

Yang Li

## 6 Cultural Reconstruction of a Traditional Chinese Courtyard House into the Suochengli Neighbourhood Library

**Abstract:** Suochengli Neighbourhood Library is located in a traditional Chinese siheyuan/courtyard house in the back garden of the historic Zhang Ancestral Hall in the port of Yantai in the Shandong Province of China. Over the years, owners and occupiers of the courtyard added new buildings and, although the original complex had been compromised, the additional structures were all precious evidence of the development of the complex over time. The relationship between the old and the new became the focus of a renovation project to bring the courtyard back into use suitable for a modern lifestyle while respecting its heritage. The site comprises three bungalows and a cloister which reframed the courtyard into several smaller connected sections. The various structures had the capacity to accommodate all the functions required of a modern library, including an inviting entrance, reading area, café, gallery and toilet. The library reading room and courtyard are connected by a sliding door which increases the flexibility of the main floor space and enables a range of activities to take place.

**Keywords:** Public libraries – China; Library buildings; Buildings – Remodelling for other use; Courtyard houses; Sustainability

### Introduction

Suochengli Neighbourhood Library is composed of three bungalows and a cloister framing a former siheyuan/courtyard house into several smaller connected sections. The small complex accommodates all the functions required of a library including an entrance, reading area, café, gallery and toilet. The reading room (Figure 1) and courtyard are connected by a sliding door which increases the flexibility of the main floor space and enables a range of activities to take place.

The library holds special collections of Yantai and Jaodong (Shandong) Peninsula history and local culture and oral history collected from recording work carried out in the community. Book clubs, lectures, workshops, exhibitions, community entertainment and leisure activities are held regularly, both for residents and tourists. Within the library, a dialogue between the new and the old is cultivated, with the energy and vitality from local communities contributing to the



**Fig. 1:** Reading room of the Suochengli Neighbourhood Library. © Yang Li.

### **Facts and Figures.**

*Name:* Suochengli Neighbourhood Library

*Address:* No. 12 Shiyan Street, Chefoo District, Yantai, China

*Website:* not available

<https://afasiaarchzine.com/2018/11/vector-architects-4/> provides details on the library building

*Opening:* July 2017

*Builder:* Yantai Chuangyuan Culture Communication Co. LTD

*Architect:* Vector Architects <http://www.vectorarchitects.com/>; Principal Dong Gong

*Gross floor area:* 323 m<sup>2</sup>

*Main floor space:* 323 m<sup>2</sup>

*Collection size:* 3,000

*Staff:* 1

*Workstations:* 3

*Building costs:* not available

gathering, creating, sharing and dissemination of knowledge. The new library is both a place of learning and knowledge creation and a community centre where people can meet and share the space.

## Background to the Suochengli Development

Yantai, alternately known as Zhifu or Chefoo, is one of the most important trading ports in the Province of Shandong in northern China, having existed for more than 600 years. Yantai's history began in Suochengli, which was built in 1398 during the Ming Dynasty as a coastal defence military base to prevent Japanese attacks. Originally called the Qishan Defence Qianhusuo/Garrison, it comprised small towns and defence posts called Wei and Suo and was established in 1398 in the administrative area of Ninghai Wei. A watchtower called Yantai by the local people was constructed on the top of Yantai Mountain thereby constituting the origin of Yantai, 22 years earlier than the Forbidden City in Beijing.

During the reign of Shunzhi (1644–1661) in the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912), the defence garrison became a civilian city at the end of the war and the population increased accordingly. The most famous residents were the Zhang, An and Liu clans. Although economic and social change over many years created a modern urban landscape, the Suochengli District retained a relatively complete northern hutong/laneway style (Figure 2) with traditional siheyuan/courtyard compounds lining both sides.



**Fig. 2:** The guiding sign to the library in the historic hutong style district. © Yang Li.

The group of buildings which remained in the northwest corner of the historical block known as the Qianhu Base of the Qishan Garrison became the ancestral hall of the Zhang family clan following the Qianlong (1735–1796) period of the

Qing Dynasty. Subsequently the area declined, and the buildings fell into disrepair. The Zhang Ancestral Hall with its history covering nearly 300 years was awarded cultural heritage status within the Shandong Province in December 2006 and eventually its back garden became the site of the Suochengli Neighbourhood Library.

