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A STUDY ON THE STRUCTURAL GAPS BETWEEN OFFICIAL PARTICIPATION NARRATIVES AND RESIDENTS' PARTICIPATION PERCEPTIONS IN THE MICRO-RENEWAL OF PUBLIC SPACES IN OLD RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

With the transition of urban renewal in China from large-scale redevelopment to micro-renewal of existing built-up areas, public participation has become an increasingly institutionalized component in the renewal of public spaces in old residential communities. However, how institutionalized participation translates into residents' lived participation experiences remains insufficiently understood, resulting in persistent discrepancies between official participation narratives and residents' participation perceptions. This study adopts an exploratory cross-case analysis based on preliminary site observations, unstructured interviews, and official narrative materials from six micro-renewal projects in Shanghai to examine how public participation operates in practice. The findings identify three recurring types of structural gaps: information gaps, procedural gaps, and meaning gaps. These gaps emerge from mismatches in information transmission, limited visibility of participatory processes, and differences in how participation is interpreted and experienced by residents. The results suggest that participation effectiveness is not determined solely by the presence of formal procedures, but is shaped by the interaction of communication practices, institutional implementation, professional translation, and trust relationships. By conceptualizing these discrepancies as structurally recurrent gaps, this study provides a mechanism-oriented explanation of the divergence between institutionalized participation and lived experiences. It advances existing public participation research by shifting the focus from procedural arrangements to experiential processes, and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of participation–design interaction in micro-renewal contexts. The findings also offer practical implications for improving participation mechanisms and design communication.

Keywords: Public spaces in old residential communities, Micro-renewal, Public Participation, Structural Gaps, Participation Perception

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INTRODUCTION

With the transition of urban development in China toward the regeneration of existing built-up areas, urban renewal practices have shifted from large-scale physical transformation to micro-renewal approaches that emphasize incremental spatial improvement and community-level interventions (Sun et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2023). In this context, public spaces in old residential communities function as critical settings for everyday life, social interaction, and grassroots governance (Carmona, 2019). However, many of these spaces are characterized by aging infrastructure, limited functionality, and declining social use, making their renewal a pressing issue in contemporary urban governance (Zhang et al., 2022).

Micro-renewal has therefore emerged as a governance approach that prioritizes small-scale, adaptive interventions while promoting community engagement. Within this transition, public participation has become a central governance mechanism, implemented through instruments such as consultations, public displays, and community planner systems (Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China, 2021; Shanghai Planning and Natural Resources Bureau, 2020). Existing studies suggest that public participation can enhance social acceptance and long-term sustainability in urban renewal processes (Innes & Booher, 2018; Parés et al., 2012).

However, empirical research indicates that participation in practice is often proceduralized and instrumentalized, characterized by limited channels for expression, weak feedback mechanisms, and low visibility of participatory processes (Boland & Zhu, 2012; Chen et al., 2021; Lu, 2020; Marzukhi et al., 2022). Even where participation is institutionally established, residents' perceptions remain highly uneven: some residents recall participation processes clearly, while others are unaware of them or perceive renewal as a top-down intervention.

This divergence suggests that the key issue lies not in whether participation occurs, but in how participation is communicated, interpreted, and experienced. Although existing studies have examined participation from perspectives such as collaborative governance, responsive design, and participatory planning (Carmona, 2019; Innes & Booher, 2018; Yang et al., 2025), they primarily focus on participation forms or outcomes, with limited attention to the mechanisms through which institutionalized participation is translated into lived experience.

Against this background, this study adopts an exploratory research approach to examine recurrent discrepancies between official participation narratives and residents' participation perceptions in micro-renewal practices in old residential communities. Through a cross-case analysis of six cases in Shanghai, it aims to identify recurring types of structural gaps, analyze how these

gaps are manifested across different contexts, and provide a mechanism-oriented explanation of participation–design interaction processes.

The main contribution of this study lies in shifting the analytical focus from participation procedures to participation experience, and in developing a process-oriented perspective that explains how institutionalized participation may formally exist while remaining experientially unrecognized. This provides an empirical basis for further research on interaction mechanisms between public participation and spatial design in micro-renewal contexts.

In this study, official participation narratives refer to the institutional representations of public participation produced by governmental agencies, community committees, project organisers, and related professional actors. These narratives are commonly expressed through policy documents, project reports, official WeChat posts, public notices, community records, and publicity materials. They describe how participation was organised, communicated, and documented from an institutional perspective. By contrast, residents' participation perceptions refer to residents' subjective awareness, recollection, interpretation, and evaluation of whether and how they were involved in the renewal process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research on public participation in the micro-renewal of public spaces in old residential communities has examined this issue from multiple perspectives, including institutional design, governance practices, and perceived participation. However, these studies remain largely fragmented and provide limited explanation of how discrepancies emerge between institutional arrangements and residents' lived experiences.

