

Transforming Gusu: Models, Pathways, and Strategies for Suzhou-Specific Urban Renewal

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Abstract: As global urbanization shifts toward intensive stock-based regeneration, urban renewal drives urban functional restructuring, historical context inheritance and high-quality development. Existing literature overemphasizes fragmented design techniques and macro policy reading, lacking systematic research on classified implementation paths and long-term mechanisms for high-density historic cities constrained by complex property rights, strict heritage protection rules and financing limits. This paper takes pilot renewal city Suzhou as the research object, establishes a three-tier analytical framework of model induction, path classification and strategy formulation, and conducts multiple-case analysis on historic districts, old public buildings, disused industrial sites and aging communities to interpret their financing and governance modes. The results identify a government-financial-market collaborative governance model supported by the “1+N+X” policy system and diverse financing tools, alongside four spatial renewal modes: micro-intervention with cultural, commercial and tourism feedback, asset-light integrated activation, policy dividend release, and multi-party co-governance. To address deep-stage renewal obstacles such as insufficient social capital participation and high property right integration costs, the study proposes a set of practical tools including infrastructure REITs, future revenue pledge financing, renewal special loans, “Urban Renewal Plus” comprehensive development, three-dimensional property right confirmation and risk compensation pools. The findings provide empirical support and transferable governance experience for the intensive stock renewal of historic cities worldwide.

Keywords: Suzhou; Urban Renewal; Historic City Conservation; Renewal Paths

1. Introduction

Entering the mid-21st century, global urban development faces universal challenges, including intensified spatial and environmental resource constraints, aging industrial structures urgently needing transition, and conflicts between historical heritage conservation, the development of new productive forces, and modernization. After decades of rapid urbanization, the dominant logic of urban development in China has irreversibly shifted from extensive peripheral expansion to intensive stock-based quality and efficiency enhancement. In 2025, the Opinions on Continuously Promoting Urban Renewal Actions and the subsequent 15th Five-Year Plan for Urban Renewal in 2026 deployed eight key tasks, marking China’s urban renewal officially entering a new phase of institutionalized, sustainable, and high-quality advancement centered on “heritage conservation, functional enhancement, and livelihood improvement.”

Against this macro-transitional background, localized explorations are particularly crucial.

Suzhou, as one of the first national historic and cultural cities and a pilot city for urban renewal by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MOHURD), faces highly representative challenges. On one hand, Suzhou bears the mission of inheriting a 2,500-year “ancient city context,” facing extremely strict Floor Area Ratio (FAR) restrictions and landscape controls. On the other hand, as an economic powerhouse in China, it urgently needs to create premium spatial carriers for high-tech industries like artificial intelligence and the digital economy. Although Suzhou has generated numerous cutting-edge explorations through local regulations such as the Suzhou Urban Renewal Regulations, challenges such as fragmented property rights, massive initial capital precipitation, declining motivation of social capital, and the lack of long-term operational mechanisms remain core pain points restricting sustainable renewal as projects advance into deeper stages.

Based on this, this paper attempts to address three progressive core research questions: (1) Under strict conservation baselines and high-standard development requirements, what distinct urban renewal model has Suzhou constructed? (2) For categorized spatial carriers such as districts, buildings, industrial parks, and communities, what are the differences in their implementation paths and financial logic? (3) Facing the challenges of full-lifecycle stock revitalization, how can long-term strategies be constructed through more forward-looking financial innovations and institutional reforms?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Theoretical Evolution and Policy Context

Foreign urban renewal theories have evolved over half a century, forming a theoretical lineage of capital-driven logic, humanistic turn, and comprehensive regeneration. From the perspective of spatial political economy, David Harvey’s theory of spatial fix reveals the profit-seeking mechanism of capital’s “secondary fixation” in the built environment [3][11]; Neil Smith’s rent gap theory accurately explains gentrification and spatial exclusion in inner-city renewal [4][22]. Together, they form the core framework for analyzing benefit distribution and spatial injustice. This triggered a humanistic turn in space: Jane Jacobs emphasized street vitality and functional mix [7], and Jan Gehl established the “human scale” design paradigm [2], promoting the transition from “bulldozer-style” renewal to micro-renewal. Amid the collision between capital drive and humanistic reflection, the concept of “Urban Regeneration” proposed by P. Roberts [1] established a modern paradigm of collaborative governance across economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