## The Kwan-Yen Project

The Suochengli Neighbourhood Library is part of the Kwan-Yen Project, an urban renewal plan supported by the Yantai city government, focusing on Yantai's past, its specialist location and culture including its history, archaeology and folk traditions (Ling 2017). The project name comes from Guangren Road, which was formerly known as Kwan-Yen Road, the first street of Yantai Port constructed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On both sides of the road, parallel to the coastline, more than 40 historical colonial buildings covering a period of over one hundred years were constructed. As the city changed, most of the colonial buildings were rented and operated as high-end clubs, restaurants and bars. Most of the tourists and residents who came to the seaside seldom stayed in the area. The use of the colonial buildings declined, and many fell into disrepair (Figure 3). The government decided to commence urban renewal and commercial revitalisation and invited architects, designers, artists and other groups to bring life and activity to the historical area. The Kwan-Yen Project respects the complexity of the old district and the concept of civil society, paying attention to the importance of maintaining traditional street life and local culture, emphasising interpersonal interaction and integration into the community, and opposing plans to demolish the old road and historic district for redevelopment.



**Fig. 3:** Inside the courtyard before the renovation.  
© Suochengli Neighbourhood Library.

As a historic conservation plan, the Kwan-Yen Project resulted in the redesign of the streetscape of the Guangren district and the restoration of historical buildings, accompanied by the reintroduction of cultural and artistic creativity. Simultaneously, the Chefoo Institute/Zhifu Academic Hall was established, and the historical district transformed into the Kwan-Yen Art District. The Chefoo Institute delivers public education services to the whole city of Yantai through satellite agencies. Suochengli Neighbourhood Library is its first satellite organisation providing services to local residents.

## Design Focuses on Symbiosis of the New and the Old

As already outlined, the Suochengli Neighbourhood Library was created in a traditional Chinese courtyard house in Yantai's historic district. Before the renovation, there were three beautifully detailed rooms at the back of the courtyard. In 1950, the courtyard was rented to a woodcarving factory and the spaces became a workshop. Traditional architecture embodies historical memory. It is important to protect, repair and renovate a historic building from a sustainable perspective within its historical context to enable the building to demonstrate historic and cultural value and meet the functional requirements of modern life.

The architects for the Suochengli Neighbourhood Library were the well-known practice, Vector Architects, with the work led by Principal Architect Dong Gong (<http://www.vectorarchitects.com/en/projects/39>). Dong Gong (<https://www.archilovers.com/gong-dong/>) studied architecture at Tsinghua University in Beijing and the University of Illinois. His work has been exhibited at the Biennale-



**Fig. 4:** The contrast between the library and the surrounding modern buildings. © Yang Li.

Architettura/International Architecture Exhibition in Venice. In 2014, he designed the Sanlian Bookstore Seaside Public Welfare Library (Trendland 2017) in Qinhuangdao, which has attracted considerable attention and been called “the loneliest library in the world” (Snakesolidus 2017).

A primary focus of the Suochengli library renovation was the relationship between the new and the old, to ensure that the new form of the courtyard would meet the needs of a contemporary lifestyle at the same time retaining Suochengli’s unique city style formed by its hundreds of years of development and its important role in Yantai’s urban history (Gooood 2017). As a latecomer, the Suochengli Neighbourhood Library adopted an intervention strategy of integration and coexistence with the original buildings, without erasing the original historical traces. Through blending the new with the old, the library contributes to the urban context of Yantai (Figure 4) and displays an awareness of history and human spirit expressed through the form of architecture; this philosophy is transmitted to every resident in the community through the library. The original courtyard and the shape and materials of the original building were retained and a new cloister arrangement was introduced which connected the different spaces. The renovation of the Suochengli Neighbourhood Library has brought new life to the courtyard house. The library includes a reading room, children’s area, lecture hall and exhibition hall, as well as leisure space, and other functional areas and covers an area of more than 300 m<sup>2</sup>.

## The Design Process

At the start of the project, the architect carried out a systematic reorganisation and restoration of the original walls, doors, windows, roof trusses, flooring and other architectural elements. As a result, the original purlin and beams of the old structures were made visible and the interior space was increased to make the building layout more logical and easier to use. As well as retaining most of the original features and materials, the colour scheme is integrated with the green brick and black tile colour of the surrounding built environment.

The architect implemented a cloister organisation for the design dividing the courtyard into several smaller areas, including a multifunctional public space at the centre and three landscaped areas at the sides. At the entrance (Figure 5), the cloister opens out into the hutong/alley of the Suochengli neighbourhood and welcomes the public into the library. Within the courtyard, the cloister connects all the different functions, including the entrance, reading space, café, gallery and toilet, creating space for outdoor activities (Figure 6). The cloister also functions as shelter from the rain during bad weather.





Fig. 5: The entrance to the library. © Yang Li.

