

The Rise of Art Bookstores and Their Influence on Urban Cities in China

Yu'ang Wu ^{1,a,*}

¹ Shanghai Foreign Language School Affiliated to SISU, Shanghai, China

a. fz05445@shisu.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: In recent years, China have seen a increase in culture and art spaces that happen to drastically change people's lifestyle, socialization and work habits. Among them, art bookstores are one of the most trending among young people that also provides positive cultural vibe in urban societies. Therefore, this paper discusses art bookstores' history, development and roles in urban planning, by examining past examples as well as their existential situations and business mode. This paper examines the status quo of art bookstores' development and successful examples of art bookstores domestic and abroad, incorporates the damage that Covid-19 and its after math have inflicted on art bookstores, then explores art bookstores' integrated approach of combing different consumer experience into one cultural space, the main advantage and disadvantages of art bookstores' business modes, their influences on urban planning and people's lives, current flaws in their business mode and potential innovation and development suggestions for art bookstores in the post-pandemic period.

Keywords: art bookstores, influence, urban cities, China

1. Introduction

From the age of industrialization, architecture and its function in urban cities have been designed largely under utilitarianism. However, the 1950s to 1960s witnessed a shift from pure physical determinism. The influence of culture, arts, and aesthetics on social life rose to importance [1]. The US and Europe entered the phase of cultural economy buzz forty to sixty years ago in the mid-1960s to 80s, as cultural planning and programming started to oversee urban planning [2]. Public artists, iconic city-center facilities and art-related investments were at the center of this cultural buzz. Public facilities like the Lincoln Center in New York revitalized the neighborhood commercially and culturally. Consequently, economic impact assessments such as job creation, increased output and public sector revenues were used to justify funding arts facilities [2]. MASS MoCA, an art center, which increased property values in surrounding communities by twenty percent, was a good example that attracted funding due to its wealth-creating effects [2].

In contrast to the decades of experience and a mature system of art commercialization, urban aesthetics in China is a relatively novel idea that only existed in the recent decade after the Reform and Opening Up policy. In the past, urban aesthetics in China mainly concentrated on traditional Chinese gardens, museums and temples. In post-socialist China, imported foreign goods and services and a rising middle class resulted in community gentrification and many facilities modernization. A

characteristic of urban planning is the “aesthetics of disappearance”, indicating that the past is erased. It can be denoted from the skyscrapers, cultural centers, art galleries and mass-scale architects commissioned by famous architects that rose from completely untouched land or used to replace old residential communities. Among these urban modifications, art bookstores have become the new fashion among young people in China. It is often defined as the quality of the “third place”, a place between workplace and home, that provides essential community life opportunities for socializing, a relaxed working environment and cultural values [3]. Though popular among young people, art bookstores generally have faster rates of alteration and are especially vulnerable to the strikes of Covid-19.

Therefore, this paper discusses art bookstores’ history, development, roles in urban planning, existential situations, as well as their business mode. By looking into how art bookstores advanced their market share, particularly in the mid-2000 decade, and referencing prior cases of art bookstores and cultural spaces domestic and abroad, this paper provides several suggestions for major stakeholders.

2. Two Typical Types of Art Bookstores

Art bookstores with different locations, functions, and cultural environments have different furnishing and architectural styles. Generally, they can be categorized into two types.

2.1. Plain Bookstores

The first is the type with a low profile, which possesses an unimpressive street frontage and plain interior arrangement, similar to a regular bookstore. They are usually close to residential areas with cheap drinks, stationary, supplementary textbooks, and magazines. This type of multi-functioning bookstore mainly has four advantages. First, it targets a large audience. Because the price is reasonable and the plain furnishing constructs an inviting atmosphere, people are more likely to visit with a companion regularly. Second, transient tourists would be put off, and the regular customers could be protected from disturbance. Third, plain places preserve the reading atmosphere and adapt to the local streetwise livelihood. Like the book café in Hutong, a typical Beijing residential architecture, tea, snacks, and newspaper are also served along with coffee and books, formulating a more stylized local lifestyle. Finally, bookstores are likely to survive for longer periods owing to cheap rents, and stable profits. Customers feel attached to these bookstores as the familiar plain setting enhances their mood to read, work, study and socialize.

