

The Role of Public Art in Shaping Urban Cultural Identity

Hannah Lin

*College of Letters and Science, University of California, Davis, USA
Hannahlin7520@gmail.com*

Abstract. Public art has taken on the power of cultural expression, thus influencing the ways in which cities practice identity, negotiating memory and developing community belonging. With the rapid urbanization in the modern global environment, the issue of environmental art becomes more and more important in keeping the cultural uniqueness and developing the spatial meaning. The paper explores the role of the participation of public art in the development of urban cultural identity by exploring the communicative, symbolic, and participatory roles of the piece in the contexts of the West and in China. This paper examines the role of public art in turning urban spaces into landscapes that have cultural significance through the application of a comparative literature analysis and a theoretical review based on a case. Results indicate that the Western view of public art is more likely to focus on social discourse, civic symbolism, and involvement of people, whereas the Chinese view tends to focus on philosophical harmony, significance of rituals, and cultural continuity. Differences notwithstanding, both contexts of public art play an important role in creating a sense of identity, strengthening the emotional connection, and enhancing cultural resilience to rapidly evolving cities.

Keywords: public art, urban cultural identity, symbolism, community engagement

1. Introduction

The practice of public art has become one of the essential characteristics of modern urban culture that is both influencing the visual image of cities and the cultural awareness of the urban population. As a form of aesthetic expression and simultaneously a source of civic communication, the role of public art is pivotal to expressing shared values, social memory and sense of place. Cities in the context of the global and very urbanized world want to stand out by cultural production, and public art becomes a tool of branding, narrative, and interaction.

Urban cultural identity is that belonging to a city that is caused by its history, symbols, spaces, and cultural experience. The Cloud Gate in Chicago or the Fourth Plinth in London are iconic examples of installations, which not only serve as tourist attractions but also as a visual story that portrays civic ideals and histories of a community.

Despite the fact that the existing literature has explored the aspects of public art either aesthetically or sociologically, there has been sparse research that considers the intersection of space, aesthetics, and collective identity in both Western and Chinese societies. This paper attempts to address the contribution of public art to the building and asserts the urban cultural identity using

comparative examples of Western theories and Chinese aesthetic philosophies. The present study approaches the subject of the analysis of public art as a visual and cultural language in which the meanings, the sharing of values, and the development of specific urban identities are negotiated by societies.

2. Theoretical background and literature review

2.1. Theories of urban development and representation

Conceptualizing global cities as a product of the cultural production and transnational flows, Sassen asserts that the process of urbanization through artistic interventions plays an important role in creating the global urban identities [1]. Public art, in turn, enters a soft power component of a city, which enables it to focus on creating an image abroad and at the same time fostering domestic unity. The representation theory by Hall has another explanation on how symbols and images in public places indicate social ideologies and political identities and how public art is a communicative system whereby the cultural narratives are constructed and disputed [2].

2.2. Western perspectives on public art and cultural identity

Western culture highlights the twin aspects of public art as an aesthetic and social tool. Doss brings out the role played by the public memorials as a means through which people express their collective memory and emotion, and demonstrates the symbolic meanings that the artworks of the people hold in the civic spaces [3]. Lippard goes ahead to propose that the construction of local identity is achieved through a shared experience of place, the implications of which suggest that the meaning of public art is derived through its implicatedness in living urban conditions [4]. Such views support the idea of how social meaning, cultural continuity and civic imagination can be formed by the use of public art.

2.3. Chinese perspectives on public art and aesthetic philosophy

Chinese thinkers bring the view of public art through philosophical and aesthetical traditions based on ritual, harmony, and symbolic images. According to Hu Shensheng, the existence of the concept of public art can be traced back to ancient Chinese architectural and ritual customs because in Chinese view the idea of art focuses on the harmony between a person and the natural environment [5]. The study of the tradition of Yixue by Zhou Liming singles out the spiritual vitality and symbolic representation as the key elements of modern Chinese aesthetics [6]. Combined, these views imply that the art in China that is seen by people is not purely aesthetic but a form of cultural dialogue that strives to achieve a common sense in making the meaning.

3. The role of public art in shaping urban cultural identity

The concept of public art is crucial and multidimensional in the process of creating urban cultural identity through the manner in which it transforms ordinary urban spaces to become cultural landscapes they are. With the process of globalization and the swift urbanization of cities, the gathering of memories, social values, and city narratives are being depicted through the visual form of arts. In contrast to the general aspects of decoration within the built environment, public art acts as a cultural agent that conducts negotiation as to how communities perceive themselves, how they are connected to their environments and how they express themselves in the context of larger social

organizations. This chapter builds on the symbolic, social, and cultural purposes of public art in order to show the way in which it enhances identity both in the Western and the Chinese context.

