
Urban Micro-renewal - An Exploration of the Spatial Activation of Public Art in Traditional Courtyards

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Abstract: In the process of urban development, the background of the times is different, the needs of citizens are also changing, therefore, the concept of urban planning is constantly updated and improved. In order to make the traditional urban infrastructure and cultural content meet the needs of new citizens, urban renewal is imperative. Urban Renewal is not only embodied in the systematic project, but also in the micro-environment transformation. Micro-renewal is a convenient and concrete way to express the quality improvement of public space. Taking Beijing as an example, with the development of the city, the facilities and functions of the courtyard dwellings, which occupy the mainstream of the traditional architecture in the city, can no longer meet the needs of modern residents of the courtyard dwellings, through infrastructure upgrading and public art intervention to achieve the activation of the old space. This paper makes an in-depth study of the practical case of Nestle CAFÉ in Beijing, combs the relationship between public art and traditional courtyard dwellings from the perspective of art installation, and explores the possibility of public art becoming a medium of dialogue with traditional courtyard dwellings, and the function of the urban Micro-renewal which is carried to activate the old space. This paper demonstrates that public art is an effective mode of urban Micro-renewal.

Keywords: Urban Micro Renewal, Public Art, Courtyard Dwellings, Art Installation

1. Introduction

In the process of urban development, the background of the times is different, the needs of citizens are also changing, therefore, the concept of urban planning is constantly updated and improved. In order to make the traditional urban infrastructure and cultural content meet the needs of new citizens, urban renewal is imperative. Micro-environmental renovation is a part of the urban renewal system project, because the area involved is small, the number of people is small and the property rights attributes are simple, it is easy to be the starting point of urban renewal, and the urban micro-environment is often the focus of the most urgent need for citizens to upgrade on a daily basis. Although there is a huge demand for renovation and upgrading, the independence of courtyards allows them to be broken down into individual units, starting with each specific micro-environment and gradually completing the macro system project of urban regeneration.

The intervention of public art in micro-environmental

transformation is one of the elements of urban Micro-renewal, an enhancement of environmental quality over and above the upgrading of infrastructure into the context of the contemporary urban environment. The Nestle Sense CAFÉ project in Beijing is a typical example of Micro-renewal, through which the original traditional courtyard space is upgraded into a thematic space with a romantic twist, and similar renovations become a unit to activate the old community.

The intervention of public art in the renovation and Micro-renewal of traditional courtyards provides a way to reshape the quality of the space, enabling the daily lives of residents to be closely integrated into the modern process of the city.

2. Courtyard Dwellings

2.1. The Architectural Form of the Courtyard Dwellings

Beijing Courtyard dwellings has a very long history, it

arose during the Shang Dynasty and appeared on a large scale in Beijing as a major residential building during the Yuan Dynasty, “Beijing Courtyard dwellings has better residential characteristics than any other living space, it is a courtyard space surrounded by houses with a central courtyard, spacious and private, the central courtyard promotes communication between people, plays a resting, ornamental function, and is rich in intimacy. Ornamental function, rich in affinity, and the most high-end residence with Chinese characteristics”. [1] The architectural pattern of the courtyard has a strict hierarchical division, and the layout focuses on traditional concepts such as feng shui culture and yin and yang gossip, influenced by Beijing folk culture, with typical Chinese architectural features.

2.2. Status of the Courtyard Dwellings

Although the renovation of the traditional courtyard dwellings has been underway since the early 80s, the average population density in the traditional courtyard dwellings is still much higher than the average population density in Beijing, and the per capita living space in the courtyards is less than square 10 metres per person, which is far below the standard per capita living space in Beijing. People live in old neighbourhoods with poor living conditions, a serious lack of amenities and a mixed population of migrants, and the living environment for normal residents is becoming worse and worse.

The change in the traditional way of life is accompanied by a change in people's demand for building functions, the early bird walking and theatre watching in the hutong has long been unsuitable for modern young people, the fast-paced lifestyle, the importance of private space and other such modern rhythms of life is the current and future development trend of residential buildings; the serious lack of building functions in the traditional courtyard dwellings, not only in terms of building functions can not meet the modern people's requirements for the serious lack of functionality of traditional courtyard buildings not only fails to meet modern requirements for independent partitioning of living rooms, living rooms, dining rooms, kitchens and bathrooms, but also restricts people's functional transformation of the buildings at a later stage due to the constraints of traditional building forms.