Therefore, this kind of bookstore doesn’t contribute specifically to urban aesthetics but instead focuses on providing basic functionalities and services and increasing the well-being of average citizens.

2.2. High-end Bookstores

The other type is more high-end, which elevates the aesthetic culture of urban cities. This art bookstore has delicate furnishing and is located near shopping malls, cultural centers, commercial circles, or tourist attractions. They usually set higher prices, with more refined experience and services. The art bookstores in Taipei illustrate the typical development of this kind of art bookstore. High-end bookstores started with the establishment of "Senseio Bookstore" in 1960; it was one of the first attempts to commercialize reading and cultural spaces in the form of chain bookstores. In the 1980s, "Kinstone Cultural Square" and "Eslite Bookstore" led the aesthetics bookstore revolution, focusing on a unique artbook collection and spatial ambience [4].

Art bookstores in major cities in China have features like the Eslite Group, but with less influence. Existing bookstores often used innovative furnishing, either introducing the outside landscape into

the interior, or using local cultural elements to transfer the bookstore into a museum or gallery, like the Readers Bookstore. Others combine the concept of green lifestyle and encourage the circulation of second-hand books, artworks, and antique garments to be sold in the store, like the store Duo Zhuayu.

The integrated nature of this type of art bookstore creates the impression of enriching oneself, multi-tasking and time-management, aesthetic lifestyle, and quality social interactions on their consumers, which makes purchasing books in these stores exceed its literal meaning. Also, the targeted niche of customers will likely return to enjoy the comfort, aesthetics, and sense of belonging in art bookstores, as it is elegance and attitude.

3. Influences of Art Bookstores on Urban Development

3.1. Urban Vitality

The first advantage of art bookstores is to increase urban vitality by integrating commercial spaces and urban aesthetics, providing efficient and quality space. As the urban population continues to rise in cities, congestion, crowdedness, and unplanned agglomeration of economic activities are hurdles toward urban vitality. However, increasing the aesthetic value and livability of public spaces can enhance the vitality of a certain community's social interactions and economic productivity [5]. Elevated levels of urban planning, aesthetic, and multi-functions in these art books create quality space for talented people, creating a model of how to put “useful people in density” to boost economic vitality [5].

3.2. Urban Culture

In addition to pure aesthetics, cultural elements attract readers because the number of physical bookstores continues to drop. Successful art bookstores are platforms of cultural exchange, disseminating cultural information, leading cultural trends, and building cultural awareness. For instance, Fang Suo Commune in Guangzhou created “Creator Live” lectures delivered by forefront writers and content creators. The interaction between cultural celebrities and the average audience creates an immersive and innovative experience with literature, enriching the city’s cultural space [6].

3.3. Urban Cultural Environment

Art bookstores enrich the urban cultural environment by diversifying people’s living environment and reading habits.

Art bookstores help combine a conventional leisure space, a workspace using networking devices, with the public sphere, which radically transform the mobility of people’s working habits. Because of art bookstores, more freelancers prefer to work in different places, like different art bookstores, rather than in a fixed office because they can interact with people and access more ideas and inspirations. The internet has allowed people to work in boundary-less organizations or virtual workspaces, which art bookstores can take advantage of.

Furthermore, although the trend of online reading is irreversible, Research has shown that sociality involved in art bookstores increases the chance for people to step inside and read. Due to adolescents’ motivation to read when they can talk about or interact with others in their social networks, art bookstores provide just the right atmosphere. Additionally, people can also find reading peers with similar interests and receive perceptions of art from these people, forming an inviting reading and sharing environment that positively impacts people’s reading habits.