Based on China’s characteristics of high-density human settlements and historic cities, domestic scholars have gradually constructed renewal theories suited to the local context. Academician Wu Liangyong’s “organic renewal” theory views the city as a quasi-living system, providing conceptual support for the incremental conservation of historical districts [5]. Duan Jin introduced spatial syntax to China, providing quantitative technical support for evaluating old city spatial networks [15]. At the policy level, a three-tier linkage pattern has been formed. The national level strictly adheres to the baseline of “preventing massive demolition and reconstruction” [9]; Jiangsu Province pioneered the “livable and resilient” path by establishing renewal funds; Suzhou uses the Suzhou Urban Renewal Regulations to achieve cross-departmental collaborative approval, providing a “Suzhou Model” for breaking the institutional barrier of fragmented administration [18][20].

2.2 Research Methodology

This study fully excavates Suzhou's localized renewal characteristics, following a logical closed loop of "Policy System—Model Analysis—Categorized Empirical Verification—Strategy Construction." First, a model framework encompassing "top-level regulations, diversified funding, and subject synergy" is constructed. Second, moving to the micro-practice level, categories are defined based on the spatial attributes of stock assets to analyze the financial and property rights logic behind their implementation paths. Finally, targeting the difficulties in Suzhou's practice, long-term systematic renewal strategies are proposed.

This paper selects Suzhou as the urban sample and employs a deep multiple-case study approach: first, policy text interpretation; second, field research and in-depth interviews to obtain current status of planning, bidding, and operations; third, literature and data mining for precise project information. The empirical objects cover four typical renewal types: historic districts, existing buildings, old residential communities, and industrial parks.

3. "1+N+X" Urban Renewal Model in Suzhou

In long-term practice, Suzhou has broken the traditional tendency of either "comprehensive government financial bailout" or "pure market profit-seeking," constructing a characteristic urban renewal model with "policy and institution guidance, multi-source financial closed-loop, and multi-subject interest synergy" at its core.

