

Revitalizing Community Interactive Spaces through Public Art: Strategies for the Renewal of Old Communities in Beijing

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes the renewal of old communities in Beijing as a case study to investigate strategies for revitalizing community interactive spaces driven by public art. Analyzing the current situation reveals that public art plays a positive role in shaping cultural atmosphere, enhancing resident participation, and creating social spaces. However, challenges such as disconnection from resident needs, difficulties in achieving deep participation, and shortcomings in promotion and guidance persist. To address these issues, the study proposes strategies including establishing mechanisms for deep resident participation, innovating diverse forms of public art, strengthening community public art education, and building long-term maintenance and multi-party collaboration mechanisms. These measures aim to enhance the vitality of community interactive spaces and promote the development of community culture.

KEYWORDS

Beijing; Old communities; Resident interaction; Public art; Community culture

1 Introduction

In recent years, the Beijing municipal government has emphasized public art projects in urban renewal to enhance the cultural atmosphere of old communities. The “14th Five-Year Plan for Public Services” indicates that public cultural services play a crucial role in modernizing cultural governance, safeguarding citizens' rights, meeting the needs for a better life, and promoting coordinated urban-rural development ^[1]. Community public art actively enhances resident interaction and cultural engagement. The “Guidance of the Beijing Municipal People's Government on Implementing Urban Renewal Actions” emphasizes that the renovation of old residential districts should, based on residents' wishes, utilize existing buildings and public spaces to add facilities such as convenience commerce and elderly care services; public art projects can be integrated therein to improve residents' living convenience and comfort ^[2]. Many communities integrate public art with the environment through forms like wall art, sculptures, and landscape design, enhancing aesthetics and providing platforms for communication and interaction.

2 Analysis of the current state of public art in Beijing's old communities

2.1 Shaping the cultural atmosphere

In the micro-renewal of old communities, shaping the cultural atmosphere is crucial. By adopting soft, ecological, and micro-intervention approaches, we can better focus on the relationship between people and the environment, thereby enhancing the artistry and aesthetic value of public spaces ^[3]. This method not only strengthens the community's cultural atmosphere but also promotes interaction among residents. Public art serves as an effective tool for enhancing the community cultural atmosphere, showcasing residents' lives, history, and culture, strengthening their sense of belonging, and thus fostering harmonious neighborly relations and a vibrant community environment.

In the Huajiadi Xili Sanqu wall painting project, local characteristics and resident stories were incorporated, adding cultural flavor. The wall paintings cover topics such as responsible pet ownership and waste sorting. Residents not only appreciate the art but also experience cultural accumulation and resonance. The artworks encourage community members to identify with the public space, enhancing their enthusiasm for participating in community life and cultural consciousness. The public green space renovation in Building 2, Changying Fudi Community, introduced artistic wall paintings, adding cultural interest. Designers and residents jointly painted the “Rose Fairy Tale Garden,” featuring roses composed of residents' handprints. The content of the wall paintings integrates with the environment, providing space that stimulates creativity and reflection, promoting the inheritance and innovation of community culture. (Figure 1)



Figure 1 Characteristic wall painting of the "rose fairy tale garden" in building 2, changying fudi community
(Image source: Photographed by the author)

2.2 Current State of Resident Interaction and Participation

Public art projects significantly enhance residents' sense of participation, especially when residents are directly involved in the artistic creation process, strengthening their sense of ownership. For example, the Huajiadi Xili Sanqu wall painting project invited residents, along with teachers and students from the College of Arts of Beijing Union University, to co-design and paint. The collaboration between residents, students, and designers not only expressed aspirations for a better life but also built strong neighborly bonds through the co-creation process, enhancing the sense of community belonging. Similarly, in Building 2, Changying Fudi Community, residents participated in the design of the public green space renovation. Through design workshops and exchanges, their needs were respected, making the artworks more locally distinctive and boosting residents' pride. This participatory approach gives residents a great sense of satisfaction when they see the artworks they contributed to, further strengthening their identification with the community public space.

2.3 Creation of social spaces and promotion of neighborly relations

The purpose of constructing the public sphere is to solve problems, promote full discussion and mutual, leading to compromise. The creation of a community common ground is based on such collisions and discussions, striving to form consensus and stimulate endogenous community strength to truly address issues^[4]. Public art projects not only enhance the cultural atmosphere and residents' sense of participation but also create rich social spaces in old communities, promoting interaction among residents. Public art plays an important role in improving neighborly relations and promoting community integration. Taking the Huajiadi Xili Sanqu wall painting project as an example, it attracted many residents to stop and appreciate, actively engaging in discussions and interactions. The wall paintings became social hubs and carriers of exchange. Residents shared creation stories and feelings while appreciating the art, enhancing mutual understanding and trust among neighbors. Public art makes old communities more vibrant and neighborly relations more harmonious. (Figure 2)



Figure 2 Huajiadi xili sanqu wall painting project
(Image source: Photographed by the author)

After the renovation of the public green space in Building 2, Changying Fudi Community, artistic seating and interactive installations became important venues for social interaction. Particularly among children, the play area became a center for group activities, promoting interaction between children and parents, and further enhancing communication among residents of different age groups. (Figure 3) More importantly, the community regularly holds cultural exchange events and other activities in the community classroom area, providing residents with a platform for self-expression and strengthening the transmission of community culture, forming a positive social ecosystem.



