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Revitalizing Heritage: The Role of Urban Morphology in Creating Public Value in China's Historic Districts

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Abstract: In the context of historical districts becoming a key to the urban transformation and high-quality development of Chinese cities, this paper investigates the regeneration of historic environments in China, emphasizing the creation of public value through urban morphology. By analyzing five distinct case studies—Chengdu KuanZhai Alley, Shanghai TianZiFang Alley, Guangzhou EnNing Road, Taiyuan ZhongLou Street, and Beijing NanLuoGu Alley—this study explores the relationship between urban form and public value creation from 2000 to 2020. The research posits that the spatial attribute of "public nature" is central to the regeneration process, highlighting the importance of understanding how urban spaces can foster community engagement and social interaction. An evaluation system is constructed to assess the regeneration of historic areas based on spatial "publicness" and people's perceptions, addressing the need for a more nuanced approach to urban planning. The findings reveal that effective urban regeneration not only preserves historical significance but also enhances the quality of public spaces, thereby contributing to social equity and cultural integrity. This study aims to provide valuable insights for urban planners and policymakers, advocating for a public value-oriented approach to the renewal of historic districts that balances economic development with the preservation of cultural heritage. The integration of public value concepts into heritage management is crucial for creating vibrant urban environments that resonate with community needs and aspirations.

Keywords: urban regeneration; publicness; urban morphology; public value

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1. Introduction

Since 2000, in China, under global consumerism and pro-growth agendas, some historic urban areas that evoke nostalgia have been transformed into iconic spectacles for consumption or spatial commodities by the entrepreneurial government [1]. As of now, China has announced 143 historical and cultural cities, along with hundreds of historical and cultural districts. Beyond a few cases deemed successful in their transformation, many historical districts are confronted with dilemmas such as "destructive development" or "conservation stagnation" [2]. According to the National New Urbanization Plan of China issued in 2014, cities have shifted from incremental expansion to the era of stock renewal since then. Stock renewal not only focuses on the development of physical space but also on the use, value creation, and distribution of elements under the space carrier. After 2019, China entered an era of high-quality development centered around the people (2019 National Strategy) [3]. Safeguarding public interests in urban renewal is a key component

for achieving high-quality development. The regeneration of historic districts has become an important part of urban transformation and development.

As a public good, the renewal of historic areas should pay more attention to their historical and cultural values, and their social values for people's happiness, sense of belonging, and sense of identity. However, urban planners and researchers typically investigate how to preserve and utilize historical districts, rather than considering them as urban public spaces. In this paper, we adopt the concept of "public value" to measure the value created for the public in the process of historical regeneration. It refers to the benefit or worth that a government or public organization creates for society as a whole [4]. Publicness is the most fundamental character of the public space [5,6]. Measuring the publicness of urban spaces is an interdisciplinary issue, involving dimensions such as ownership, rights, accessibility, perception of spaces, management, inclusiveness, etc. [7]. There is a substantial body of research on the publicness of public spaces [6]. However, there is a lack of morphological studies and descriptive indicators of historic districts. This study investigates the intricate relationship between urban morphology and the creation of public value in five representative areas that underwent urban regeneration between 2000 and 2020: Chengdu KuanZhai Alley, Shanghai TianZiFang Alley, Guangzhou EnNing Road, Taiyuan ZhongLou Street, and Beijing NanLuoGu Alley.

While the essence of public space in Western countries is the vehicle for the expression of democracy and social values, the value of public space in China depends on how it influences people's life experiences. As the highest realm of traditional Chinese spatial art is the integration of emotion and scenery [8], the value of public space in China lies in its capacity to influence people's life experiences by fostering a harmonious relationship between the physical environment and human emotions. Public spaces in China are designed to create a sense of balance and resonance, where the natural or built surroundings evoke and interact with the emotional states of individuals. This integration enhances people's daily lives by providing spaces that offer emotional solace, spiritual renewal, and a sense of belonging, thereby enriching their overall life experiences.

By analyzing the spatial attributes of these historic districts, this research aims to elucidate how urban morphology can foster community engagement and social interaction, thereby enhancing the quality of public spaces. This study posits that the concept of "public nature" is central to the regeneration process, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of urban spaces that promote inclusivity and accessibility.

The primary objectives of this research are to:

1. Examine the relationship between urban morphology and public value creation in selected historic districts.
2. Develop an evaluation system to assess the regeneration of these areas based on spatial "publicness" and people's perceptions.
3. Provide insights for urban planners and policymakers to advocate for a public value-oriented approach in the renewal of historic districts, balancing economic development with cultural heritage preservation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Historic Districts as Public Spaces

The regeneration of historic districts plays a crucial role in the creation of public space. It contributes to the formation of social bonds and embodies the unique identity of old towns [9]. Their significance lies in their role in enhancing a society's capacity to foster self-esteem and empowerment for individuals within the common cultural context. "This system of public spaces, this 'labyrinth', is perhaps the most important element of the historic city center. It is more intricately networked than all other subsequent city forms. This fine network not only reduced the distance between different points within the city, it also offers countless opportunities for planned and unplanned encounters and thus for human interaction" [10]. The architectural features, urban layout, and composition of urban

and architectural factors in historical public spaces greatly influence people's perception of space [11].

As American scholars B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore announced in 1998, after the product and service economy, the age of the experience economy has arrived. The economic value of historic districts has been highlighted. In this context, people pay more attention to the integration of senses and emotions in the process of consumption, feel pleasant emotions, and gain the experience of culture, history, science, and technology, in addition to increasing knowledge. In China, a lot of cultural heritage has been transformed into a commodity since 2000 [12]. As public goods, historic areas become "city name cards" and "Scenario consumption areas" under the establishment of entrepreneurial government in the progress of regeneration [13]. In addition, the historic environment also has a non-renewable nature of authenticity, and complexity of property rights and functions, which determines the specificity of historic districts as public goods. Against the backdrop of the modern Chinese economy, the urban renewal of historic areas serves as a strategy for advancing market growth and fostering the accumulation of capital. They have a strong tendency towards privatization and commercialization in the process of regeneration.