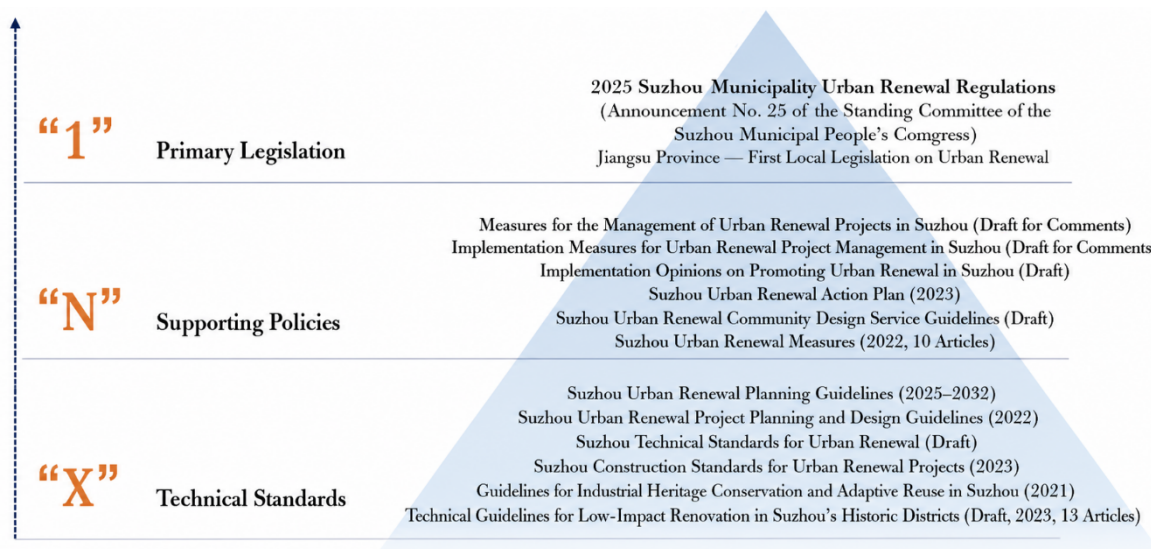


Figure 1: The "1+N+X" Policy Matrix of Suzhou

3.1 The "1+N+X" Policy Matrix

A major obstacle to stock renewal is the complex integration of policies and administrative approval barriers. Suzhou's top-level design breakthrough lies in its "1+N+X" regulatory system. "1" refers to the Suzhou Urban Renewal Regulations as the local legislative guide; "N" represents cross-departmental technical guidelines covering planning and land, financial support, fire safety exemptions, and property rights consolidation; "X" refers to specific implementation plans for ancient city conservation and old industrial area upgrading. This system breaks the administrative deadlock by establishing municipal leading groups. For instance, addressing the chronic problem of old buildings failing to meet current fire codes, Suzhou introduced a "joint expert review system for

special fire safety designs,” clearing administrative barriers for numerous stalled projects.

3.2 Multi-Level Investment and Financing Ecology

Financial sustainability is the key to urban renewal. Suzhou has eliminated reliance on short-term land finance and built a multi-level financial foundation. First, leveraging central and local finance, Suzhou secured central urban renewal demonstration funds in 2025 for public infrastructure. Second, policy finance plays a crucial role; the Suzhou government signed a 50 billion RMB strategic cooperation agreement with the China Development Bank (CDB), directly supporting projects like the Pingjiang Road historical conservation. Third, innovating project-level financial balance models, Suzhou pioneered the “EOD (Ecology-Oriented Development) + Urban Renewal” model in Gusu District and piloted “state-owned capital cooperation + operational profit-sharing” fund mechanisms in the Industrial Park.

3.3 “Government-Enterprise-Public” Collaborative Governance and Implementation Network

In the complex stock game, the Suzhou government successfully transitioned from a “sole investor” to a “rule-maker and service provider.” At the implementation entity level, it widely promotes the “State-owned Enterprise (SOE) leading + Private Enterprise collaboration” framework. Projects like the Guanqian Bookstore and Xuanqiao Lane historic building “Pan Residence” utilized this model to mitigate single-party financial pressure. For full-lifecycle management, the “EPC+O (Engineering, Procurement, Construction, and Operations)” mechanism is widely introduced, seamlessly integrating front-end construction with back-end leasing to achieve a long-term financial closed loop. At the grassroots governance dimension, the government introduced the community planner mechanism and built regular negotiation platforms (e.g., the “City-Commerce Communication Group” in Shiquan Street) to overcome property rights barriers, accurately balancing public interests and market efficiency.

