory methods to promote community engagement. Amateur cultural club activate the community from the bottom, increase neighborhood participation, and improve the neighborhood's ability to resolve public affairs through community involvement and empowerment. The final outcomes of this paper include participatory workshops on Beijing Opera, the applet based on the WeChat, and initiative on cultural regeneration during the Beijing Design Week. Through promoting the cultural activities, we also generate the new mindset and solution in implementing culturally supporting the aged in community. With the help of the culture organizations, like Gehua Group and local community committee, it is possible to expand influence through a variety of channels. For example, we can help the local government to implement the pilot project on traditional culture during Design Beijing Week, which is popular event for young people and encourage them to participate in traditional culture regeneration. Amateur cultural club will become the carrier of urban culture. Maintaining the sustainable development of the amateur clubs in community is very important to reshape the urban culture DNA and facilitate the urban regeneration better. The model and sustainable mechanism developed in this paper will be used to support the further project on community regeneration as well.

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