4. Art Bookstore's Current Situation and Developing Strategies

4.1. Current Situation

Since Covid-19, most art bookstores are on the process of slow recovery. The aftershock of Covid-19 was quite significant. In 2020, 1,573 bookstores were closed, which was three times the number in 2019 [7]. Of the 1,021 physical bookstores surveyed, 926 were closed, accounting for 90.7% of the total number [8]. On top of governmental efforts to reduce rent and taxes, and provide funding and financial assistance, many bookstores also utilized online channels, live broadcasting and delivery service to exploit the online book market. However, despite the effort of self-save, the rapid development of the internet and e-commerce has downgraded the revenue of art bookstores across China. Online bookstores outperform physical bookstores in terms of cost and convenience because they require no specific manpower, funds, and rents compared to their physical counterparts. The emergence of reading apps, WeChat official accounts, and reading blogs on social media has driven people to “fragmented reading” during commute time rather than time-consuming integral reading [9]. Therefore, it has become the norm for people to window shop in physical bookstores and get the exact online copy or get the same book at a cheaper price from an online bookstore. The consumer groups are usually young artists, students, and older people, who are either used to traditional ways of reading or value the unique artistic book collection and atmosphere that physical bookstores can offer [10].

4.2. Problems

Art bookstores are facing several problems due to sales platforms and business modes.

The online selling of e-books cannot rival those of well-known authors and internet celebrities based on sales volume. The discount and preview reading that physical bookstores can offer is also less than traditional online booksellers on Taobao or Jindong.

The business mode also warrants innovative upgrades. Bookstore café is no news to the public, and new consumer experiences are always anticipated. Frequently, art bookstores struggle to attract consumers, and even if they can attract them, they struggle to keep them. The first to take the initiative is usually to get the larger market share.

For example, Daikanyama first cooperated with Starbucks in launching the concept of a book cafe. For independent bookstores after Daikanyama, repeating the mode of bookstore plus coffee doesn't guarantee success. Some independent bookstores strive to integrate various art forms into innovative bookstore experiences, such as various DIY, pottery, flowers, drama, live house, and art salons. However, art forms are highly stringent to high-end consumers and have high requirements on location. Since the barrier of entry is not high and unique concepts are usually rare, a high alteration rate is anticipated.

4.3. Development Strategies

The art bookstores are advised to research prior successful cases both home and abroad according to their specific art form and their targeted consumers based on location and cultural elements. It is suggested that they integrate multiple activities alongside selling books. The below-mentioned ways are all applicable and can benefit different kinds of art bookstores.

First, art bookstores can diversify their products based on consumer demand. It is more important for plainer bookstores that rely on a large regular consumer population. Art bookstores can go further from the rigid form of selling related products or drinks and stretch their service into the consumer fields of food, clothing, living, transport, education, entertainment, etc. For example, art bookstores can arrange parent-child interactive reading and gaming activities that cater to the needs of many

young parents. Another possible option is to foster learning socialization through formulating study groups or reading clubs. Certain events can be opening a language salon for minority language learners, live house lovers, young poets, or artists to communicate with others of the same interest.

Second, a swift intuition in marketing and advertisements is required for successful sales. Accurate market analysis and following social hot-spot news can effectively attract new consumers. As in the case of Xinhua Bookstore in Ningbo. It took advantage of the trending color artbook challenge “The Secret Garden”. The participating readers only need to buy a coloring book and finish an artwork within the stipulated time. The creator of the top three artworks voted by the readers received a 50% discount coupon for books.

In addition, media coverage is also key to receiving more attention. Art bookstores can utilize multiple online platforms, such as the website Dou ban, WeChat, Red, and Sina Weibo, to reach out to more consumers. The literature and art groups on these platforms are crucial for disseminating content such as movies, reading, music FM, drama, and art and organizing local activities such as book fairs, book clubs, and art exhibitions. Shanghai Zhongshuge is a successful example of early WeChat and Sina Weibo promotion. Branded as “the most beautiful bookstore” in Shanghai, the subscription volume and followers have reached a million. Therefore, art bookstores can consider allocating efforts to social media promotion.

Third, art bookstores can use the celebrity effect for advertising for their publicity. People are prone to high-quality content that they can’t get elsewhere. In the case of Eslite Group Bookstore, it offers the chance to meet college professors, urban yuppies, movie stars, famous writers, and experts from different fields to share professional advice for people who wish to enter certain fields or pure lovers.