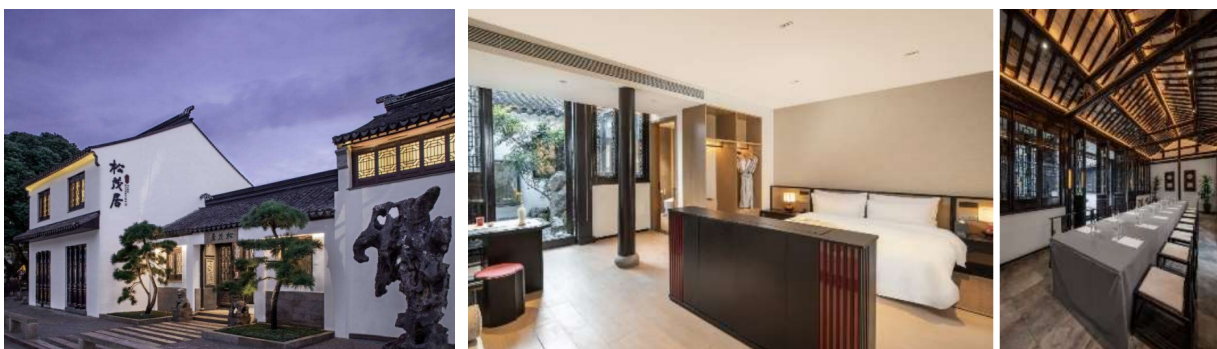


Figure 2: Renewal of Pan Residence in Xuanqiao Lane, Suzhou.

4. Analysis of Categorized Paths

Urban renewal features strong spatial heterogeneity. Suzhou has abandoned standardized renovation paradigms, implementing precise policies to evolve four classic categorized paths with profound academic significance and strong practical value.

4.1 Historic Districts and Commercial Areas: Micro-intervention and “Culture-Commerce-Tourism” Feedback Path

In heritage-rich but highly fragmented districts, Suzhou rejected high-cost, long-cycle comprehensive leasing models, exploring an asset-light catalytic path of “public infrastructure first, market autonomous upgrading.” The Shiquan Street area represents the “acupuncture-style” micro-renewal paradigm. Facing a 2,004-meter street with 598 spontaneously grown shops, the government invested merely 60 million RMB in public funds for sidewalk widening, facade weaving, and parking additions, without resetting property rights. Establishing a four-party participation model, it guided merchants to upgrade their businesses using their own funds. The commercial vacancy rate dropped significantly as the street achieved an occupancy rate of over 95%, realizing a spontaneous ecological growth without massive social capital intervention.

Conversely, the Huaihai Street project demonstrates a government-led “scenario reconstruction and heavy-asset financial closed-loop.” For this declining former foreign enterprise cluster, the sub-district invested 130 million RMB for infrastructure and core asset buybacks, utilizing an EPC model. By defining strict “public-private cost division” rules, upgrading public spaces, and retaining original merchants, the project achieved a daily foot traffic of 40,000 during holidays and tripled merchant revenues. Relying on increased rents, new tax revenues, and state-owned asset appreciation, it established a robust long-term financial balance model.



Figure 3: the renovated public area of Shiquan Square (top left), a privately-led self-renewal space (bottom left), the nightscape of Shiquan Street (right).

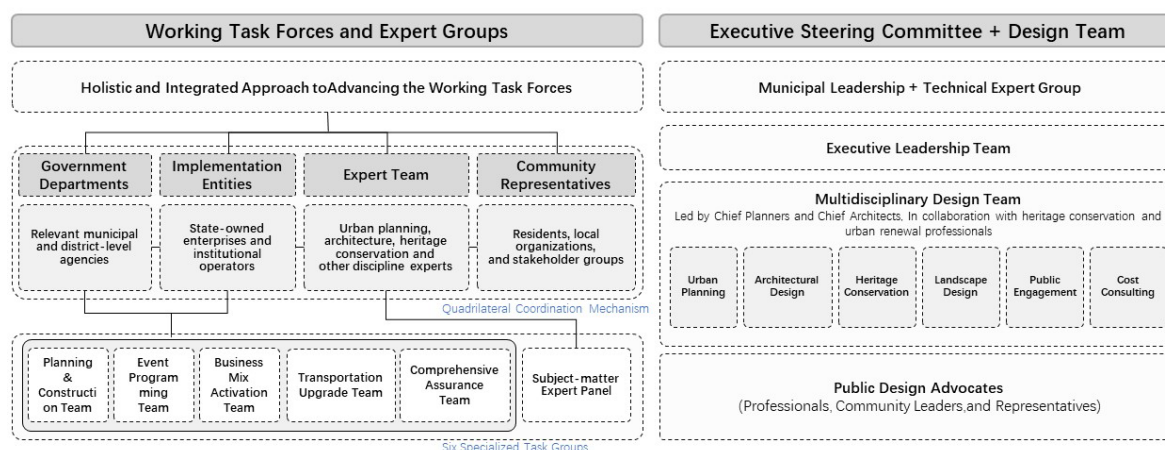


Figure 4: Quadrilateral Working Organization Mechanism for Comprehensive Renovation of Shiquan Street.