Public Participation: From Institutional Procedures to Participatory Experiences

Public participation has long been regarded as a key mechanism for enhancing governance legitimacy and decision-making quality. Since Arnstein (1969) proposed the “ladder of participation,” subsequent research has expanded to address issues of power distribution, deliberative processes, and collaborative governance (Prilenska & Liias, 2015). At the theoretical level, participation is conceptualized as a process of communication, negotiation, and social learning.

However, in the context of urban renewal in China, public participation is often characterized by consultative and proceduralized practices (Boland & Zhu, 2012; Chen et al., 2021; Lu, 2020). Empirical studies indicate that participation is frequently limited to formal procedures such as questionnaires, public notices, and consultations, with restricted channels for expression and

weak feedback mechanisms. As a result, participation may be institutionally present while remaining experientially unrecognized. Although some studies have begun to consider residents' subjective perceptions and the role of trust (Hamideh, 2020), most research continues to focus on participation forms or levels, rather than explaining how participation is understood and experienced in practice (Boland & Zhu, 2012; Zanudin et al., 2022).

Micro-Renewal as a Governance Context

Micro-renewal refers to a form of urban intervention characterized by small-scale, incremental, and adaptive improvements within existing built-up areas (Wu et al., 2023; Yue et al., 2021). Compared with large-scale redevelopment, it emphasizes community-level governance, resource constraints, and multi-actor collaboration, making participatory processes particularly complex.

Existing studies show that participation outcomes in micro-renewal are shaped not only by institutional design but also by governance conditions, including administrative capacity, organizational resources, and information coordination (Wang et al., 2025; Xue et al., 2021; Yao & Li, 2024; Zanudin et al., 2024). In addition, contextual factors such as demographic composition and neighborhood relations influence residents' willingness to engage and their trust in participatory processes (Zhu, 2023). However, these studies primarily focus on external conditions, with limited attention to the internal processes through which participation is communicated, interpreted, and experienced.

Participation Perceptions, Trust, and Interpretive Processes

Recent research has increasingly emphasized the importance of perceived participation and trust in shaping participatory outcomes. Residents' evaluations of participation are closely associated with whether they perceive their opinions as being heard, understood, and reflected in decision-making processes (Hamideh, 2020; Sun et al., 2022).

At the same time, interpretive differences between professional knowledge and residents' lived experiences often result in mismatches in how participation is understood. In spatial renewal practices, professional design logic may not be effectively translated into forms recognizable to residents, leading to shifts in meaning during the participation process (Carmona, 2019; Chen, 2025; Yang et al., 2025). These studies suggest that participation is not only a procedural arrangement but also a process of meaning construction. However, existing research still fails to explain how such interpretive differences produce systematic discrepancies.

Explanatory Limitations and Research Positioning

Overall, existing research provides valuable insights into public participation in micro-renewal contexts from institutional, governance, and perceptual perspectives. However, most studies adopt single-dimensional approaches and fail to offer integrated explanations of how discrepancies arise between official participation narratives and residents' participation perceptions.

To address this gap, this study adopts a mechanism-oriented perspective and focuses on identifying recurrent structural discrepancies between official participation narratives and residents' participation perceptions. By conceptualizing these discrepancies as structural gaps and analyzing their formation processes, this study develops a process-oriented analytical framework for understanding participation–design interaction in micro-renewal contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research approach to examine structural gaps between official participation narratives and residents' participation perceptions in micro-renewal practices in old residential communities (Stebbins, 2001; Watson, 2014). The analysis is based on a cross-case comparison of six old residential communities in Shanghai, including Hongxu, Shanbei, Xiuyuan, Sanlinyuan, Boyi, and Bosan, integrating institutional materials, site observation, and preliminary interview data to identify recurrent patterns of discrepancy.

Research Design and Case Selection

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select six old residential communities that had undergone public space micro-renewal. The selected cases were chosen to reflect typical micro-renewal practices and to ensure relevance to the research focus on public participation processes. In addition, the cases were selected to capture variation in spatial conditions, participation arrangements, and governance contexts, thereby enabling a more robust cross-case comparison of participation dynamics.

Data Collection

The study draws on three types of data: official participation narrative materials, preliminary interviews, and site observations.

Official materials were collected from publicly available project descriptions, policy documents, and community-level records, including information on participation procedures such as consultations, public displays, and voting arrangements.