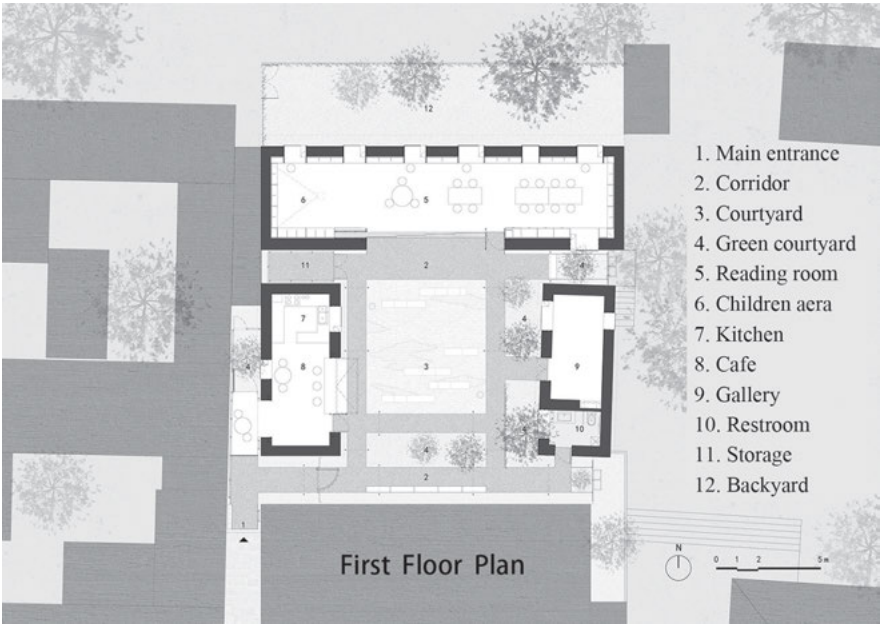


Fig. 6: First floor plan. © Suochengli Neighbourhood Library.

## The Reading Room

The north wing includes a reading room (Figure 1), children's picture book area, study area and a staff workstation. The 86 m<sup>2</sup> space is flexible and can be used as an indoor or outdoor lecture space with an open inner courtyard where the library can hold book discussions and other activities. In the reading room, the wooden bookcase extending the full height of the wall is made of environmentally sustainable wheat straw. The unique sliding door design in the reading room creates four glass doors integrated into the wall connecting the interior and exterior spaces and allowing them to blend into each other, at the same time creating extra room and alleviating the restrictions of a small space.

## A Leisure Space

The west wing is an open dining area and coffee shop with a broad window ledge where people can sit, relax and enjoy views over the courtyard (Figure 7). The east wing is designed as an exclusive space for art exhibitions where local and international artists are invited, from time to time, to exhibit their artworks to the community.



Fig. 7: Leisure space. © Yang Li.

## Special Collections and Activities in the Library

Community is an important part of urban life and the quality of public space available is closely connected to the quality of life of the area's residents. The library is an important public space where people learn, think, discover information and



communicate with each other. It has a vital role to play in supporting community activity and enhancing community vitality. The Suochengli Neighbourhood Library is a place for local cultural research and knowledge sharing which contribute to community wellbeing. The library holds regular book discussions, lectures, exhibitions, entertainment, leisure and free parent/child activities.

The library is located within Yantai's historic community and the book collection must reflect a connection with the community. There are more than 3,000 books in the library, including literature and art books from all over the world and many special collections of Yantai and Jiaodong (Shandong) Peninsula history as well as local literature by Yantai writers. The Suochengli Neighbourhood Library carries out oral history recording in the community, collecting stories, photos, objects and books and preserves the material collected. There is a children's corner providing picture books and magazines.

## Exhibitions

*Suochengli Photo Studio* (Suochengli Photoshop 2017) was the first exhibition after the new library opened. Zhang Xiao ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhang\\_Xiao\\_\(photographer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhang_Xiao_(photographer))), an artist from Yantai, was invited to create an interactive artistic work in the community. The idea for the exhibition came in response to various requests. For the local residents, who do not usually visit exhibitions, the displays are extremely valuable. Who is the target audience for community participation in arts and crafts? Can artists bring new ideas to the community and engage people's enthusiasm? The exhibition was aimed at shopkeepers, migrant workers and the long-time residents of Suochengli, and gave power of aesthetic choice to the residents. The artist designed a special online programme. Residents who came to the exhibition could upload photos of themselves to a background scene of somewhere they wanted to live, or travel to, by scanning a QR code. There was a choice of seascapes, the forest, a glacier or even outer space. Using photoshop technology, a new synthetic photo was generated.