4.2 Existing Public Buildings: Asset-light Operation and Spatial Composite Empowerment Path

For single-function existing buildings, the core objective is to reinvent the commercial model without changing ownership. The Guanqian Bookstore renewal is a paradigm of “autonomous investment + endogenous drive.” Originally a traditional 7,600 m² book market, it adopted a mixed-ownership operational system (“SOE controlling cultural tone + private enterprise investing and planning”). Without government subsidies, it integrated book sales with characteristic markets, intangible cultural heritage experiences, and youth activities, transforming into a “youth cultural consumption hub.”

The Shuangta Market renovation is a landmark achievement of old market revival under government guidance. Adopting a “micro-renovation + asset-light operation” model, a professional commercial management company absorbed initial decoration and smart system costs. By uniformly leasing from property owners and subleasing after integration and upgrading, the company recouped investments via the “rent gap,” cracking the long-standing operational pain points of traditional farmers’ markets while retaining their core livelihood functions.



Figure 5: Before and after renovation of Xinhua Guanqian Bookstore

4.3 Industrial Parks: Policy Dividend Release and Industrial-Service Ecological Transition Path

To adapt to Suzhou’s “1030” high-tech industrial system, the city implemented a “planning-oriented breakthrough” path for old industrial areas. The Xinhong Industrial Park (SOE-led) maximized policy dividends like “FAR increase without land premium compensation.” By investing 180 million RMB to increase the FAR to 1.5 within existing boundaries, the park comprehensively introduced digital economy enterprises, skyrocketing the per-mu tax yield from tens of thousands to 1 million RMB.

The Lan Cultural and Creative Industrial Park (private enterprise-led) demonstrates the efficacy of social capital. Investing 150 million RMB, the private entity employed a “repair as old” weaving approach on a derelict electronics factory. Introducing over 200 digital technology enterprises, it generated an annual total revenue of 4.4 billion RMB, validating the potential of private capital in revitalizing high-potential industrial heritage.



Figure 6: Before and after renovation of Xinhong Industrial Park.

Table 1: Implementation and Innovation of Xinhong Industrial Park.

Phase / Process	Implementation	Key Challenges	Innovation
Identification of Implementation Subject	Suzhou Xinhesheng Real Estate Co., Ltd. acted as the implementation subject, completing the acquisition and investment construction of the factory buildings upon the approval of the State-owned Assets Investment Decision-making Committee of the Industrial Park.	N/A	Introducing a government-guided "Urban Partner" mechanism to promote multi-party collaboration.
Project Registration	Registering the project at the District Bidding Center.	N/A	Leveraging the park's policy support that encourages mixed-use development on industrial land to achieve an efficient approval and filing process.
Scheme Formulation	The formulated implementation scheme reorganizes the original factory's courtyard and corridor spaces and optimizes functional partitions by separating offices from production workshops. It targets the elimination of building safety risks, functional rationalization, and the regeneration of vacant	The original factory features large bays and deep spans, resulting in poor natural lighting and ventilation in the central area; structural testing and reinforcement pose significant technical difficulties.	The principle of Old-New Symbiosis is proposed for the renovation project. New components are built upon the original load-bearing structure to maintain formal and contextual consistency with the inherited industrial buildings. The integration of historic and new elements