Admittedly, a run-down historical structure that currently diminishes the visual appeal of an area might not be appreciated by locals. However, regeneration holds the promise of enhancing the overall scenery and gaining admiration from future generations. The quality of the historical environment can be improved by analyzing the urban morphology of public spaces, which helps regenerate historic districts more correctly [14]. By integrating public spaces with the historical environment and public life, multidimensional contributions are made that cannot be ignored [15]. The spatial and functional regeneration of historic districts as public spaces makes the old city an engine of communication and creates value for the public.

2.2. Publicness in the Context of Urban Morphology

Urban morphology is, according to Conzen, the "objectivation of the spirit" of the succession of societies that inhabit it [16]. It can improve urban planning by providing a scientific basis for understanding and designing cities. The study of urban form, through methodologies such as comprehensive historico-geographical analysis, allows for a better understanding of cities' material structure and relationships [17]. By analyzing the street systems, plot patterns, building arrangements, and land uses of human settlements, urban morphology can inform the design process and help define site-specific goals and programs [18]. Within the realm of describing physical space, common indicators such as accessibility, urban fabric, permeability, and land use, among others, are often employed to provide a nuanced understanding of urban environments. The characteristics we can observe reflect the wishes, actions, and life encounters of these societies [19]. Meanwhile, the main goal of urban design is to enhance the sociability of urban space by building public spaces that better civic life [20]. The design and organization of these spaces can have a significant impact on the social and cultural life of communities, and on the degree to which they foster a sense of publicness—that is, a shared sense of identity, belonging, and collective action.

Publicness in urban morphology can be defined as the degree of inclusivity and fairness in public open spaces within a city [21]. Measuring publicness in urban morphology involves assessing the spatial characteristics and distribution patterns of public spaces and activities [22]. This can be carried out through a combination of qualitative and quantitative assessment tools. For example, the Star Model, a qualitative assessment tool (it has five axes, each corresponding to the five meta-dimensions of publicness, including ownership, control, civility, physical configuration, and animation), can be integrated with Space Syntax, a quantitative assessment tool, to provide a comprehensive understanding of public spaces and their mechanisms of publicness [23]. Other main crucial analytical models of the publicness of public spaces are the Cobweb Model [24], the Linear Method and the Tri-Axal Model [25], and the OMAI Model [26]. By analyzing the common factors

of these models such as spatial accessibility, choice, and public activity, the impact of spatial morphology on public life can be explored and understood [27]. These approaches can guide future spatial planning and design, enhancing the publicness of urban spaces. It is also possible to analyze the publicness of historic districts as public spaces to assess the impact of their urban morphology on public life and public value.

2.3. Public Value of Historic Districts and Measurement

As an essential part of human civilization, the perception of heritage value influences the scope and methods of protection and utilization of historic areas. The concept of heritage value is evolving and the update of the understanding of heritage value is the basis for achieving contemporary vitality in historic areas. From Alois Riegl (the famous Austrian art historian that, for the first time in Western civilization, theorized the values of architectural and urban heritage at the beginning of the 20th century) [28], to Nara Grid (a tool designed to assess the multidisciplinary values and authenticity of cultural heritage in the context of heritage protection and conservation), to China's "Norms for the Protection and Planning of Historic and Cultural Cities" (2005 & 2018), through "Principles, Policies, and Guidelines for the Sustainable Management of Historic Environment Protection" (Guidelines in short) published by English Heritage in 2008 and 2015, different heritage values are proposed, such as historical value, artistic value, use value, and communal value, among others.

Public value was originally introduced by Harvard University Public Management professor Mark H. Moore in 1995. It is the concept that public organizations and policies should be designed to create and deliver outcomes that are important to the public. Public value therefore inverts the traditional 'producer-led' approach to heritage management and is instead predominantly 'consumer-led' [29]. Over the last two decades, the integration of public value concepts into cultural heritage has become pervasive. Professionals and scholars, including those like Clark [30], have delved into understanding the connection between heritage and the public. Their efforts have significantly shaped the theories and management practices associated with heritage. "These 'public' concerns define a heritage which is dynamic, plural, and experienced, rather than static, objectively assessed, and materialistic" [31]. Guided by public values, English Heritage organizations have shifted from having expert decisions to having public decisions when choosing the heritage conservation projects they fund, shifting from what they want to provide for the public to what the public wants them to provide [32]. Feng Gaoshang and Zhang Shangwu (taking the Kunming Cuihu Lake renewal plan as an example) explored the urban renovation planning strategies guided by public value. The analysis focuses on three aspects: constructing a public space system, enhancing public functions, and public participation in the planning and implementation process of renovation [33].

To measure the public value of heritage, English Heritage organizations adopt a comprehensive model which includes 'intrinsic value (the meaning and value people attach to places and things, including evidential, historical, aesthetic values and so on)', 'instrumental value (benefits of investment-economic, social, educational and recreational values)', and 'institutional value (the value of the service delivered by an institution and demonstrated through their behavior)' [31,32]. Among these, intrinsic values are benefits arising from ontological heritage values [34], which are closely related to the physical environment of the heritage. The regeneration of the urban morphology of historic districts can be described as the creation of intrinsic value. On this basis, Zhang, R. et al. propose an analytical framework for the public value of the regeneration of historic districts, which involves a tiered approach to excavating and upgrading historic districts at the macro, meso, and micro levels in the spatial dimension [35]. In addition, Moore emphasizes that public value concepts find their foundation in individual perceptions of value [4]. To comprehensively understand the value of a space, evaluating its utilization and the public's perception is crucial, as the users represent the genuine beneficiaries of its existence [23]. Although it is more difficult to measure the identity of a place, resultant happiness, and sense of accomplishment than to calculate direct economic outputs, some methods of analysis,

such as 'willingness to pay', 'stated preference', and 'subjective well-being assessment' are used by heritage sectors [36]. Utilizing the customer satisfaction theory, Shi, J, etc. (2023) constructed a comprehensive model for assessing public satisfaction with waterfronts. The model aimed to systematically explore key factors and resulting outcomes related to waterfront satisfaction relying on questionnaire responses from 240 individual visitors in Shanghai, China [37].

3. Methodology

The objective analysis of urban morphology is combined with subjective perceptions to verify whether these forms can predict and elucidate individuals' feelings, ultimately determining the public value of historic districts. This approach aligns with the Heideggerian connections between individuals and their perceived world, emphasizing the importance of objective and subjective dimensions in urban regeneration efforts [34].