Preliminary interviews were conducted with 24 participants across the six selected communities, comprising 18 residents and 6 community committee representatives. In each community, interviews included residents with different ages, lengths of residence, and levels of engagement with the renewed public space, together with one community committee representative who had been directly involved in the planning or implementation of the renewal project. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to capture a range of institutional and resident perspectives on the participation process. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews encouraged participants to reflect on their awareness of the renewal project, recollection of participation opportunities, perceptions of participatory processes, and trust in decision-making actors.

In addition, two rounds of site observation were conducted to document spatial conditions, usage patterns, and visible traces of participation processes. These observations provided contextual support for interpreting interview data and helped triangulate findings across different data sources.

Analytical Approach

The analysis follows an inductive and iterative process aimed at identifying recurrent discrepancies between institutional narratives and residents' lived experiences.

First, participation processes described in official materials were examined for each case and compared with residents' interview accounts to identify observable inconsistencies between institutional descriptions and perceived experiences.

Second, these discrepancies were compared across cases to identify recurring patterns. Rather than applying a predefined coding framework, the analysis focused on pattern recognition and conceptual grouping based on similarities in how discrepancies were manifested.

Third, through iterative comparison and abstraction, these recurring patterns were categorized into three types of structural gaps: information gaps, procedural gaps, and meaning gaps. These categories emerged inductively from empirical materials and were subsequently interpreted with reference to existing literature.

To enhance analytical robustness, findings were cross-checked across data sources (official materials, interviews, and observations) to ensure consistency in the identification of recurring patterns.

This analytical process is consistent with exploratory qualitative research, where the aim is to identify structurally recurrent patterns rather than to test causal relationships.

To enhance the transparency of the analytical process, representative empirical evidence from interview materials was selected to illustrate how each

structural gap was identified. Interview accounts were examined alongside official participation narratives and field observations through iterative cross-case comparison. Recurrent patterns identified across the six cases were subsequently synthesised into three structural gap categories: information gap, procedural gap, and meaning gap. Representative empirical evidence for each structural gap is presented in the Results section (Table 1).

Limitations

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the number of interviews is limited and systematic sampling was not employed, which restricts generalizability. The findings should therefore be understood as indicative of recurrent patterns rather than statistically representative conclusions. Residents' accounts may also be influenced by recall bias and contextual factors. Future research may build on these findings through more systematic data collection and in-depth qualitative analysis.

RESULTS

This study identifies three recurrent types of structural gaps between official participation narratives and residents' participation perceptions across six cases: information gaps, procedural gaps, and meaning gaps. These gaps are consistently observed across different communities, indicating that they are structurally recurrent rather than case-specific phenomena.

Information Gap

Information gaps refer to inconsistencies between officially disseminated participation information and residents' awareness. Across cases such as Xiuyuan and Sanlinyuan, although participation information was formally communicated through channels such as WeChat groups, public notices, and voting arrangements, residents' awareness remained uneven. Some residents recalled no participation-related information, while others reported partial or unclear knowledge. This suggests that the presence of information dissemination mechanisms does not guarantee effective recognition or accessibility of participation-related information. The findings indicate that information transmission alone is insufficient without ensuring that information is accessible, understandable, and meaningfully received by residents.

For example, one resident in Xiuyuan stated, "I only knew that the space had been renovated; I did not know there had been any consultation before that." Another resident in Sanlinyuan similarly noted, "Maybe some people were informed, but I personally did not receive any clear notice." These accounts indicate that information channels existed, but participation-related information was not equally received or recognised by all residents.

Procedural Gap

Procedural gaps are observed where participatory procedures exist institutionally but fail to generate perceptible participation experiences. In cases such as Sanlinyuan and Hongxu, formal procedures including voting and consultation were documented, yet many residents did not recall participating or did not associate these procedures with decision-making processes. These findings indicate that institutionalized procedures may exist formally without being experienced as meaningful participation by residents. This reflects a disconnection between procedural completion and experiential engagement in participation processes.

A resident in Hongxu recalled that “there were notices and discussions, but I was not clear about how the final plan was decided.” In Sanlinyuan, another resident stated, “I heard there was voting, but I did not take part, and I do not know what influence it had.” These comments suggest that formal procedures may be documented institutionally while remaining weakly perceived by residents.

Meaning Gap

Meaning gaps arise from divergent understandings of what constitutes participation. While official narratives define participation in terms of procedural completion, residents tend to evaluate participation based on whether their opinions were acknowledged and responded to. In several cases, residents expressed satisfaction with renewal outcomes but still stated that they “did not participate,” indicating a disconnect between procedural participation and perceived participation. This suggests that participation effectiveness is closely linked to processes of interpretation, recognition, and response, rather than procedural fulfillment alone.