“On the basis of fully protecting the historical and cultural atmosphere and upgrading the architectural features, we should pay attention to strengthening the renovation and implementation of the infrastructure, enhancing the use functions of the buildings, and effectively improving the quality of life of the residents in the neighborhood.” [2] The emergence of modern buildings with complete facilities has led to a rethinking of the residential function of the traditional courtyard dwellings, and the construction of its functionality and infrastructure is the focus of the renovation of courtyard dwellings. The courtyard dwellings are rich in functional forms, and under the wrapping of the traditional courtyard building, various kinds of activity spaces appear inside, not only in the function of living, but

also in the artistic transformation of the traditional building into a very modern installation, through which the boundaries between indoor and outdoor space are blurred, and this design approach mostly follows the principle of openness, in This interventional design approach links the indoor and outdoor spaces together to form an open public space, and under the influence of the art installations, the lives of the residents of the courtyard are activated, and the spatial form of the traditional courtyard collides with the modern public space, giving the once traditional living space a new function and a greater potential for development. The traditional living space is given a new function and has a greater potential for development.

3. Urban Micro-renewal and Public Art Interventions

3.1. Urban Micro-renewal

3.1.1. The Concept of Urban Micro-renewal

Urban Micro-renewal is an extension of the theory of “organic renewal”, when the country's economic situation and social conditions change, urban renewal began to focus on the residents as the main community renewal, and then the formation of local Micro-renewal of the community micro-activity space, Wu Liangyong in the transformation of Ju'er Hutong proposed that “should be a reasonable adjustment or small changes to the local environment of the community, so that the space is more perfect, the place is more livable, so as to achieve the organic renewal of the community as a whole”. [3] The term Micro-renewal evolved from this. Urban Micro-renewal breaks away from the large-scale urban construction of the past, examining the problems brought about by urban renewal from a micro perspective, targeting small-scale spaces and user groups that are easier to organise and implement for Micro-renewal transformation, with the goal of realising people's more refined living needs, triggering the spontaneous optimisation and renewal of urban spaces on a larger scale, thus achieving the goal of improving The aim is to improve the overall quality of space and stimulate the vitality of the site. Micro-renewal is a method of urban regeneration that is more often used in traditional houses with history and culture. A large number of experts have explored the mechanism of community regeneration, trying to stimulate the vitality of the site through the renewal of small spaces in the community, awakening the public's curiosity about the site space, so as to realise the independent regeneration of the residents' community as a whole. As Micro-renewal is gradually accepted by the public, it has begun to expand to public spaces in older areas.

3.1.2. The Urban Micro-renewal Approach

From the perspective of “Micro-renewal”, it refers to the renewal of small-scale and small-scale areas. Unlike the traditional carpet-type urban renewal, Micro-renewal is a small-scale restoration and renewal that addresses the

problems arising from the urban renewal process. The scope of Micro-renewal can be a small-scale public space or community space, or a specific area divided to meet the public demand for regional regeneration, such as historical and cultural districts, characteristic residential houses, etc. (Figure 1). Urban Micro-renewal emphasises the optimisation and improvement of the spatial environment of a site on the basis of respect for urban culture, enhancing the quality of urban space and improving the living environment of residents through Micro-renewal, which in turn promotes the development of communities to enhance the quality of the surrounding ecological environment, catalyzing the overall, long-term optimisation and renewal of the city with progressive local improvements, people-oriented and refined design and extensive public participation, effectively and efficiently safeguarding the rights and interests of the public.



Figure 1. Part of Gulou West Street after block renewal.