One of the main methods of identity determination by means of which public art is created is through the creation of collective memory. Memorials, celebratory sculptures, and symbolic installations form places where the general emotions and historical accounts can be expressed. According to Doss, these pieces of art assist communities in recalling and reprocessing major events, which makes the public area to function as a cultural memory storage [3]. This role is particularly noticeable in cities of the West, as the installation of projects including the Fourth Plinth in London or the multiple projects dedicated to memorials in the United States not only memorize historical moments, but also react to the social discourse of the day. Placing emotionally charged symbols into the cityscape, the art in the public domain provides people with a narrative framework within which they can analyze the history and the present of their city, which serves to strengthen the impression of continuity between generations.

The other significant aspect of public art is that it encourages civic life and social interaction. Lippard points out that lived experience defines the sense of place in people and not just the physical form [4]. Public art usually plays a role in bringing dormant areas to life through the creation of a platform of interaction and communal meeting. Interactive installations, participatory artworks that are done in consultation with the community, or temporary ones turn citizens into active participants in the production of meaning. This aspect of social aspects of public art reinforces the cultural identity through the fact that it makes residents feel part of the city since there is no distinction between an art viewer and art producer. By so doing, we can see that the concept of public art is not only an aesthetic intervention but also a tool for creating social cohesion.

Identity is also formed in relation to public art with regard to its role in the representation of cities and exposure internationally. According to Sassen, the world cities are largely dependent on cultural production as they build familiar identities across transnational networks [1]. The iconic public art objects like the Cloud Gate in Chicago or the Olympic sculptures in Beijing are the visual symbols conveying the image of a particular city on the global level. Such artworks aid in branding efforts and assist urban areas in exhibiting uniqueness in a world where it is becoming homogenous. Simultaneously, they also bring about internal cultural pride since they provide a sense of belonging to the resident and also a sense of shared identity in a common symbolic order. This is why numerous cities are currently working to commission public art through the larger cultural development policies.

The Chinese views provide some philosophical and ritual layers to the functioning of the public art in the urban space. Hu Shensheng dates the beginnings of Chinese public art to the systems of ancient rituals and architecture where artistic articulations were used as moral, symbolic, and social [5]. The tradition still has an effect on the present-day Chinese popular art, which is usually focused on harmony between humanity and nature, harmony in the social system, and presenting the cultural values of people collectively. In contrast to most of the Western examples where the emphasis is on personal expression or political comment, Chinese public art often emphasizes the rhetoric of shared identity and community.

The interpretation of the Yixue by Zhou Liming also explains that Chinese visual culture appreciates the existence of the spirit and vitality, which is a spiritual life force that conveys the cultural awareness of a society [6]. Modern Chinese city art works are based on the traditional symbols like dragons, calligraphic elements or landscape themes and combine them with the modern media, or design ideas. This combination of tradition and innovation creates a very unique Chinese urban identity which reflects the historical past and adjusts to the forces of modernization.

Consequently, Chinese cities make art a continuous conversation between the past and present that strengthens the continuity of the culture even in the era of rapid changes.

Lastly, art in the community serves as a cultural exchange point. According to Hall, his theory of representation describes how meanings in the cultural context are created and fought over using the elements of visuality and symbolism [2]. Public art serves the purpose of giving cities a voice to express their values as well as giving them space to challenge social norms. Public art can be seen as a language through which communities argue about themselves and how they would like to be viewed, be it in commemoration, community murals, or even installations based on philosophical traditions. With the growing pace of urbanization taking place in the entire world, the process gains even greater significance in regard to the preservation of cultural resilience and a sense of community.

Conclusively, public art is a critical factor in building urban cultural identity through the creation of collective memory, socializing, assigning symbolic significance, and promoting local as well as international representation. Although in Western traditions symbolic communication and civic dialogue take precedence, and in Chinese traditions harmony and cultural continuity are of priority, both of them also show the deep influence of the art in the environment people live in and in their relationships with each other. Making urban space a cultural narrative, the public art enhances emotional attachment and solidifies the identities that are the meaning of cities.

4. Conclusion

The cultural essence of urban areas is manifested through public art through its connection between the memory of the past, the present, and the hopes of the future. It is a transference of the individual feeling to the exteriority, a dialogue between the aesthetic culture of the West and the East. In a withered and diverse sense, public art determines the way cities present themselves and the way people perceive their place in the city space. This research admits that its research is constrained by the fact that it does not involve empirical field work but only literature review. Future studies may have the advantage of utilizing both ethnographic observation, interviews, or spatial analysis in order to understand how citizens experience public art in their everyday settings. Also, it may be possible to include quantitative or participatory data (surveys or digital mapping) to gather additional information about the way various demographics perceive public art objects. With mounting challenges on cultural identities in a globalized world setting, the role of expressing, maintaining, and creating a new urban character has become a significant force behind the various types of art that are now public.

References

- [1] Sassen, S. (2001). *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton University Press.
- [2] Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage.
- [3] Doss, E. (2010). *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*. University of Chicago Press.
- [4] Lippard, L. (1997). *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New Press.
- [5] Hu, S. (2013). Examples of Ancient Chinese Public Art. *Public Art Journal*.
- [6] Zhou, L. (2019). *The Yixue Philosophy in Chinese Painting*. China Social Sciences Press.