3.1. Objective Analysis: Assessing Publicness of Urban Morphology

3.1.1. Methods of Analysis

This study adopts an inductive approach to identify key indicators of urban morphology (UM1-10) crucial for defining public spaces within historic districts (Table 1). Firstly, this study draws upon the literature on publicness (see Section 2.2) within urban morphology, particularly focusing on the dimensions of accessibility (physical and legal barriers to access), inclusiveness (diversity of uses and users), permeability, and imageability. Secondly, from a value-centric perspective, the regeneration of historical settings and the reshaping of spatial configurations at varying scales generate unique values. Referring to an analytical framework [35] for the public value of the regeneration of historic districts, the research investigates urban morphology through three different scales. To guarantee consistency, the assessing scoring system is based on a 5-point system, including 1 (least public), 3 (middle) and 5 (most public) [23].

At the macro (urban) scale, it is mainly about its structural role in the contemporary city (UM1) and the old town (UM2), including centrality and its connections with other historical environment elements.

At meso (street) scale, the analysis of urban morphology encompasses multiple indicators, specifically UM3, UM4, UM5, UM6, and UM7, which collectively assess various spatial characteristics. Unlike the block pattern of Western cities, most of the traditional Chinese historic districts are fishbone-like or tree-like. In the regeneration of historic districts, the basic urban fabric is often not altered, but rather the streets become more networked by opening up local blockages or internal courtyards (from one street through a courtyard to another).

This research adopted traditional drawing analysis methods to illustrate how the spatial configurations of streets, particularly in traditional Chinese districts, influence pedestrian movement and social interactions. By enhancing accessibility through the opening of local blockages and internal courtyards, the regeneration efforts aim to maintain the historical essence of these areas while fostering vibrant public life. This approach underscores the importance of understanding spatial characteristics to create inclusive public spaces that resonate with the community's cultural identity, ultimately impacting the quality of life in historic districts.

At the micro (building/plot) scale, the assessment is mainly about the architectural imageability of the buildings and the extent to which the traditional structure, materials, and workmanship are presented to the public. Imageability can be described as the characteristic feature of a physical entity that significantly increases the likelihood of eliciting a vivid mental image in any observer [38]. It is the distinctiveness of urban space that creates a sense of place.

Table 1. Indicators of objective analysis.

Aspects	Indicators			Description	Scoring Standard	Reference
Macro (Urban) Scale	UM1	Degree of centrality in the contemporary city		Assessment of the centrality of the location in a modern city, whether it is a municipal center, a district center, or a general area	Municipal Center (5) General Center (3) General area (1)	[6]
	UM2	Importance in the historical spatial structure		Assessment of the importance of the site for the spatial structure of the Old Town and its relevance to other historical and cultural elements	The site is located at the historical axis, and connected with other important historic sites (5). Not located at the historical axis but connected with other important historic sites (3). The site is an isolated historic element in contemporary city (1).	[35]
Meso (Street) scale	UM3	Accessibility to different types of public spaces		Assessing the grading and openness of public space, such as whether it contains streets, squares, courtyards and whether it is open to the public	The public space consists of three levels: courtyards, small squares, streets, etc. and all are open to public (5). Courtyard closed, small square and street open (3). The public space contains only the street (1).	[26]
	UM4	Space permeability		Assessment of the ability to move through an environment.	Gridding of streets and alleys in 5 cases: Finely meshed grids (5). Middle degree (3). Coarser grids (1).	[39]
	UM5	Mobility: degree of pedestrianization		Evaluate whether major streets and alleys are pedestrianized or mixed with pedestrian and vehicle traffic	All the streets are pedestrian (5). Mixed pedestrian and vehicular traffic on major streets (3). Mixed pedestrian and vehicle traffic on all streets and valleys (1).	[39]
	UM6	Mix of Land Use		Evaluate whether the proportion of residential, commercial and public services land has a varied mix	Mixed and balanced mix of land use (5). Medium mix (3). Low mix (1).	[26,39]
	UM7	Urban fabric		Evaluate the percentage of historical urban fabric kept compared to the historic fabric	>90% (5); 70–90% (3); ≤70% (1).	[40]
Mirco (building/ plot) scale	UM8	Architectural imageability	Constructive system	Evaluate whether traditional structural forms have been applied	Evaluate each case based on the classification and renovation analysis of block buildings, as well as the requirements for building construction, construction technology, and materials under various renovation measures. The traditional architectural imageability of buildings is largely preserved (5), medium (3), less preserved (1).	[35,41]
	UM9		construction techniques	Evaluate whether traditional construction techniques have been applied		
	UM10		Building materials	Evaluate whether traditional building materials have been applied		

3.1.2. Materials

The data for this study were drawn from multiple sources. A significant portion of the materials were obtained from government websites, including urban master plans and publicly disclosed documents, such as the "Guidelines for the Protection and Control of the Historic and Cultural District of Nanluogu Alley in Beijing (Trial)". Additionally, the author collected project design materials during her tenure at the Taiyuan Urban and Rural Planning Institute, such as the "Protection and Utilization Plan for the Enning Road Historic and Cultural District in Guangzhou." Furthermore, relevant literature and references were consulted to supplement the research. Moreover, the authors conducted field research in the historic districts of various case study cities to investigate the current conditions that differ from the design materials and made corresponding adjustments in the analysis.

3.2. Subjective Analysis: Questionnaires on People's Perception

3.2.1. Questionnaire Design

Firstly, the questionnaire (Table 2) of people's perception (PP1-10) was designed in accordance with the scales and indicators of publicness of urban morphology shown in Table 1. For instance, UM1 pertains to the 'degree of centrality' within the contemporary city. To gauge the public's perception of centrality, PP1 was formulated as 'I consider

the district to be very accessible from other parts of the city.' High agreement with this statement among survey participants would suggest a strong perception of centrality for the area. The final design of the questionnaire was also reviewed and approved by two professors in the field.

Table 2. Questionnaire on people's perception.