## Lectures

The Suochengli Neighbourhood Library provides residents with a variety of cultural activities. There are two types of free activities each weekend: historical culture and folklore. The library invites scholars, craftspeople and writers who understand the history and folklore of Yantai to talk about the local history and traditional customs to community residents. There are lectures and demonstrations

on local traditional skills like paper cutting and shadow play (Figures 8 and 9). The audience can participate and experience the techniques for themselves. A series of popular and influential lectures has been held giving the residents, especially children, a better understanding of their community and city and awakening their cultural spirit.



**Fig. 8:** Papercutting. © Suochengli Neighbourhood Library.



**Fig. 9:** Shadow play. © Suochengli Neighbourhood Library.

## The Theory Behind the Practice

The Suochengli Neighbourhood Library exemplifies the aspirations of community libraries described in the literature. Scott (2011) provided concrete examples of how community libraries support their communities. They serve as a conduit to access information and to learn; encourage social inclusion and equity; foster civic engagement; create a bridge to resources and community involvement; promote economic vitality within the community. Little (2010) points out that the function of a community library is to transmit information, spread knowledge and promote the improvement of residents' cultural life. Alemanne, Mandel and McClure (2011) advocate that community libraries should explore cultural exchange activities, organise reading activities, encourage users to discuss various topics, promote participation particularly in community affairs, and establish a stable and harmonious community environment. Hendry (1990) believes that community libraries should provide reading opportunities, promote new interests and hobbies, and generally broaden the public's horizons. Through exchange of information, the community library can encourage cultural integration of its user groups, and thereby enhance the social value of the library. Regneala (2012) points out that the library service should have community cohesion at its core and promote the cultural exchange and harmonious life of the

local community. It can provide a free, comfortable place where, through various leisure and culture activities organised by library staff, users can relax and grow.

## **Community Empowerment and Cultural Renaissance**

A library is an important part of urban culture. It is the organic fusion of the external appearance and internal spirit of a city. As an important public cultural institution, a community library not only undertakes the responsibility of disseminating knowledge and culture, but also plays an important role in cultivating community culture and improving the quality of life. The Suochengli Neighbourhood Library integrates the old and the new into the library through the transformation of the former buildings and the development of cultural activities which promote the renaissance of community and city culture.

Paying attention, and responding appropriately, to changes in society are important components of the public library mission. To embrace fully the function of the library as the third place, it is important to make the library the centre of the community (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982; Oldenburg 2001; Oldenburg 2007). Coleman and Hanley (2012) advocate the use of modern information technology to create contemporary reading spaces and the provision of public leisure areas in community libraries, such as flexible conference rooms and coffee shops.

A community library needs to understand its region, its residents and their traditions, and the availability of resources in the wider library network to identify the most fundamental and urgent issues facing citizens. The design of the library, its resources and services, can then be based on the understandings gained. The community library becomes much more than a space for reading. Through the dissemination of new knowledge and information, it promotes the building of community culture, cultivates an awareness of the wider urban culture, and improves the entire quality of life in the city.

## **Conclusion**

The transformation of a residential building with a rich historical accumulation and cultural atmosphere into a community library involves the consideration of external environmental and internal spatial factors. The aim is to ensure that the building functions well in its contemporary new use while respecting the original

architectural elements and style. The architecture should give back to the city a building which both enhances the modern environment and retains a sense of the tradition and the memories and history it embodies. The Suochengli Neighbourhood Library continues Yantai's cultural tradition through the combination of the old and new and demonstrates the energy and spirit of its society and history through the architectural form. Through unique and novel design, the library has developed into a cultural landmark in the community and has also contributed to the cultural renaissance of the whole city.

The Suochengli Neighbourhood Library promotes the cultural vitality of the community and encourages community engagement by providing a place for reading and for residents to meet. The library and the community grow together, enhancing the residents' sense of belonging to the library, and providing a new path for the sustainable development of the library. New vitality has come to the historical district. As a cultural landmark, the library not only promotes the revival of community culture, but also improves the cultural image of Yantai and promotes the development of local tourism. In China, providing high-quality public cultural services for residents is the common goal of the government and social organisations and Suochengli Neighbourhood Library provides a great model. It is a shared place where dialogue between the new and the old is cultivated, and the energy and vitality from local communities is stimulated, further contributing to the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

Suochengli Neighbourhood Library echoes the lifestyle and pace of the local community, while representing the contemporary culture and aesthetics of modern society. While other future satellites of the Chefoo Institute/Zhifu Academic Hall will make their mark, the Suochengli Neighbourhood Library will continue to be at the core of community education and cultural activities ensuring that the vitality of the local region remains undimmed.

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