Figure 3 Children's play experience space – "listening to sounds in the ravines"
(Image source: Photographed by the author)

3 Problems faced by public art in Beijing's old communities

3.1 Disconnection from resident needs

Many public art projects fail to fully consider the actual needs and expectations of residents during planning and implementation. Decision-making is often led by government departments and artists, lacking in-depth investigation

into the diverse needs of community residents. For example, in the public art renovation project of the Panjiayuan old residential area in Beijing, although the aim was to enhance the environmental quality by adding artistic elements, residents' opinions were not sufficiently solicited during the design process. Ultimately, modern geometric sculptures and abstract-style murals were installed at the entrance. However, the residents of Panjiayuan are mostly long-term Beijing locals with strong emotional ties to traditional culture like Peking Opera and old Beijing customs. These modern artworks not only failed to reflect the residents' cultural background but also clashed with the traditional atmosphere. Furthermore, they occupied the public space originally used for chatting and playing chess. From a functional perspective, residents preferred pavilions for shelter and rest. Additionally, the art installations and murals lacked maintenance; over time, the sculptures showed scratches and the murals faded, failing to enhance the community image and instead causing dissatisfaction among residents, making it difficult to resonate with them.

3.2 Dilemma of deep participation

Currently, resident participation in public art projects in old communities often remains superficial. On the one hand, residents lack channels and mechanisms for deep participation; most can only participate in limited creative stages or provide simple feedback, making it difficult to substantively influence the overall direction and core design of the project. On the other hand, community residents' understanding of public art is often limited to its visual appearance, lacking deep comprehension of its cultural connotations and creative concepts. This dampens participation enthusiasm and prevents public art from fully playing its role in promoting resident interaction and community cohesion. For example, the Guanghuili neighborhood in Beilangdong Community, Dongcheng District, Beijing, has a high proportion of elderly residents. Previous activities were traditional and highly homogenized. Residents had limited participation in public art projects and struggled to influence the overall design. This community, as a former staff residential area of the Red Star Distillery, has a unique historical and cultural background. However, residents' understanding of public art was superficial, such as community cultural drawing activities, without grasping the deeper connotations and concepts. This led to limited cognition of public art and a lack of pathways for deep participation, frustrating residents' enthusiasm and hindering public art's potential to promote interaction and community cohesion.

3.3 Shortcomings in promotion and guidance

In the promotion of public art in old communities, there are obvious shortcomings in publicity and guidance. Promotion channels are narrow and methods are singular, relying on community bulletin boards that struggle to reach all residents, limiting information dissemination effectiveness. Furthermore, there is a lack of targeted guidance measures, such as public art education activities or organized visits and study sessions. This results in insufficient resident understanding of the value and significance of public art, restricting its role in enhancing the vitality of community interactive spaces. It also leads to low levels of resident interaction and participation in many old communities, and a lack of communication and collaboration mechanisms. The root cause lies in the insufficient attention to resident needs during the implementation of public art projects, and the lack of close integration with residents' lives, affecting their participation enthusiasm. Fan Weiya proposed that public art should be community-centered and focus on resident needs; organizing art activities and workshops can incentivize resident participation and enhance the vitality of interactive spaces^[5]. Simultaneously, Beijing residents show significant interest in public art, as seen in the attention received by the 798 Art District and Tianqiao Art Center, reflecting the potential of public art to stimulate community vitality. This provides support for public art projects in old communities, meaning that if properly conducted, they can increase resident participation rates and sense of belonging, and promote community cultural publicity.

4 Strategies for public art to promote the vitality of resident interactive spaces in Beijing's old communities

4.1 Establishing deep resident participation mechanisms

The core concept of public art involves a sociological shift, requiring public art to move closer to the public and focus on social issues of public concern. In community public art projects, establishing systematic mechanisms for deep resident participation is key to promoting the vitality of interactive spaces^[6]. Therefore, community public art projects should adopt a bottom-up participation model, using methods like questionnaires, community forums, and design workshops to understand resident needs and cultural preferences. During project implementation, invite residents to participate deeply in the entire process. Activities like "Community Art Days" can be held to make residents co-designers, enhancing their sense of identity, stimulating their affection for public spaces, and improving community cohesion and interactive vitality. In the public art renovation of Dashanzi Community, Jiuxianqiao Street, questionnaires were used to understand residents' emotional connection to the community's industrial history and their expectations. Design workshops were organized. Residents actively participated, suggesting ideas like preserving old factory architectural elements. After the renovation, the community public space possessed unique artistic charm, and residents had a strong sense of identity and belonging, making it a popular leisure and communication spot. This bottom-up model ensures that public art fits the community's reality, meets resident needs, plays a positive role, and enhances community cohesion and

interactive vitality.

