

# From Racks to Riches: Qingdao's Decade Long Liyuan Revitalization Project Unlocks Shared Community Memories

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**Abstract.** The Liyuan Revitalization Project in Qingdao, China, represents a decade-long effort to restore and modernize the city's historic Liyuan architectural complexes. These structures, originally built during the German colonial era, combine Chinese and Western architectural styles. The project, led by engineers and architects, aimed to preserve the cultural heritage while improving living conditions. Major challenges included the lack of modern amenities such as plumbing and electricity, and the difficulty of balancing historical preservation with urban renewal. Following the restoration, the Liyuan buildings now serve as a vibrant community hub, featuring small businesses and tourist attractions. This project reflects a broader effort in China to protect architectural heritage while fostering economic and cultural growth in urban areas.

**Keywords:** Liyuan, Urban revitalization, Shared memory.

## 1. Introduction

Liyuan is a special form of architecture and community in Qingdao. Invented by German during its colonization of Qingdao from 1897 to 1914, Liyuan not only carries the memories of local residents, but is also a valuable historical and cultural heritage of Qingdao. This article will discuss the history and changes of Liyuan since the 20th century through interviews with local residents, especially the impact of the Qingdao government's project to transform and revitalize it in the 21st century.

QINGDAO- "Qingdao's old urban area is already than I am," said Zhang, a middle aged looking, chubby man with a head of long, wild curls and a Bandholz beard down to his chest. He moved his toes in the white flip flops and lit his third cigarette as he spoke.

"You know, I used to attend the Qingdao No.7 Middle school at Huangdao road, near here, and that was already more than twenty years ago," he said. "And I would walk past the Liyuans afterschool before they were renovated into this look." He inhaled deeply, adding "I never expected to see them the way they are after the Shangjieli Project."

## 2. From Renew to Revitalization

Xuliang Song, Shangjieli Project's engineering and architecting head, walked me through the past years of Liyuans' revitalization.



**Figure 1.** Logo of the Shangjieli Project. Photo Credit: JC

When asked about regional coverage of the project, Song explained that during Germany's colonization era from 1897 to 1914, the German administration decided to start the city grid planning construction. They demolished the Dabaodao village into the Dabao "China City". Nowadays, the locals named the Dabaodao area as the "old urban area", which is the target area of his project.



**Figure 2.** The German administration city plan map in 1900 for the Dabaodao Area. Photo Credit: JC

Song further explained that since China's liberation in 1949, Liyuans have remained to be used as dormitories and housings. These historical buildings were swept into the corner of attention until the revitalization project's launch in 2018. After six years, the Liyuan architectural complex was rebirthed into Qingdao's name card.

As Song recalled, "The living conditions of the hundred-year-old architects were totally unsuitable for any modern living."



**Figure 3.** A small sector of the Liyuan building complex. Photo Credit: Xuliang Song

Song emphasized that Liyuan was in fact, as an “Eurasian” invention by the German. Liyuan is constructed for two functions, Li and Yuan.

Li, meaning “inside” stands for the inside warehouses connected to shops along the streetside, featured from the Western architects.

While Yuan standing for “courtyard”, emphasizes the function of shared court space, featured from Chinese architects. Two characters put together as “Liyuan” demonstrates another meaning of an “inner bonded community”.

Liyuans are parallel to the street organization with internally enclosed courtyard spaces, built symmetrically, a traditional Chinese layout feature from the Siheyuan. Liyuans were built as 2 to 3 stories, a feature from German architecture. The courtyard is closed to outside with only one or few access points, designed for good security and tight neighborhood interaction.

For Song, all of these features became tricky problems when transporting large numbers of materials or when needed to use large-scaled machines.

Before revitalization, most Liyuans were not equipped with independent washrooms. Public toilets were shared by 20 to 40 households.

No internal water pipes were laid due to their distant construction dates. Residents had to bathe and access drinking water in the public courtyard with one or two public hoses.



**Figure 4.** April 2017, taken at Jiningzhi Road No.4 Liyuan, a residence is filling water at the public hose. Photo Credit: Xuliang Song

Electricity was also inaccessible for most households. For many residents they had to endure seasons living in walls, crowded dim rooms without air conditioning.

Starting during the pandemic in 2019, after one year's negotiation, the old residence households were transferred from Liyuan to their new constructed housings. All the transferring and housing fees are covered by the government as an exchange to buy the Liyuan from the residence.

In 2017, the CPC Central Committee General Office released the *Suggestions on Implementing the Project of Inheriting and Developing Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture*. For the Qingdao government, the old urban district was the perfect carrier of historical heritage preservation and trendy tourist attraction sites.