3.1.3. Characteristics of Urban Micro-renewal

Compared with the traditional regeneration model, urban Micro-renewal views the city from master planning to local construction as an organic association, and carries out planned transformation of places within the city that do not meet people's material living needs and spiritual and cultural needs according to the inner development law of the city, with characteristics such as permanence and gradualness. On the one hand, urban Micro-renewal encompasses the spatial dimensions of morphological space, social space and environmental space within the city, and on the other hand, it pays more attention to the comprehensive benefits of social, economic, environmental and ecological aspects in order to meet the requirements of more levels. While traditional regeneration models focus on a single transformation of the physical space environment, urban Micro-renewal is based on a small-scale, small-area remediation and gradual transformation approach, with the transformation of small areas gradually catalysing the transformation of a larger urban area. The urban Micro-renewal model has evolved from the traditional demolition of new buildings to a sustainable regeneration model that is people-centred, takes into account the overall development of the city through scientific and rational planning, and tries to meet the multi-level needs of urban residents.

3.2. Public Art

3.2.1. The Concept of Public Art

“Public art is a form of art that emerges from traditional art forms, art that changes over time, is absorbable, variable

and does not point exclusively to a single art form”. [4] In fact, when the concept of art came into being, public art was created at the same time, which clearly reflects the original public character of art itself, extending to a comprehensive cultural concept and a special expression of the artistic spirit, representing the intrinsic connection between art and people, art and urban public space, as well as art and regional culture, art and public landscape, heading towards the original openness, pluralism and integration. The artwork is an expression of the original openness, pluralism and integration that resonates with the culture of modern society.

Rather than being a new art form, public art represents a democratic spirit that has changed with contemporary culture and art, taking root in traditional art forms as a contemporary cultural consciousness, growing in the soil of the contemporary public cultural environment and constantly revealing the public art face of the times, based on its macro-function, publicness, openness and democratic extension. It is a form of art that is constantly fulfilling its unique function, directly and succinctly in relation to the experience of living and living in the city. In a narrow sense, public art is understood to mean artworks placed in public open spaces or artistic acts with public impact. In a broader sense, public art includes not only artworks placed in large public spaces, but also public art activities carried out by social organisations, such as art exhibitions, art performances, art fairs and other group public art activities.

It is undeniable that most public art is misguided in its restriction of public space as well as its decorative nature. Public art is mistaken as an artistic means of decorating the landscape environment as the atmosphere of the commercial environment is enhanced; true public art should be defined in terms of the communicative interplay between publicness and citizenship, focusing on the core cultural cohesion, constantly stimulating the potential people's enthusiasm for life, the tracing of traditional quality history and the sense of happiness in the common destiny of mankind. It should focus on the core of cultural cohesion, constantly stimulating the potential of people's enthusiasm for life, their appreciation of traditional and quality history, and their sense of the quality of happiness in the common destiny of mankind, thus enhancing the vitality and dynamism of the entire cultural synthesis of society.

3.2.2. The Need for Public Art to Intervene in Urban Micro-regeneration

Public art is an objectified cultural capital when it is used as an intangible cultural ideology. “For Urban Culture, public art can highlight the city's taste, shape the city's image, accumulate the city's culture, condense the city's spirit, and enhance the People's cultural identity, public Art can form visual beauty, beautify the environment and benefit people's life with the help of external forms such as shape, color, material and space.” [5] Public art is part of the city's cultural resources and an element that promotes economic development, pulling people towards the demand for cultural

products. Cities undertake related cultural construction through Micro-renewals to grow the cultural needs of residents and use public art to boost employment and cultural development. Although public art is usually used for social and cultural purposes and is not aimed at economic profitability, it can, in certain circumstances, bring economic benefits to regional development. The most direct expression of public art's contribution to economic development is the promotion of regional commerce. While tourism activities are inevitably accompanied by food, drink and leisure spending, large scale public art events can also promote the consumption of related cultural and creative products, driving economic development.

Under the macroscopic conditions of urban development, there is a high degree of interest in Micro-renewal in order to meet the broad needs of the civil society. Compared to urban regeneration, urban Micro-renewal is a small-scale, incremental model that combines bottom-up and top-down approaches. It focuses more on the inheritance of the city's history and culture and the continuation of the city's cultural heritage, in order to meet the needs of the new urban regeneration situation, and promotes public participation through the involvement of diverse subjects. For public art, which was attached to buildings in the early days of urban construction, public art has been given a new connotation as urban regeneration construction continues to develop. Public art is not only culturally significant, but also sociologically and ecologically significant. The public nature of public art allows it to intervene in urban Micro-renewal, promoting the reshaping of regional culture, enhancing public participation, controlling the quality of Micro-renewal transformation and promoting the economic development of Micro-renewal areas.