People's Perception on Urban Morphology			
Aspects	**Questions**		**Public Value**
Macro (Urban) Scale	PP1	I consider Zhonglou Street to be very accessible from other parts of Taiyuan City.	Social and economic value
	PP2	The Bell Street Historic District deepened my impression of Taiyuan as a historical and cultural city.	Historical value
Meso (Street) scale	PP3	I am satisfied with the public spaces, including streets, squares and courtyards, which are open and welcoming.	Historical, social and use value
	PP4	It was easy for me to find my way around within Bell Street and it was very convenient to move between locations.	Social and use value
	PP5	I am satisfied with the comfort of the pedestrianized streets here, without the distraction of motor vehicles.	Social and use value
	PP6	How many of the following activities (walking, eating, shopping, taking photos, exercising, sitting on street benches, watching performances, attending festivals, participating in cultural events) do you usually do in the historic district?	Social, economic and use value
	PP7	The pattern of streets and alleys and the layout of buildings (e.g., fishbone-shaped streets and alleys, courtyard layout, etc.) give me a historical atmosphere.	Historical value
Mirco (building/ plot) scale	PP8	The traditional architecture here struck me as different from modern reinforced concrete buildings in the form of columns, beams and roofs.	Historical, esthetic and educational value
	PP9	The traditional architecture here gives me a special sense of beauty in its construction techniques (e.g., wooden roofs, bricklaying styles, carvings, colorful paintings, window styles, etc.).	Historical, esthetic and educational value
	PP10	The traditional architecture of the area gave me a special sense of beauty in its building materials of brick, tile, stone and wood.	Historical, esthetic and educational value
People's perception on public value			
Emotion	PV1	I find it refreshing and interesting to come to this historic district, which inspires a lot of thoughts in me.	
Activity	PV2	I came to this historic district to have more social or cultural activities compared to other places.	
Overall experience	PV3	How would you rate the overall experience of visiting or living in the updated historic district?	

According to the theory of Moore, in the table's rightmost column, subjective public satisfaction corresponds to the relevant aspects of public perceived values. These values have been combined with the Nara Grid to define artistic, historical, social, scientific/cultural, and economic values expressed by the built cultural heritage [42].

Additionally, to assess individuals' subjective perceptions of public values, a survey was conducted from the perspectives of emotion, activity, and overall experience (PV1-3).

The five-point Likert scale is utilized to measure the items except for P6, in which the level of agreement grows with the score: a score of 1 signifies total disagreement, and a score of 5 signifies total agreement. For PP6, the options are as follows: score 1 means 1 item, score 2 means 2–3 items, score 3 means 4–5 items, score 4 means 6–7 items, and score 5 means 8–9 items. This study averages the results of all the questionnaires to obtain the results of each item.

3.2.2. Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through a survey administered using the "Wenjuanxing" (Questionnaire Star) mini-program on WeChat. The survey consisted of two parts: on-site data collection and online distribution.

On-Site data collection: About one-fifth of the questionnaires were randomly distributed on site at historical districts. Visitors to these areas were approached and invited to participate in the survey. They were provided with a QR code to scan, which directed them to the online questionnaire on the "Wenjuanxing" platform. This method ensured that the respondents were actual visitors to the historical districts, providing firsthand insights into their experiences and perceptions.

Online distribution: The remaining part of the survey was distributed online through the social networks of citizens. Friends and acquaintances of the research team, as well as their extended networks on WeChat, were asked to share the survey link within their circles. This approach helped to reach a broader audience, including those who might not have been present at the historical districts during the on-site data collection period.

3.2.3. Sample Size and Response Rate

The survey was conducted across five historical districts in different cities between 2023 and 2024. The first question of the survey asked whether the respondents had visited the historical district after its renovation, and only those who answered affirmatively were considered to have provided valid responses. The effective number of questionnaires collected from each location is as follows: Chengdu's KuanZhai Alleys (208 valid responses), Shanghai's TianZiFang (213 valid responses), GuangZhou's EnNing Road (215 valid responses), Taiyuan's ZhongLou Street (252 valid responses), and Beijing's NanLuoGu Alley (231 valid responses). In total, 1116 valid responses were collected, satisfying the requirement that the sample size should be 5–10 times the number of observed variables.

Taking Taiyuan ZhongLou Street as an example, the sample statistical characteristics are given in Table 3. The sample was distributed across different genders, ages, and address and income groups, demonstrating the diversity and randomness of the empirical sample. In addition, 92.97% of the respondents were local residents, mainly because local residents tend to congregate in the Zhonglou Street area to engage in daily recreational activities. Moreover, they are major stakeholders who could reap the benefit of the street's redevelopment and have a strong demand for further improvement of the area. This also suggests that the collected samples are valid and the evaluation results are reliable.

Table 3. Sample characteristics of 270 respondents of Taiyuan ZhongLou Street.

Category	Classification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Ever been to the historic district	Yes	252	93.33%
	No	18	6.67%
Gender	Male	106	39.26%
	Female	164	60.74%
Age	Under 18	6	2.22%
	18–25	27	10.00%
	26–40	128	47.41%
	41–60	89	32.96%
	61 and over	20	7.41
Address	Within 3 km away from the site	72	26.67%
	More than 3 km away from the site	179	66.30%
	Visitors from other cities	19	7.04%

Table 3. *Cont.*

Category	Classification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yearly income	Less than RMB 20,000	47	17.41%
	RMB 20,000–60,000	81	30.00%
	RMB 60,000–120,000	104	38.52%
	RMB 120,000–300,000	35	12.96%
	More than RMB 300,000	3	1.11%

4. Case Studies

4.1. Selection Criteria for Case Studies

In this research, five cases are selected for comparative study (Table 4), which are Chengdu KuanZhai Alley (West China), Shanghai TianZiFang Alley (East China), Guangzhou EnNing Road (South China) Beijing NanLuoGu Alley (North China), and Taiyuan ZhongLou Street (Central China). The cases were selected considering different regions, different development levels, and different starting times of urban renewal ranging from 2000 to 2020.

Table 4. Summary of case study selection and their geographic distribution.