Some residents evaluated participation not by whether formal consultation had taken place, but by whether their concerns were taken seriously. One resident commented, “The renovation is good, but participation should mean that our opinions are actually listened to.” Another stated, “If the problem we mentioned was not responded to, I would not really call it participation.” Such responses show that residents tend to associate participation with recognition, responsiveness, and visible influence.

As summarized in Table 1, three recurrent structural gap types and their underlying mechanisms were identified across the six cases. Figure 1 synthesizes these findings into an integrated conceptual framework illustrating the relationships among official participation narratives, structural gaps, and residents' participation perceptions. To further illustrate how these structural gaps were manifested across individual cases, Table 2 summarizes the dominant

structural gaps identified in each community, while recognizing that multiple gap types may coexist.

Table 1: Structural Gaps and Underlying Mechanisms in Participation between Official Narratives and Residents' Perceptions

Structural Gap Type	Official Participation Narrative Focus	Residents' Participation Perceptions	Representative Resident Statements	Underlying Mechanism
Information Gap	Participation information is disseminated through formal channels such as public notices, meetings, and online platforms	Limited awareness or recall of participation opportunities	"Did not know there was participation"; "Only heard about the outcomes"; uneven awareness among residents	Information is formally provided but fails to be effectively received, understood, or recognized by residents
Procedural Gap	Participation procedures are formally established and completed at the institutional level, with corresponding documentation	Participation is not experienced as a real or perceptible process	"There was voting, but I didn't take part"; "I don't know how decisions were made"	Institutional procedures exist but lack perceptibility and experiential engagement
Meaning Gap	Participation is defined as the completion of procedures	Participation is understood as being listened to and responded to	"I didn't really participate"; "My opinions were not considered," even when procedures existed	Failure to translate procedural participation into meaningful and recognized experiences

Source: Author's analysis based on site observations, unstructured interviews, and official participation narrative materials.

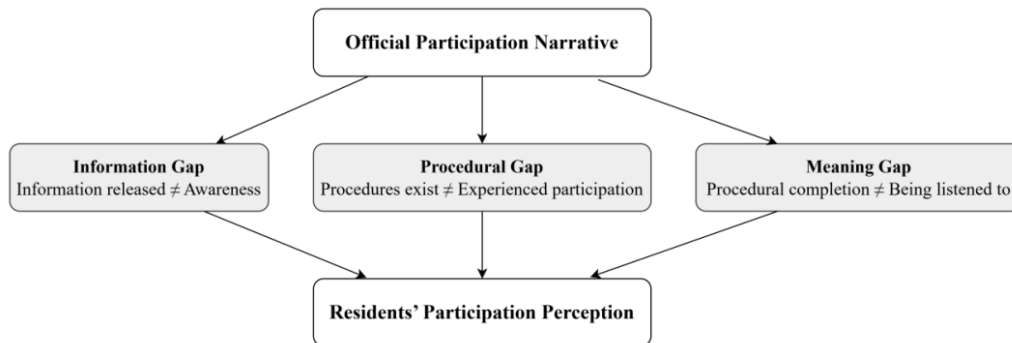


Figure 1: Structural Gaps between Official Participation Narratives and Residents' Participation Perceptions

Source: Author's analysis based on site observations, unstructured interviews, and official participation narrative materials.

Table 2: Cross-Case Comparison of Structural Gaps

Case	Official Participation Narrative	Residents' Participation Perceptions	Dominant Structural Gap
Hongxu	Consultations, public communication, community-based coordination	Some residents recognised participation, while others mainly remembered the completed space	Procedural and meaning gap
Shanbei	Community consultation and public activities	Residents generally recognised improvement but had uneven awareness of decision-making	Information and procedural gap
Xiuyuan	WeChat groups, public notices, offline consultation	Some residents recalled consultation, while others stated they were not informed	Information gap
Sanlinyuan	Voting, questionnaires, community planner involvement	Formal procedures were present, but some residents did not clearly recall participation	Procedural gap
Boyi	Resident and children's representative involvement	Some residents perceived the project as mainly government-led	Meaning gap
Bosan	Representative consultation and community-school cooperation	Residents had limited awareness of the participation process	Information and procedural gap

Source: Author's analysis based on site observations, unstructured interviews, and official participation narrative materials.

