



# Private mansions brought back to life

Former homes of the city's rich and famous are renovated and protected, **Fu Chao** reports.

**A** history of more than 2,500 years has left Suzhou with a lot of heritage, both tangible and intangible. During past millennia, a number of affluent businessmen and political and cultural celebrities settled down and built private mansions in the bustling and beautiful city.

As one of several cities in Jiangsu province renowned for their traditional culture and scenic beauty, Suzhou has 138 protected cultural relics and 248 cultural relics pending approval as official protection sites.

Classical-style buildings typical of ancient southern China have made the city a unique and valuable cultural capital.

In recent years, residents living in these old buildings have moved to new urban areas in the city. Migrant workers and lower-income families moved in and unauthorized construction and safety issues became a concern.

To protect the ancient buildings and improve Suzhou's image, the city government started a large protection and renovation project in 2011.

The Suzhou Culture and Tourism Development Group, the main project partner, took up 52 building protection and renovation cases and came up with a bold and innovative approach to protect relics and also boost the city's development.

Wang Jinxing, chairman of the group, said the city has rich cultural and historical resources that need to be integrated with the city's tourism industry for better protection and development. He noted that the tourism industry needs more professionals for such integration.

He said the group has set its eyes firmly on cultural tourism, with unique experiences through which people can learn from and interact with local cultural and historical legacies.

According to the group, the objective of the protection and renovation project is to present the traditional culture and lifestyle of Suzhou, as well as to make the city an example

**52**  
cases

of ancient building protection and renovation carried out by the Suzhou Culture and Tourism Development Group

of how an old community can maintain its original charm while modernizing.

## Keeping the old alive

Before carrying out the renovation, the group asked the Tourism Development Research Center at Soochow University to research and compile proposals for the project. The group also recruited experts in old building renovation as consultants.

It also started to seek investments prior to the renovations and paid attention to commercial concerns during the project.

According to the group, it is not only the buildings that need to be renewed but the project is more about the culture and history of the buildings that need to be kept alive.

To better preserve and present specific pieces of history, the group also renovated the areas surrounding the buildings.

Tourism resources in the areas will be integrated to highlight the culture of each locale and the group plans to aid cooperation between scenic spots, hotels and transport businesses.

Suzhou traditional cultural items, including Suzhou embroidery and the local Kunqu Opera, are some of the city's selling points used in tourism promotions.

The group encourages scenic spots and hotels to work with individual artists and institutions for folk arts to help bring such arts to market.

The group plans to further improve public facilities for tourists, including sightseeing boats and buses.

## Successful cases

The Ding and Pan residences have garnered the most



**Blossom Hill Suzhou**, a hotel in the Pan residency, stands out as a combination of classical garden architecture, culture and modern beauty.

public attention among the group's finished and current renovation projects.

Ding Chunzhi, a businessman in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), established the Ding building.

The building's surrounding area changed significantly so the group relocated it to a new area. To maintain the building's original look as much as possible, the group moved almost all the structural components to the new location.

The Ding building is now home to an art center created by Chinese artist Wang Xiaohui, who now lives in Germany. The center is open to tourists for free.

The Blossom Hill Suzhou, a hotel in the Pan residency, stands out as a combination of classical garden architecture

, culture and modern beauty.

The original owner of the building, Pan Zuyin, was an important official during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). He had a sharp eye for art and was an amateur collector. The building had an elegant beauty in very subtle details, which can still be seen today.

The 3,150-square-meter hotel makes full use of each part of the classic building. It offers eight suites with authentic Suzhou-style furniture.

The garden surrounding the building, which is still intact after so many years, is a pleasant outdoor space for relaxing. Wandering around the private garden, people often have the illusion of being in one of the famed Suzhou Gardens.



**The Panmen scenic area**, one of the key projects operated by the Suzhou Culture and Tourism Development Group, is the largest cultural tour site in the city. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



**The Suzhou Zhuangyuan Museum** showcases the brilliant culture of *zhuangyuan*, scholars who achieved the highest scores in the imperial examinations.

## Suzhou's must-see sites

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Suzhou's ancient city moat, the Panmen Scenic Area and unique classical garden-style hotels are must-see sites for visitors to the city.

The moat stretches more than 15.5 kilometers around the ancient city, which was also known as Gusu centuries ago. One of the first things tourists often do in Suzhou is take a boat ride on the moat to enjoy the city's classical and modern beauty.

The Suzhou Culture and Tourism Development Group is the only State-owned company that operates waterway tours. The company has eight sightseeing boats, which have had famous visiting political figures aboard during their visits.

After disembarking from the boats, people can wander around the Panmen Scenic Area. The area is home to Suzhou's three best-known landmarks, Ruiguang Pagoda, Wumen Ancient Bridge and Land and Water Gate.

In 2014, China's Grand Canal, the longest artificial waterway in the world, was included on the World Heritage Sites list. The Suzhou part of the canal covers a range of cultural heritage sites including the Panmen Scenic Area.

With abundant cultural and

natural resources, the scenic area is not only a tourist spot, but also an ideal venue for festivals and events.

The Blossom Hill Suzhou, a hotel inside an ancient building, is part of the Culture and Tourism Development Group's endeavor to renovate the plethora of old buildings in the city.

The hotel opened in November 2013 and offers high-quality service and the experience of living in ancient Suzhou.

The city wall museum, also one of the group-operated projects, showcases stories of the city wall during its 2,500-year history.

Suzhou also has a museum dedicated to *zhuangyuan* — scholars who achieved the



**The Suzhou Culture and Tourism Development Group** operates waterway tours with eight boats.

best scores in the highest level of Chinese imperial examinations during ancient times. The city was renowned for its top scholars.

The museum is housed

in an old garden renovated by the group and showcases relics related to the imperial examinations. It opened in November 2014 and is free of charge to visit.



**The ancient city wall** features a water gate that links the Grand Canal with the inner-city waterways.