3.2.3. The Relevance of Public Art to Urban Micro-renewal

Urban Micro-renewal is an important part of urban construction, and public art is a reflection on the survival and needs of urban social subjects. It is also a reflection of the city's spiritual culture and an expression of people's true needs. Public art connects the public with public space, promotes the regeneration of urban space, stimulates spatial vitality, promotes the spirit of the city and humanity, and promotes the positive development of urban Micro-renewal.

Urban Micro-renewal is a way to reshape the space of a site through design, so as to activate the space, improve its cultural quality and enhance the public's sense of identity and participation in the space. In the creation of artworks, it is important to communicate with the public in a timely manner, to widely incorporate the views of residents into the design, and to focus on the implementation of public artworks in the form of public decision-making, accommodating the views of the public and realising the joint participation of designers and the public, thus promoting bottom-up urban Micro-renewal. In the Beijing Nestle Sense CAFÉ project, the courtyard space is used as a carrier, and public art is used as an important medium for dialogue with the space. Through

the placement of art installations with modern characteristics, the public is attracted to participate in the reshaping of the space, forming a kind of organic combination of local characteristics of culture and regional Micro-renewal construction, showing a Micro-renewal model with cultural characteristics.

4. Case Study - Beijing Nestle Sense CAFÉ

4.1. Project Description

In the courtyard of Internal Affairs Street 27 in Beijing's Dongcheng District, there is a café that requires advance booking and attracts people with the concept of "sense" (Figure 2). In this café, Beijing Sense, the designer has incorporated a large number of metal curtains into the traditional courtyard dwellings, creating a layered immersive experience space that aims to present a new form of courtyard. "Nestlé Sense CAFÉ Beijing is open for 10 days only as a flash mob café. 'Sense CAFÉ' is Nescafé's unified name for its flash shops, and 'Beijing Sense' is the third time it has launched its own flash store in China. 'Beijing Sense' is the third time it has launched its own flash shop in China. The two previous attempts were the 'Five Senses' café in Sanlitun, Beijing in 2017, and the 'Sense of Nature' bamboo forest café in Huangshan, Anhui in 2018," [6] This flash café concept, which incorporates the unique cultural heritage of the courtyard, has created a great stimulus to the original site space, attracting a large number of young people to visit and experience it, fully mobilising the residents to be active and making the public the foremost practitioners of urban Micro-renewal.



Figure 2. Nestlé Sense CAFÉ Beijing.

4.2. Public Art Interventions

The design of Beijing Nestle Sense CAFÉ breaks through a series of boundaries of the old city. The designer uses art installation interventions to transform the original courtyard space, incorporating a contemporary spatial attribute into the traditional Chinese courtyard, which is a difficult proposition in itself; because the form of the traditional Chinese courtyard, both in terms of the relationships that emerge from the structural system, its form and the space available for extension as an archetype is in fact very limited. "Artistic intervention is a medium and mode of action for community creation. 'Artistic intervention', also known as 'participatory art', focuses on the inclusion of public action, where art can

contribute to the growth of space. ‘Public Art Intervention’ emphasises collaboration with people, with the artist as the scenario planner and the public as collaborators and participants.” [7] In the process of renovation, the designer mixes contemporary intentions with traditional forms through a ‘soft intervention’ approach, creating a metal curtain installation that incorporates a concept similar to landscape painting, but using metal, a highly modern material. This overlap gives the public a new perception of the courtyard space and a new experience.