Finally, it’s always important to create a unique identity. Take Sisyphe Bookstores as an example, an euphemistic method is used to show that reading and buying books is a way of sticking to values and ideals. They launch monthly recommended books with a certain topic that intends to spread values such as “life philosophies” or “art and aesthetics”. Many art bookstores also adapt to the local architectural style to augment the cultural element that is already prominent in that city, therefore building an identity that can be well-known to local culture lovers. On top of it, adhering to government policy and advocating for government support is also vital. Building an identity is important for getting government funds. Art bookstores, as previously explained, are crucial in increasing cultural vitality through building identity.

5. Conclusion

Art bookstores’ main advantages are integrating reading and artistic, and cultural experiences. If well-designed, planned and managed, art bookstores can unleash the potential of physical bookstores and revive people’s interest in the integral reading experience. However, these bookstores still face many problems with the status quo. As a new industry that started at the turn of the century, art bookstores don’t have a mature system or business mode. Couple with this is the strike of Covid-19 that pushed many art bookstores to bankruptcy.

In the post-pandemic period, many art bookstores actively sought different ways to utilize offline and online resources and governmental support to save themselves from closedown. We suggest that art bookstores diversify their products, approach the marketing tactfully, and utilize the celebrity effect and the influence of social media platforms to create a unique and localized identity. As Chinese experimental artists have moved from a marginalized position to a leading role in spreading culture, art bookstores can take advantage of these young artists. They can use innovative ways to create hold of marketing trends, brand positioning, and figure out clear and thorough business strategies, consumer experience analysis from the consumer point of view, and finally penetrate their brand identity and social influence deep into the roots of the city and into people’s hearts.

References

- [1] Nia, H. A. and Olugbenga, F. 2020. *A Quest on the Role of Aesthetics in Enhancing Functionality of Urban Planning*. *Civil Engineering and Architecture*. <https://doi.org/10.13189/cea.2020.080514>
- [2] Markusen, A. and Gadwa, A. 2010. *Arts and Culture in Urban or Regional Planning: A Review and Research Agenda*. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 29(3), 379–391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456x09354380>
- [3] Van Thi Nguyen, T., Han, H., Sahito, N. and Lam, T. K. 2019. *The Bookstore-Café: Emergence of a New Lifestyle as a “Third Place” in Hangzhou, China*. *Space and Culture*, 22(2), 216–233. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331218795832>
- [4] Lin, M., Lin, P. and Chen, J. 2014. *Designing “Innovation” into Eslite Group for Taipei City*. *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, 650–659. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-07308-8_62
- [5] Kim, K. S. 2020. *Urban Vitality, Urban Form, and Land Use: Their Relations within a Geographical Boundary for Walkers*. *Sustainability*, 12(24), 10633. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su122410633>
- [6] Jiu-Xia, S. and Xueji, W. 2016. *Interpretation of Urban New-type Public Spaces: An Anthropological Case Study of Fang Suo in Guangzhou*. *The Anthropologist*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09720073.2016.11892052>
- [7] Loh, C. E. and Sun, B. 2019. *“I’d Still Prefer to Read the Hard Copy”: Adolescents’ Print and Digital Reading Habits*. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 62(6), 663–672. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.904>
- [8] book118.com. (n.d.). 2021. *Physical bookstore industry analysis report*. Docx. Original Tronics document network. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <https://max.book118.com/html/2021/0801/5114323033003322.shtm>
- [9] *The dilemma, countermeasures and outlook of physical bookstores in the post-epidemic era*. *Publishing Journal*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <http://cbkx.whu.edu.cn/jwk3/cbkx/EN/Y2021/V29/I2/79>
- [10] Wang, L. and Chen, Q. 2018. *Research on Physical Bookstore Marketing Communication Under the Internet Challenge*. *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Humanities (ICCESSH 2018)*. <https://doi.org/10.2991/iccssh-18.2018.354>