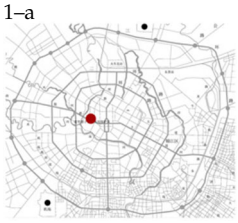
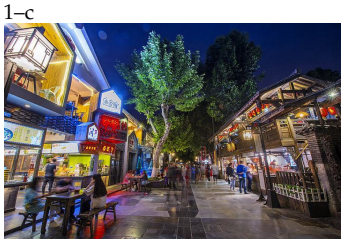
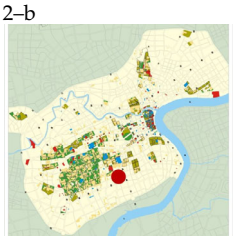
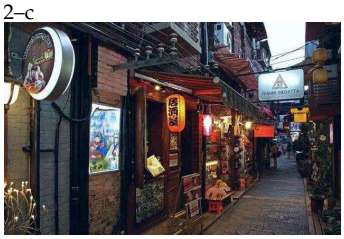
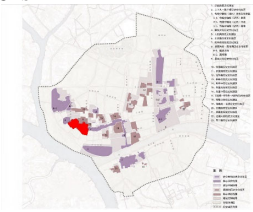
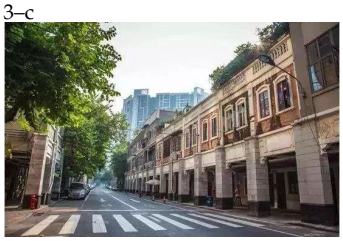
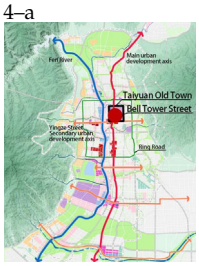
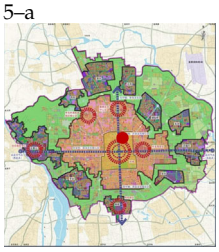
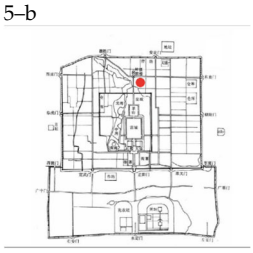
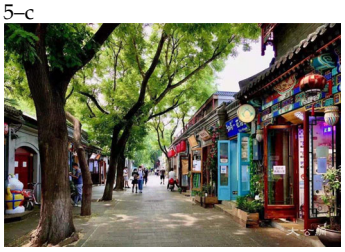
Cases	Time for Regeneration	Historical Times	Area (ha)	Location in the Contemporary City	Location in the Old Town	Street View
1. Chengdu Kuanzhai Alley	2003–2008	After 1718	6.66	1–a 	1–b 	1–c 
2. Shanghai TianZiFang Alley	2004–2010	1920s	7	2–a 	2–b 	2–c 
3. Guangzhou EnNing Road	2007–now	About 1930s	16	3–a 	3–b 	3–c 
4. Taiyuan ZhongLou Street	2014–now	History: 982 BC, Urban fabric: 1900s	10.65	4–a 	4–b 	4–c 

Table 4. *Cont.*

Cases	Time for Regeneration	Historical Times	Area (ha)	Location in the Contemporary City	Location in the Old Town	Street View
5. Beijing NanLuoGu Alley	2016-2017	More than 700 years ago	25	5–a 	5–b 	5–c 

Source:1-a, 2-a, 3-a, 4-a, and 5-a, adapted from the master plan blueprint of Chengdu City, Shanghai City, Guangzhou City, Taiyuan City, and Beijing City; 1-b, adapted from the file of Architectural Design of the Core Area of Chengdu Kuan-Narrow Alley Historical and Cultural Conservation Zone; 2-b, adapted from Master Plan of Shanghai Downtown—Historic Landscape Conservation of Old Districts; 3-b, adapted from Guangzhou Masterplan 2035; 4-b, from reference [35]; 5-b, from Guiding Principles for the Protection and Control of the Windscape of Nanluoguxiang Historic and Cultural Neighbourhood; 1-c, 2-c, 3-c, 5-c, from https://images.baidu.com, accessed on 16 December 2023; 4-c, from a file from Taiyuan Institute of Architecture Design and Research, 2022.

4.2. Urban Morphology Analysis

4.2.1. At Macro (Urban) Scale

By examining the urban master plans of the cities where the historic districts are located, the centrality of these districts within the modern urban context was assessed. For instance, in the "Guangzhou City Master Plan (2017–2035)," the Enning Road Historic and Cultural District is situated within the "main urban area" of the urban–rural spatial network system, which includes the main urban area, secondary centers, peripheral urban areas, new towns, and rural areas. However, it is not within the range of city-level public service centers and thus is not a city-level center. Therefore, it can be assigned a score of 3 for the indicator UM1 according to the scoring standard in Table 1. Additionally, the Enning Road Historic and Cultural District is part of the "one belt, one axis, two rings" overall structure of the historic city area, which is formed by the "Pearl River Cultural Belt, traditional urban central axis, city walls, and arcade cultural landscape belt". It is not located within the traditional urban central axis but forms part of the arcade cultural landscape belt along with adjacent historic and cultural districts. Hence, it can be assigned a score of 3 for the indicator UM2. Using the same method, evaluations were conducted for all five case studies.