	industrial stock land.		revitalizes these heritage industrial structures.
Administrative Approvals	Submitting the renovation scheme to the District Drawing Review Center and passing the review; completing project supervision procedures at the District Quality and Safety Station.	The substantial modifications to the structural system must strictly comply with housing and construction codes, requiring the coordination of multi-departmental approvals.	Extensively consulting relevant housing and construction departments, conducting testing, appraisal, and reinforcement of the existing structure, and successfully passing the drawing review by fully satisfying the relevant regulatory requirements.
Engineering Renovation & Completion Acceptance	Executing factory wall openings, courtyard construction, and workshop separation renovations; completing structural reinforcement alongside specialized acceptances for fire protection and safety.	The extensive scope of the renovation demands absolute assurance of structural safety; coordinating the transition between old and new functions and ensuring overall construction quality.	Optimizing the spatial layout through floor slab perforations, balancing structural safety with functional needs; preserving distinctive industrial architectural characteristics while introducing novel functions.
Operational Management	Introducing the Nanjing Medical University Innovation Center, the Sino-Korean Pan-Semiconductor Acceleration Center, and leading medical device enterprises to enhance industrial supporting facilities.	Attracting high-quality enterprises necessitates the synchronized upgrading of hardware facilities and soft services (e.g., talent acquisition, industrial chains).	Fostering industrial agglomeration effects and driving the synergistic development of upstream and downstream sectors through technology spillovers; providing complementary smart services to elevate overall attractiveness.

4.4 Old Residential Communities: Multi-party Cost Sharing and Grassroots Governance Reconstruction Path

This path breaches the surface of physical repairs, delving into grassroots governance. The Loufeng Sub-district renovation covered 92 communities and 15,000 households. It unprecedentedly established a symbolic maintenance fund standard of “1 RMB per square meter per household.” This micro-financial contribution raised a long-term management fund pool and awakened residents’ sense of ownership, ending the vicious cycle of “government builds, residents watch, facilities decay.”

The Ancient City Block 32 project innovatively introduced policy funds from the CDB and adopted an “EPC+O” long-cycle operation mechanism. It completed highly difficult overhead line undergrounding and heritage restoration, seamlessly weaving the enclosed old community into the macro cultural tourism network, achieving a dual victory for historic preservation and livelihood improvement.



Figure 7: The Ancient City Block 32 project

Table 2: Implementation and Innovation of The Ancient City Block 32 project.

Phase / Process	Implementation	Innovation
Associated Projects	Restoration projects for heritage conservation units, including the Former Site of Jiangsu Provincial Surveillance Commissioner's Office, Changyuan Tao's Garden (Taoyuan), and Cao Cangzhou Ancestral Hall; auxiliary facilities improvement projects; residential courtyard projects such as No. 10 Shengjiabang and No. 30 Banlian Lane.	N/A
Implementing Entity	Suzhou Historic City Renewal and Development Co., Ltd., a subsidiary of Suzhou Historic and Cultural City Conservation Group Co., Ltd.	N/A
Property Rights Consolidation	Completed the asset consolidation of 89,900 square meters through four batches of negotiated relocation programs and expropriation plans for multiple independent courtyards.	Established household-based resident archives following a "one file per household" (Yihu yidang) approach for data collection. Conducted grassroots consultations and implemented negotiated relocation adopting a "one policy per household" (Yihu yice) model based on residents' willingness.
Funding Sources	Limited fiscal allocations; primarily self-raised corporate funds.	N/A
Planning Formulation	The implementing entity, in collaboration with the Gusu Branch of the Natural Resources and Planning Bureau, jointly formulated the Research Scheme for the Conservation and Renewal of Block 32 Area and the Special Planning for	Positioned as a Su-style Life Experience District, Block 32 is split into five functional zones. Guided by small-scale renovation and organic regeneration rules for historic blocks, 71 conservation