As the very first engineers that surveyed the initial Liyuans' situation, Song and his team proposed to "evacuate, demolish and renovate." Three words took five years for Song and his team to bring them to life.



**Figure 5.** May 2015, taken at Huangdao Road No.17 before renovation. Photo Credit: Xuliang Song

Transferring Liyuan's original residence started in 2019, clearing out the Liyuans. Then, Song and his team continued to investigate the extent of building damage and condition floor by floor, room by room.

After investigation, they write construction proposals to the Revitalization Project Committee and the Cultural Relics Bureau, viewed by architecture experts. The Committee would send feedback and specific advice on what to renew and what to preserve.

"The construction progress is usually quick," Song said. "At most one to one and a half years for a big Liyuan, from general renovations to the soft furnishings." He paused and added "The hardest part is revising numerous proposals for one building after receiving feedback from the expert team. Sometimes it takes two years to land a proposal."

"There is a hundred pages long renovation handbook," Song said. "Inside it has three hundred terms regulating what you can change and what you cannot change. It's rigorous work."

In general terms, they are told to preserve the architect in its most original form, with a principle "recovery over rebuilding."

He pointed to revitalized Liyuan's windows saying, "These wooden doors, frames, windows and staircase were all custom-made based on their original looks." Once these items are demolished, the new interchangeable parts must be made as replicas.

For what comes after the long phase of building revitalization, Song answered "After 2025 is the ending phase of reforming buildings, the commercial activities and shop operations would become the focus." Song explains "These commercial operations in and out of the buildings would serve to work on a decade's scale. In our expectation, they'll continue to operate even after my retirement."

Song said at the end “It is indeed a large-scale, long-term project, covering more than 300 Liyuans and thousands of square meters, but I am always glad to contribute as a part of this new cultural heritage.”

### 3. The Days in Liyuans

Next to a Liyuan still under construction, the Sanjiangli Liyuan, one of the first batch of revitalized Liyuans, has already become one of the most popular tourist sites ever since its 2021 opening.

Located in the Dabaodao area, it is a relatively small sized Liyuan with a distinctive narrow street. Along the street are various small shops, ranging from instant interactive picture taking to tea shops.



**Figure 5.** The narrowed street of Sanjiangli Liyuan. Photo Credit: Dazhong Dianping

Zhang is a shop owner of the Chill Art Shop, a small variety store in Sanjiangli Liyuan.

As one local resident of the old urban area in Qingdao, Zhang has lived by the side of the Liyuan communities for more than thirty years. The old urban area has become a piggy bank of all his most important memories. It is where he went to school, got to know friends and met his wife.



**Figure 6.** The Chill Art Shop’s facade with Zhang’s self-designed figure. Photo Credit: Lao Zhang

Zhang never planned to become a revitalized shop’s owner. In 2020, on a small trip down to the Sanjiangli Liyuan, seeing his friend’s shop, he walked past this small store’s facade.

“It was just lovely and far-off from the tourists,” Zhang said with excitement. After that he conceived the idea of opening a small multi-functional store in Sanjiangli.

Zhang's previous occupation was a tattoo artist. “We’re the first group of people in Qingdao to grapple with tattoo art,” Zhang said, “All my old friends in Qingdao worked with me and we operated the biggest and the first tattoo shop in Qingdao back in the early 2000s.”

“My previous career was in the tattoo business, but it was more like managing a utopian space for outsiders like us, punk-heads, alternate artists, offbeats from the public,” Zhang said with a smile. “I cherish the mental bonds.”

“I opened up this store simply because I wanted to bridge the artworks of my friends with the public and be a non-mainstream gallery to present the works of artists.”



**Figure 7.** Zhang's cartoon figure and his shop's logo. Photo Credit: Lao Zhang

Zhang's tattoo business career took a downturn with rapid industry changes. Things hit bottom during the COVID-19 pandemic leaving him with no income. "We had to move to places charging lower rent," he said.

Not long after coincidentally seeing the vacant stores in Sanjiangli, Zhang found himself already submitting a sign up to the property management office of Sanjiangli, applying to join as a shop owner. His shop started a soft opening during the 2021 Lunar New Year. Since 2021, it is almost his third year running Chill Art Shop.

"How this place became a hit was outside my expectations, honestly, I'm not really happy with it. I only wanted to operate somewhere aloof from the start, but now this place has become one of the 'must visits' in Qingdao."

In Liyuan's high seasons, from June to October, Zhang's shop's monthly day to day account can reach 80,000 RMB. "The main income was from tourists, Qingdao is a tourist city, and it's overly crowded."

Today, around 150 restaurants, shops and small stores are operating around the 200 revitalized Liyuans. Hundreds of shop owners, engineers and citizens are reliving their lives around this thriving new community.

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