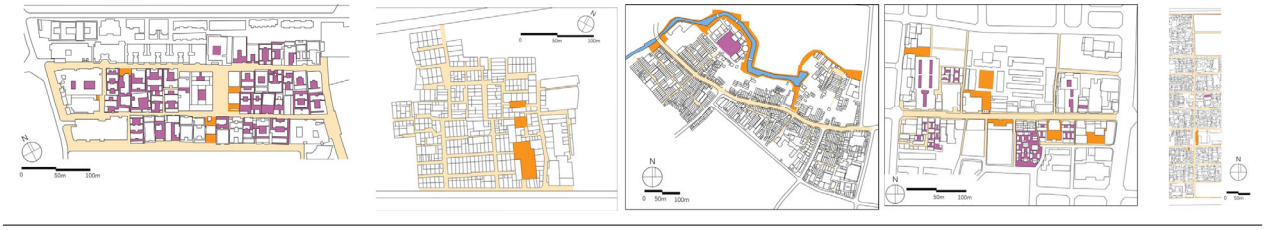
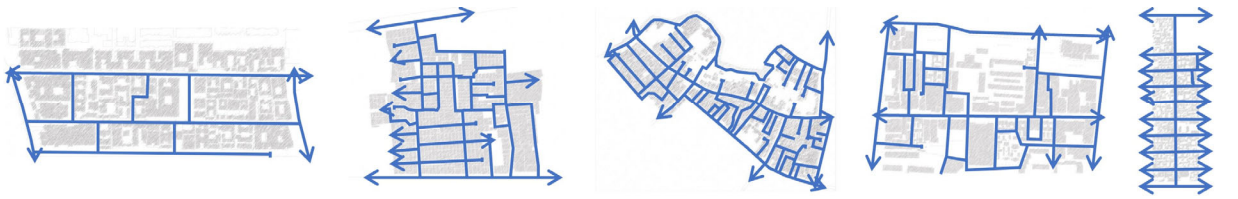
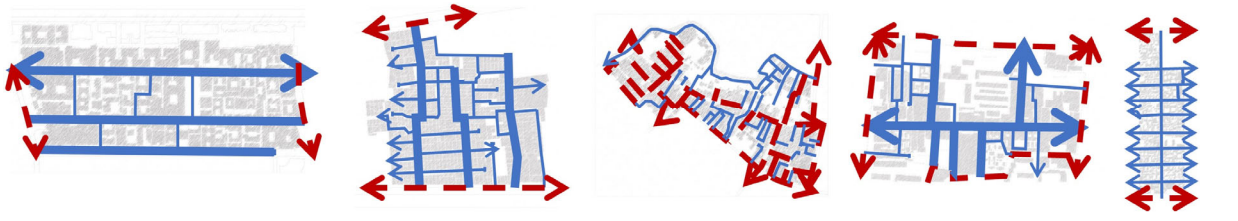
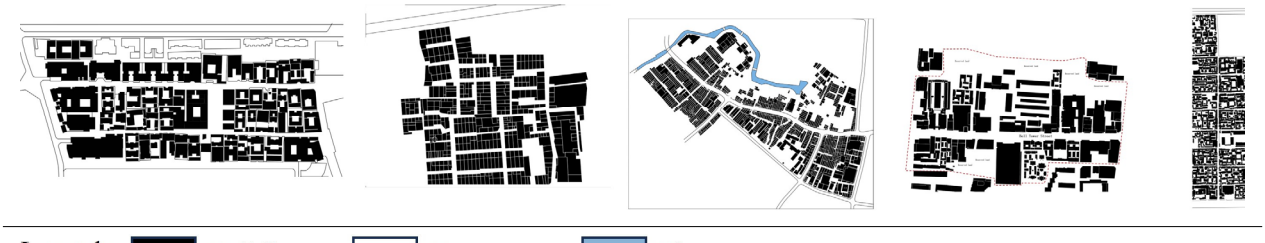
4.2.2. At Meso (Street) Scale

At the meso (street) scale, urban morphology analysis (Table 5) emphasizes the spatial characteristics and configurations of streets within historic districts. Traditional Chinese historic districts often feature unique layouts, such as fishbone-like or tree-like patterns, significantly influencing pedestrian movement and social interactions. The regeneration of these areas typically preserves the basic urban fabric while enhancing connectivity by addressing local blockages and opening internal courtyards, thereby increasing permeability between streets. This approach not only maintains the historical essence of the districts but also fosters a vibrant public life by encouraging social engagement and community activities [43].

For example, according to the scoring standard for indicator UM3 (accessibility to different types of public spaces) outlined in Table 1, a comparative analysis of UM3 for the five cities presented in Table 5 reveals the following: Chengdu Kuanzhai Alley and Taiyuan Zhonglou Street, with their abundance of open public spaces including courtyards, small squares, and streets accessible to the public, are assigned a score of 5, reflecting their high level of accessibility. In contrast, while primarily consisting of streets, Shanghai Tianzifang and Guangzhou Enning Road feature additional public spaces such as enlarged squares in Tianzifang and a riverfront waterfront space in Enning Road. However, the limited number of these spaces, particularly the single open courtyard in Enning Road, results in a score of

3, indicating moderate accessibility. Beijing Nanluoguxiang, with its predominantly alley-based layout, internal courtyards of traditional courtyard residences remaining private, and the absence of enlarged public squares, receives a score of 1, reflecting its low level of accessibility to public spaces.

Table 5. Urban morphology analysis at the meso (street) scale (source: drawn by the authors).

Indicators	Chengdu's KuanZhai Alley	Shanghai's TianZiFang Alley	Guangzhou's Enning Road	Taiyuan's ZhongLou Street	Beijing NanLuo Gu Alley
UM3					
UM4					
UM5					
UM6					
UM7					

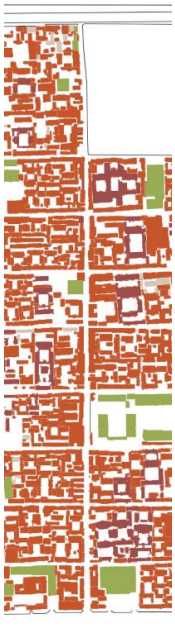
Utilizing the same methodology, the indicators UM4-7 were evaluated for each of the five cities, with the results presented in Table 7. Examining the street systems and their arrangements can provide insights into how the urban form impacts publicness and the overall quality of life in historic districts [44].

4.2.3. At Micro (Plot and Building) Scale

In the five cases, Chengdu's Kuanzhai Alley, Guangzhou's Enning Road, Taiyuan's Bell Tower Street, and Beijing's Nanluoguxiang have unified planning and design documents, which provide coordinated planning and management for the classification of protective measures for buildings. Although each project's types and specific measures vary slightly, they all follow the principle of categorizing interventions from "less to more." For ease of comparison, this study standardizes the protective measures of each project into categories: new construction at the original site, appearance restoration, maintenance and improvement, exterior maintenance, renovation and renewal, and demolition [37].

Taking Beijing's Nanluoguxiang as an example, as shown in Table 6, all buildings are divided into four categories according to the "Guidelines for the Protection and Control of Historical and Cultural Streetscape in Nanluoguxiang (Trial)," and the UM8, UM9, and UM10 categories are evaluated based on their respective protection and repair requirements. "Y" indicates that traditional building structures, craftsmanship, or materials are required, while "N" indicates they are not. The proportion of land designated as 'Y' for indicators UM8, UM9, and UM10, as calculated by the histogram pixel count in Photoshop, is 94%, 82%, and 83%, respectively. Conversely, the proportion of land marked as 'N' for these indicators is 6%, 17%, and 17%, respectively. Across the five case studies, the land proportion marked 'Y' is the highest when compared laterally. Consequently, all three indicators are assigned a score of 5 points. Using the same method, the five cases are then compared and scored according to the scoring standard in Table 1. Furthermore, the Tianzifang case in Shanghai lacks a unified top–down plan due to spontaneous maintenance and updates by residents. The authors conducted field research to evaluate and score it.