	Conservation and Renovation of Jianjinqiao Lane Historic City Conservation and Utilization Project, among others.	control units and 282 basic operational units are demarcated according to land use types, property lines and courtyard boundaries, with project-based management adopted for phased implementation.
Implementation Scheme	Clarified the renewal scope, methods, content design schemes, construction plans, and cost estimations.	The research improved evaluation standards for integrated courtyard-building conservation and renewal, and established a two-tier control system for courtyards and buildings. Following qualitative, quantitative and morphological principles, rigid and flexible control factors were specified in regulatory documents. Additional indicators on renovation works, urban design and functional layout further guide the implementation of single-site projects.
Permitting Process	The project legally completed procedures for project approval, land use, planning, and construction, obtaining the Construction Land Planning Permit, Construction Project Planning Permit, and Construction Permit.	Conducted construction drawing reviews and fire safety reviews through expert consultation meetings.
Construction and Acceptance	The overall design of the project centered on protecting and restoring historic buildings, preserving the authentic architectural style and cultural fabric of the ancient city to the greatest extent while upgrading infrastructure. It distilled the innovation of "micro-renewal" in Suzhou's ancient city, helping to promote higher-level protection and higher-quality urban renewal in Suzhou's new development stage.	The process may involve "case-by-case review for individual residences" (one review per residence).

5. Discussion and Policy Implications

While the aforementioned empirical evidence validates the "Suzhou Model," challenges such as unviable financial returns for social capital and the inability to consolidate fragmented property rights persist as renewal enters the deep-water zone. This paper proposes the following systematic

strategies.

5.1 Innovating Diversified Financial Tools

It is urgent to explore the asset securitization (REITs) of urban renewal infrastructure, packaging operational assets with stable cash flows into REITs to complete the capital closed-loop. Financial institutions should design tailored products, such as “Renewal Loans” that do not require heavy-asset collateral for micro-intervention projects, and explore novel financing models pledging future asset revenue rights.

5.2 Stimulating Social Capital Vitality

Promote the comprehensive “Urban Renewal +” development model. Allow market entities undertaking public welfare tasks (e.g., building parks or restoring heritage) to receive flexible economic compensations, such as mixed-use zoning (M0) or cross-site FAR transfers. Furthermore, reform the traditional “highest bidder wins” land transfer logic to a comprehensive bidding model prioritizing operational capabilities.

5.3 Consolidating Baseline Guarantees

Governments should establish a unified City Information Modeling (CIM) platform to transparently share property data, drastically reducing due diligence costs for investors. Additionally, establish a “Risk Compensation Fund Pool” to subsidize projects facing catastrophic cost overruns due to unforeseeable factors like underground archaeological discoveries.

5.4 Breaking Underlying Constraints

Deepen institutional synergy by exploring “three-dimensional property rights confirmation” in high-density areas. Separately issuing independent property certificates for underground commercial spaces, surface historical buildings, and aerial corridors will activate the legal mortgage and circulation attributes of fragmented stock assets.

6. Conclusions

Urban renewal is never limited to superficial physical renovation; it is a highly intricate systematic undertaking that entails economic restructuring, the reshaping of social spatial patterns, and the readjustment of spatial rights and interests. Based on an empirical study of Suzhou, this paper concludes that the fundamental logic behind its effective urban renewal lies in building a collaborative governance system backed by the “1+N+X” policy package and diversified financing instruments. Four distinct development routes have been formulated for micro-level spatial practice in a targeted manner. As urban renewal enters an in-depth stage marked by capital withdrawal and tangled property rights disputes, a viable way out of the current predicament lies in rolling out practical tools including infrastructure REITs, floor area ratio incentive policies, integrated bidding schemes and risk compensation mechanisms. This research further enriches the theoretical connotation of stock urban planning grounded in China’s local practices, and proposes a practically replicable collaborative governance model for historic and cultural cities around the world to strike a dynamic balance between rigorous historical heritage preservation and sustainable urban revitalization amid profound transitional pressures.

Funding

This research was supported by the Suzhou Social Science Foundation (Y2026LX200) for the project “Research on the Model, Path, and Countermeasures of Suzhou’s Characteristic Urban Renewal”; Suzhou Social Science Foundation (Think Tank Special Project, ZK2026LX008) for the project “Integrated Value Assessment and Adaptive Reuse of Warehouse Industrial Heritage in the Jiangnan Region”.

Data Availability

No new data were created or analyzed in this work. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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