DISCUSSION

This study provides a mechanism-oriented explanation of the divergence between institutionalized participation and residents' lived experiences in micro-renewal contexts, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of participation–design interaction. By framing these discrepancies as structurally recurrent gaps, the study also offers a conceptual lens for understanding participation processes beyond case-specific variations.

First, the findings challenge the assumption that the existence of participatory procedures necessarily indicates effective participation. While previous studies often evaluate participation based on procedural arrangements or participation levels (Boland & Zhu, 2012), the results show that participation effectiveness depends on whether these procedures are perceptible and meaningful to residents. This extends existing research by demonstrating that participation must be understood not only as an institutional arrangement but also as an experiential process. It further suggests that participation outcomes are shaped by how institutional arrangements are translated into lived experiences rather than by their formal presence alone.

Second, the identification of information gaps highlights the limitations of communication mechanisms in participatory processes. Existing studies emphasize the importance of communication in collaborative governance (Innes & Booher, 2018), yet often assume that the provision of information is sufficient. The findings of this study suggest that communication effectiveness depends on whether information is accessible, interpretable, and recognized by residents. This refines existing perspectives by emphasizing the experiential dimension of communication. It also indicates that participation communication should be understood not merely as information provision, but as a process of recognition and cognitive accessibility.

Third, the procedural gap reveals limitations in institutional implementation. While collaborative governance frameworks highlight the role of institutional platforms and participatory procedures, the findings indicate that such arrangements may remain invisible or insignificant to residents if they are not effectively experienced. This supports and extends critiques of procedural participation by demonstrating how proceduralization can lead to the formal existence but practical absence of participation. This indicates that institutional design alone is insufficient without ensuring that participatory processes are experientially visible and socially recognizable.

Fourth, the meaning gap contributes to discussions on responsive design and participatory planning by highlighting the importance of interpretive processes. Previous studies have focused on functional responses to users' needs (Carmona, 2019; Yang et al., 2025), whereas the findings suggest that participation also involves processes of meaning construction and recognition.

Participation becomes meaningful only when residents perceive that their voices are acknowledged and translated into outcomes. This highlights the importance of interpretive alignment between institutional intentions and residents' experiential expectations.

Taken together, the three types of structural gaps—information, procedural, and meaning—represent interconnected dimensions of participation processes, corresponding to communication, institutional implementation, and interpretation. Together, these dimensions form a coherent analytical framework that links these processes as interrelated mechanisms shaping participation outcomes. This integrated perspective advances existing research by connecting previously fragmented discussions into a unified explanatory structure.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that improving participation mechanisms requires not only the establishment of procedures but also attention to participation visibility, interpretability, and responsiveness. Enhancing communication effectiveness, strengthening feedback mechanisms, and improving the translation of professional knowledge into accessible forms are essential for reducing structural gaps. In addition, building trust through continuous interaction and transparent decision-making processes is critical for aligning institutional narratives with residents' lived experiences (Hamideh, 2020). These insights highlight the need for a shift from procedure-oriented governance toward process-oriented and experience-sensitive participation practices.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the structural gaps between official participation narratives and residents' participation perceptions in the micro-renewal of public spaces in old residential communities through an exploratory cross-case analysis. The findings identify three recurrent types of structural gaps—information gaps, procedural gaps, and meaning gaps—that are consistently observed across different cases.

The results demonstrate that public participation should not be understood solely as the implementation of formal procedures, but as a process shaped by the interaction of information dissemination, institutional visibility, interpretive communication, and trust relationships. In particular, the study shows that even when participatory arrangements are institutionally established, they may fail to be recognized or experienced as meaningful participation by residents in the absence of effective communication, perceptible processes, and responsive interpretation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to public participation research by conceptualizing the discrepancies between institutionalized participation and lived experiences as structurally recurrent

gaps, and by providing a process-oriented framework for understanding participation–design interaction in micro-renewal contexts. This shifts the analytical focus from procedural arrangements to experiential processes, thereby extending existing discussions on the procedure–experience gap.

From a practical and policy perspective, the findings highlight the need to move beyond procedural compliance toward enhancing the visibility, accessibility, and interpretability of participation processes. Improving communication strategies, strengthening feedback mechanisms, and enhancing the translation of professional knowledge into forms that are understandable and meaningful to residents are essential for reducing structural gaps. In addition, fostering trust through continuous engagement and transparent decision-making is critical for aligning institutional narratives with residents’ lived experiences.

This study is exploratory in nature and is based on a limited number of preliminary interviews and case observations, which constrains the generalizability of the findings. Future research may build on this study by employing more systematic qualitative methods, expanding the number of cases, and examining the formation mechanisms and contextual conditions of structural gaps across different urban settings.

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