Table 6. Analysis of whether traditional forms have been maintained under the measures of building classification renovation (source: drawn by the authors).

Classification	Legend	Description	UM8	UM9	UM10
	Appearance restoration:	Immovable cultural heritage is implemented in accordance with conservation laws and plans. Repairs may only be carried out in accordance with the original architectural pattern and form of the building	Y	Y	Y
	Maintenance and improvement	Buildings should be preserved and traditional building forms restored when alterations are required	Y	Y	Y
	Exterior maintenance	Refurbishment or alteration of façades in keeping with the traditional character of the conservation area	Y	N	N
	Renovation and renewal	Renewal of the building should be in strict accordance with the spatial pattern, massing, scale, form, color and other traditional features of the conservation area	N	N	N

4.3. Results of Objective and Subjective Analysis

An analysis (Table 7) was conducted on the objective urban morphology (UM1-10) of five cities, the subjective (PP1-10) survey questionnaires, and overall perceptions of public value (PV1-3), with the results shown in Figure 1 below. The questionnaire results, formatted in Excel, were downloaded from the "Wenjuanxing" (Questionnaire Star) mini-program on WeChat. The data for each indicator were aggregated and averaged within the Excel spreadsheet, with the outcomes presented in Table 7. It is essential to discuss the results of subjective and objective analysis and to evaluate them within each case study, followed by a comparative analysis across the five cases.

Table 7. Results of subjective and objective analysis of five case cities.

Indicators	Chengdu		Shanghai		Guangzhou		Taiyuan		Beijing	
	UM	PP	UM	PP	UM	PP	UM	PP	UM	PP
1	3	4.25	5	3.85	3	3.9	5	3.8	5	3.81
2	5	3.93	3	3.85	3	3.95	5	4.01	5	3.66
3	5	4.07	3	3.48	3	4.13	5	4.05	1	3.37
4	3	4.16	5	3.49	3	3.91	3	3.97	1	3.41
5	5	4.02	5	3.79	1	3.45	5	4.14	3	3.73
6	1	4.06	3	3.93	5	3.9	3	2.84	1	2.18
7	3	4.1	5	3.96	5	3.94	3	4.05	5	3.79
8	3	3.92	3	3.9	3	3.82	3	4.05	5	3.81
9	3	4.04	1	3.57	1	3.98	3	4.15	5	3.74
10	1	4.04	1	3.59	1	3.98	1	4.12	5	3.66
Sum		40.59		37.41		38.96		39.18		35.16
PV1		4.06		3.96		4.03		4.06		3.69
PV2		4.09		3.75		3.83		3.76		2.34
PV3		4.12		3.9		4		4.06		3.01
Sum		12.27		11.61		11.86		11.88		9.04

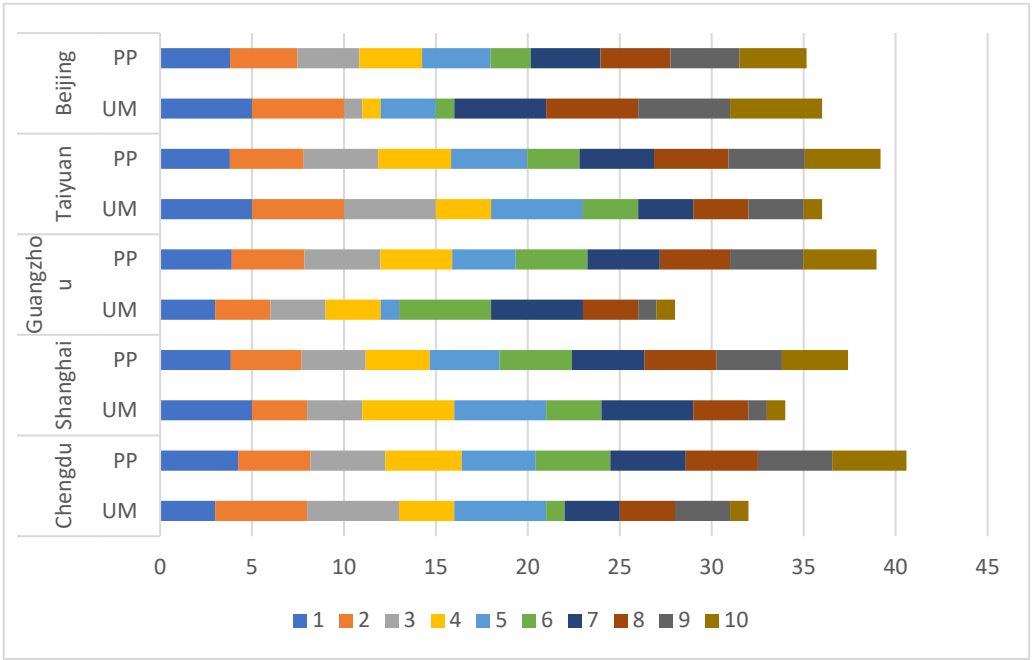


Figure 1. Chart of subjective and objective analysis of five case cities (source: drawn by the authors).

5. Discussion

5.1. Discussion of Subjective and Objective Analysis of Each City

Chengdu KuanZhai Alley: The high scores in UM indicators such as accessibility and mobility (degree of pedestrianization) suggest a well-connected public space network

that potentially fosters social interaction, which is reflected in the high PP3, PP5, and PV2 scores. However, the lower scores in UM6 (Mix of land use) and UM10 (Building materials) indicate the possibility of excessive commercialization in the district. But this was not reflected in the corresponding PP6 and PP10. As "China's first courtyard-style scene consumption experience area", the objective spatial form of Kuanzhai Alley gives people a highly subjective perception and evaluation [45].

Shanghai TianZiFang Alley's strong performance in UM5 and UM7 is reflected by the high PP5 and PP7, indicating that people have a strong perception of pedestrian environments and traditional urban fabric. However, the high score in UM4 and low score in PP4 suggest that space permeability has little significance for people's perception. The low scores in PP3, PP9, and PP10 indicate that Tianzifang, as a historically evolved urban district transforming from the bottom–up, lacks a well-coordinated public space system under unified planning, as well as a diminished historical value due to the absence of architectural restoration management [46].