The courtyard dwellings is a spatial metaphor for the city of Beijing, where the intention of urban flow passes through the cavities and a series of soft spaces reshaped in the courtyard, and where the boundary relationship of the city is broken, in the design, the designer considers how to respect the historical imprint of the courtyard through art installations, highlighting the unique cultural atmosphere of the courtyard, so that the cultural background is integrated into the art installations, conveying the regional cultural values and enhancing the sense of local identity, and reinforcing the unique memory of the courtyard through art. The combination of modern and traditional materials reflects the sense of history, place and dignity of the building from the side, and this combination of tradition and modernity appears both charming and fashionable. (Figure 3) The curtain is in the form of a grid, the thin texture of which enhances the breathability of the site and adds to the overall mystique of the space. The designer seeks to establish a new connection between the enclosed courtyard space and the open natural environment, while connecting to the historical heritage of the city. At the highest point of the curtain space, the designer has preserved the bamboo forest within the site (Figure 4), designed on the basis of not breaking the greenery within the site, creating major landscape nodes and organising the flow of adults and children by the rich space under the curtain (Figure 5) The final form of the installation is gradually reduced by the overlapping of layers of curtains and rich canals, so that the “sense” of coffee in traditional courtyard architecture is reflected through the design of art installations. The use of red not only brightens up the overall space but also serves as a guide, providing a unique space for customers who come for different purposes and promoting a pleasant experience.



Figure 3. Detail of metal curtain installation.



Figure 4. Bamboo space under the curtain.



Figure 5. Outdoor gathering space.

The roof and brick walls of the courtyard dwellings have a sense of stability and history, and the interspersing of the courtyard space through the metal curtain can enhance the permeability and interest of the traditional courtyard space. The wooden paving of the courtyard continues the sense of the courtyard's age, which is dignified and varied, but the overall spatial shaping is slightly heavy; the curtain itself gives a sense of lightness, and the effect of light and shadow is more distinctive, as the landscape structure in the courtyard is relatively independent and contrasts with the green bricks and tiles; the long red table and the trees preserved in the courtyard echo the effect of light and shadow and make the landscape more pure, which is more suitable. The atmosphere of the courtyard is more suitable for the concept of “sense” (Figure 6). The metal curtain as a set of modern landscape language contrasts with the traditional architecture. By setting up movable partitions in the courtyard installation, the designer has maximised the commercial area of the courtyard and the division of different functional areas to achieve a flexible and practical purpose, although the physical space of the courtyard is limited in its expansion, it has achieved a functional expansion of space.

4.3. Public Art Interventions for the Micro-renewal of Courtyard Spaces

When the art installation is integrated into the courtyard space of the courtyard, its function, form, size, material and colour are all influenced by the physical environment of the space and become part of it through integration with the

courtyard environment; in addition, the art installation can reshape the environment of the courtyard by virtue of its own functionality, allowing the spatial form of the courtyard to be activated through the medium of metal, while at the same time increasing the attractiveness of the courtyard with its unique artistic form, making the public willing to integrate into the environment and enhancing the quality of the entire courtyard space.



Figure 6. Installation brought indoors from outside.

In the Beijing Nestle Sense CAFÉ project, RSAA Zhuang Ziyu Studio's spatial design of 27 the courtyard is a very valuable experiment, its combination and division of architectural space, the implantation and arrangement of new functions, the reconstruction of traditional architectural space in the new era, the continuation and restoration of architectural details are all meaningful and valuable for reference in other projects; the metal curtain installation itself is a kind of exploration and experiment in the new era. The concept of a flash-mob coffee shop is also an important factor in activating the space of the courtyard. This concept and space design form has attracted many young people to participate, allowing them to experience the different forms of the courtyard, and at the same time, attracting the participation of the neighbouring residents. This shows that urban Micro-renewal and public art construction are never independent entities, but are activities closely related to urban public space, humanistic environment and urban planning.

5. The Meaning and Connotation of Micro-renewal of Courtyards

5.1. The Significance of Micro-renewal of the Courtyard

5.1.1. Micro-renewal Reshapes the Regional Culture of the Courtyard

Beijing's courtyard houses showcase the folk customs of Beijingers, with a strong national style and local characteristics, it is an artistic treasure precipitated by historical development, and is an architectural form with great Chinese characteristics. "The implementation of one micro-case, the accumulation of a few becomes many, starting from a small space to influence a larger space, thus activating the vitality of the community and even the city". [8] The meaning of Micro-renewal is not to break up an old space and redesign a good-looking space, but to create a living place by exploring the cultural connotation and charm of the site, exuding the art of living, giving the space a

unique story based on problem solving, making the transformation of this micro-space a place of regional vitality that is loved by people.