4.2 Innovating diverse forms of public art

"Old communities have limited resources and single-function public spaces. In community renewal, it is necessary to integrate and reasonably divide based on existing resident needs, the space more ambiguous functions" [7]. To meet the needs of different resident groups, diverse forms of public art should be introduced, catering to the cultural interests and functional needs of the elderly, children, and youth. Communities can install public art suitable for different groups, such as interactive installations for children, leisure landscapes for the elderly, and contemporary artworks for young people. Utilize technological means to innovate forms, such as adding interactive screens and AR technology to create virtual experiences to attract residents. Focus on combining the practicality of artworks, allowing residents to experience artistic beauty while increasing social opportunities, thereby enhancing community vitality and cohesion. When Yangmeizhu Xiejie in Xicheng District underwent public art renovation, it fully considered the needs of different resident groups and introduced diverse art forms. For children, brightly colored, fun animal-shaped sculptures and interactive play facilities were installed, like panda slides and rabbit seesaws, attracting children to play and providing opportunities for parents to communicate. For the elderly, leisure landscapes with a traditional cultural atmosphere were created, such as Peking Opera mask walls and miniature models of old Beijing courtyards, allowing the elderly to feel the cultural heritage while strolling. Simultaneously, creative artworks and fashionable elements were set up for young people, like street graffiti and artistic lighting installations, attracting young people to take photos, injecting new vitality into the community.

4.3 Strengthening community public art education

Strengthening the promotion and education of public art is an important means to increase resident participation. By regularly holding public art knowledge lectures, art exhibitions, and art education workshops, residents can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural connotations and creative concepts of public art. Additionally, communities can collaborate with local schools, art institutions, and artists to conduct parent-child art experience activities and youth art education courses, stimulating interest among residents of different ages. Through promotion and guidance, residents can not only feel the aesthetic value of art but also understand its social significance, which will further encourage their active participation in public art projects and enhance the community cultural atmosphere. The Shijia Hutong Community in Dongcheng District collaborated with local schools and art institutions to regularly hold public art education activities like "Art Journey in the Hutong," inviting professional artists to explain the hutong's history and culture to residents and students and guide artistic creation. Through these activities, residents gained a deeper understanding of public art's connotation and concepts, improving their artistic literacy and aesthetic standards. The community also organized visits to art exhibitions to broaden horizons and stimulate interest. In the "I Love My Home" themed creation activity, residents actively participated, integrating their love and aspirations into their works. These works beautified the community environment and became an important part of the community culture, enhancing community cohesion and the cultural atmosphere.

4.4 Establishing long-term maintenance and multi-party collaboration mechanisms

To ensure the lasting impact of public art projects, establishing long-term maintenance and multi-party collaboration mechanisms is crucial. Communities can form a "Public Art Management Team" composed of residents, artists, and government representatives to regularly maintain and update the artworks. Simultaneously, introduce corporate sponsorships and support from social organizations to form a multi-party collaboration model, ensuring sufficient funding and stable operation of public art projects. Furthermore, by regularly holding community art festivals, art salons, and other events, sustain the vitality of public art, allowing residents to continuously increase their attention to and willingness to use public spaces through long-term participation. This multi-party collaboration mechanism can effectively compensate for the shortcomings of single-entity implementation of public art projects and promote the sustainable development of community culture. Wangjing Xiyuan Si Qu in Chaoyang District established a long-term maintenance and multi-party collaboration mechanism, forming a "Public Art Management Team" responsible for inspecting and maintaining public artworks. For instance, they promptly repaired peeling wall paintings after heavy rain. Meanwhile, the community introduced corporate sponsors and support from social organizations, co-hosting art festivals and art exhibitions to raise funds. Social organizations also provided artistic guidance and volunteer services to assist resident creation. Relying on this multi-party collaboration model, the community's public art projects developed steadily and continuously, bringing new artistic experiences to residents, increasing their attention and willingness to use public spaces, promoting interaction and communication among residents, and making the community cultural atmosphere more vibrant.

5 Conclusion

Through the analysis of public art projects in Beijing's old communities, it is evident that public art plays an important role in enhancing the vitality of resident interactive spaces. Implementing deep participation mechanisms, innovating diverse art forms, and strengthening public art education have effectively enhanced residents' sense of belonging and

participation. Furthermore, establishing long-term maintenance and multi-party collaboration mechanisms ensures the sustainable development of public art projects and increases residents' attention and willingness to use public spaces. However, the article also has certain limitations; for instance, the in-depth analysis of some successful cases is insufficient, failing to fully showcase practical experiences and their effects from different areas. The limitations in residents' cognition of public art and their willingness to participate still require further exploration. In the future, efforts should continue to deepen the integration of public art with community needs, expand the scope of research, focus on how to stimulate residents' active participation, promote the comprehensive development of community culture, and realize residents' aspirations for an ideal life.

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