Guangzhou EnNing Road: The elevated scores in UM6 and UM7, coupled with the lower score in UM5, are probable factors playing a role in the high PP6 and PP7 outcomes, as well as the reduced PP5 score. Conversely, despite suboptimal objective environmental scores, the high scores for PP3, PP9, and PP10 suggest a superior construction quality within this historic district. The regeneration project exemplifies a pioneering approach to the organic renewal of historic areas, aiming to enhance amenities, elevate the standard of living, create new urban landmarks and identifiers, and revitalize industries [47].

Taiyuan ZhongLou Street: The highest scores of UM1 and UM2 demonstrate the significant role of this historic district in the urban structure. The high scores on UM3 and UM5 are also reflected in PP3 and PP5.

Beijing NanLuoGu Alley: The high scores in UM1, 2, 7, 8, 9, and 10 show the great role of the district for the city and its significant historical value. However, the lowest PP and PV scores in the five cities show that this historic district does not fully reflect its public value [48].

In summary, this study across five cities reveals that urban morphology can impact public value, with the potential for improved design and management to holistically enhance public spaces. The findings highlight the need to incorporate urban morphology in planning to boost public participation and urban life quality.

5.2. Discussion on Subjective and Objective Analysis in Five Historic Districts

To deepen the research's comprehensiveness and critical analysis, a comparative study of the five cities will be conducted alongside the individual examinations. Furthermore, it is crucial to interpret the indicators and elucidate their role in enhancing public value and societal benefits, particularly in the context of urban morphology.

Re-centralization: The five case studies are all situated in or near city centers, illustrating a trend of re-centralization in urban regeneration. This approach aims to revitalize historic districts, enhancing their role as hubs for social interaction and community engagement. By improving accessibility, these areas attract visitors and foster vibrant public life, essential for urban cohesion. The regeneration efforts balance modern needs with cultural heritage preservation, ensuring these historic spaces remain relevant and functional in today's urban landscape [43]. This re-centralization not only improves public spaces but also promotes social equity and cultural integrity within the city.

Accessibility and connectivity: The correlation between certain objective urban morphology (UM3, UM4, UM5) and subjective perceptions indicates that accessibility is essential in urban regeneration. By enhancing connectivity through the opening of streets and courtyards, the spatial layout encourages movement and interaction among residents and visitors. This increased accessibility fosters a vibrant public life, which is crucial for the social fabric of historic districts [49,50].

Architectural imageability and authenticity: Architectural imageability is essential for assessing the authenticity and traditional character of buildings in urban regenera-

tion. The findings reveal that while some indicators (UM8, UM9, UM10) do not correlate with subjective perceptions, visual impressions remain crucial. High scores for Taiyuan's ZhongLou Street and Chengdu's Kuanzhai Alley highlight their unique cultural identities, establishing them as significant urban landmarks. Conversely, the lower scores for Shanghai and Beijing indicate a perception of these areas as part of a larger historical context, lacking distinct architectural identity. From the perspective of public value, a sense of heritage value that is not encumbered by preservationist rules or technical conservation, nor completely by economic imperatives, but which treats the creation of public benefits as its core instrumental aim, within which high-quality conservation is encouraged and economic sustainability and return maximized, should be encouraged [34].

Public-oriented land use: The land use analysis in Chengdu and Beijing highlights a significant disparity in functional diversity, with both cities objectively scoring 1, indicating a singular land use function. Chengdu's higher subjective score is attributed to the commercial focus of Kuanzhai Alley, contrasting with the residential nature of Nanluoguxiang. This situation illustrates a tension between economic development and gentrification, as rapid urbanization elevates property values, transforming residents into affluent groups. Conversely, Taiyuan, despite a higher commercial land use ratio, exhibits a low subjective score due to its commercial offerings not aligning with public needs. This emphasizes the necessity of public-oriented land use in fostering public value and community engagement, directly impacting residents' satisfaction and participation in urban spaces.

Emotional resonance: The sum of the subjective scores of PP1-10 and PV1-3 shows a high degree of consistency in the ranking of five cities. Chengdu's Kuanzhai Alley and Taiyuan's ZhongLou Street rank highest, reflecting their unique appeal to residents. This uniqueness aligns with the integration of emotional and spatial experiences in Chinese urban design, where the historical context and aesthetic qualities of the built environment evoke strong emotional responses. Such emotional engagement is crucial for creating memorable urban experiences and significantly influences how individuals perceive and value public spaces.

Limitations and future research: The primary limitation of this study lies in its reliance on master planning design and architectural design materials for analysis. Field observations revealed that certain functional aspects and the actual layouts had deviated from the blueprints. Although the authors made adjustments to the drawings based on these inspections, the modifications may not entirely accurately reflect the current realities on the ground. Future research could be enhanced by accessing more real-time and precise data. Additionally, expanding the scope of this study beyond the five cities considered here to include data from a broader range of urban environments would contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

6. Conclusions

In summary, the regeneration of historic districts in China since 2000 has highlighted the vital connection between urban morphology and public value creation. This study emphasizes that the spatial attribute of "publicness" is crucial in the regeneration process as it encourages social interaction and community engagement, thereby enriching the urban experience. Historic districts, as objects, exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a while or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental art, town-planning, or landscape design. Modern people, as subjects, to enjoy themselves, use the space of the historic district as a stage, the buildings and artifacts as props, and the services as lights, integrating their senses and emotions, and feeling immediate pleasurable emotions and long-lasting, memorable, and growing satisfaction from the acquisition of knowledge and experience, recallable as well as the satisfaction of acquiring knowledge and experience growth.

By developing an evaluation system to assess the regeneration of historic areas, the research offers a framework for understanding how different spatial forms impact people's perceptions and experiences within these districts. The insights derived from the five case

studies—Chengdu Kuanzhai Alley, Shanghai TianZiFang Alley, Guangzhou EnNing Road, Taiyuan ZhongLou Street, and Beijing NanLuGu Alley—demonstrate various strategies for harmonizing historical preservation with modern urban needs, ensuring that the cultural significance of these areas is upheld while enhancing their functionality.

Looking forward, it is essential to continue exploring innovative strategies that prioritize public value in urban regeneration. This study's findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on urban renewal, underscoring the importance of creating vibrant, inclusive spaces that respect historical roots while adapting to contemporary demands. By focusing on the public nature of these spaces, urban planners can cultivate environments that not only preserve history but also foster social bonds and community empowerment, ultimately leading to a more enriched urban landscape.

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