5.1.2. Micro-renewal for the Cultivation of the Quadrangle's Humanities

"The renewal of traditional residential buildings in urban centres should not simply remain at the level of traditional physical forms, but should continue the 'living' traditions, including a way of life that incorporates the customs and emotions of generations of inhabitants, and adapt them to the development of the times. This is what can be called sustainable renovation." [9] The needs of the inhabitants and their aesthetic awareness have changed over the years. Therefore, in order to achieve a "non-museum" continuity of traditional residential architecture, it is necessary to examine the needs and characteristics of the life patterns of each era and integrate them into the renovation of traditional residential buildings of that era. This is the only way to ensure that the architectural spaces and forms of the traditional dwellings of different historical periods are alive and well in the "past - present - future". The development of technology, modern lifestyles and economic development have created a contradiction between modern life and tradition, while the traditional dwelling pattern is the source of inspiration for our design, and it is by transforming and renewing the traditional courtyard itself that the traditional dwelling can be revitalised in the new era.

The creation of urban public art today is not just about the construction of material forms; the cultural heritage and humanistic spirit of the city is the accumulation of innovative values for public art, enabling public art to be truly integrated into urban culture and accepted by the public, activating the public space of the city, restoring the city's historical memory and reshaping the city's regional and humanistic spirit. "Establishing a livable urban living environment has become the most important direction for public art to work towards, and in turn promote urban renewal practices In the new era of 'soft cities' where urban construction begins to take art and beauty as its goal, public art must pull itself out of a purely artistic disciplinary field and not just act as a vehicle for the visual manifestation of urban culture." [10] For, in creating an urban cultural atmosphere it also nurtures the aesthetic and creative spirit of the public, directly and significantly influencing today's urban ethos. At present, public art is experiencing a shift from decorating cities to activating them, a key point in the renewal of public space with a new cultural vitality.

5.2. The Significance of Public Art to the Micro-renewal of Courtyards

Urban Micro-renewal is a combination of bottom-up and top-down small-scale progressive renewal model, with more emphasis on the inheritance of urban history and culture and the continuation of the city's cultural lineage, in order to meet the needs of the new situation of urban renewal, and to promote public participation with the participation of diverse

subjects. For public art, which was attached to buildings in the early days of urban construction, public art has been given a new connotation as urban regeneration construction continues to develop. Public art has not only a literary meaning, but also a sociological and ecological meaning. The public nature of public art allows it to intervene in urban Micro-renewal, promoting the reshaping of regional culture, enhancing public participation, controlling the quality of Micro-renewal transformation and promoting the economic development of Micro-renewal areas.

The combination of urban Micro-renewal and public art is intended to provide a more comfortable living environment for urban residents and to meet the growing needs of the public for living and spiritual and cultural needs. Public art plays an important role in inheriting and promoting regional culture, optimising spatial quality and promoting public participation. From the perspective of urban Micro-renewal, public art is an art project that brings together the government, the market and residents, and therefore public art, as a collection of urban resources, is the optimal result of the transformation of the gathered population in public space. Urban Micro-renewal is a continuous and evolving process, and the study of Micro-renewal construction and public art interventions is a long-term and ongoing process that needs to be combined with the specific circumstances of Micro-renewal transformation, comprehensive analysis of multiple factors of urban development, the formulation of comprehensive intervention plans and policies, and the encouragement of active public participation in the overall regeneration activities to ensure that Micro-renewal implementation activities are more rational and effective.

In the subsequent renovation of traditional courtyards combined with public art, while focusing on the reshaping of the image of the space, we should also focus on the reshaping of the function and culture of the space, and activate the traditional space with appropriate public art. In design, we need to think about how public art can take root in old spaces, transform them through creative design, and improve the lives of local residents, so that they can be integrated into their daily lives. At the same time, we should also see some scholars questioned: "Art intervention in community building is the trump card of community renaissance?" Can Contemporary Art be integrated into the local community and recognized by the local people? Can the effects of

globalization be harnessed? [11] Any model has both advantages and disadvantages and needs to be tested and perfected in reality.

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