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Public Value in Historic Environment Regeneration in China: A Public Perception Perspective on Spatial Form, Urban Governance, and People's Experience (2000–2020)

Ruijie Zhang [1], Miquel Martí Casanovas [2], Montserrat Bosch González [3] and Sijie Sun [4,*]

[1] Department of Architectural, Building Construction and Urbanism Technology, Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, 08034 Barcelona, Spain; zhangruijiee@outlook.com
[2] Department of Urbanism, Territory and Landscape, Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, 08034 Barcelona, Spain; miquel.marti@upc.edu
[3] Department of Architectural Technology, Escola Politècnica Superior d'Edificació de Barcelona, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, 08034 Barcelona, Spain; montserrat.bosch@upc.edu
[4] Department of Philosophy, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Barcelona, Spain
* Correspondence: 1583451@uab.cat

Abstract: This study, grounded in the theory of public value, explores how spatial form, urban governance, and people's experiences influence the realization of public value in the regeneration of historic environments (HER) in China. Addressing the current dilemma faced by historic districts between "destructive construction" and "frozen preservation", this research proposes that integrating public value into the HER process is crucial for promoting sustainable urban development. This study reviews key theories of public value and critically evaluates their application in historic environment regeneration. From a public perception perspective, this study constructs a hexagon public value model encompassing intrinsic, instrumental, and institutional values, analyzed through the dimensions of spatial form, urban governance, and people's experiences. Through an empirical analysis of five case studies in China (Chengdu Kuanzhai Alley, Shanghai Tianzifang Alley, Guangzhou Enning Road, Beijing Nanluogu Alley, and Taiyuan Zhonglou Street), this research employs structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the interactions between these factors. The results reveal that spatial form has a significant positive impact on intrinsic value, while urban governance and people's experiences have significant positive impacts on intrinsic, instrumental, and institutional values. The methodology combines bottom-up (based on grounded theory analysis of online user reviews) and top-down (literature review) approaches, ensuring the authenticity and theoretical depth of the questionnaire. The findings offer in-depth understanding and practical guidance for future HER work, contributing to bridging the knowledge gap in this field and providing a reference for urban managers and planners to balance preservation, development, and public interests in historic environment regeneration.

Keywords: public value; heritage; spatial form; urban governance; people's experience

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1. Introduction

The rapid urbanization and modernization in China since 2000, driven by neoliberalism and entrepreneurial governance [1], have presented significant challenges to the preservation and regeneration of its historic environments. While the focus of China's urban transformation is shifting towards "people-centered" quality development, the

Chinese government recognizes the importance of preserving and regenerating historic environments (HER) to enhance cultural identity, promote tourism, and stimulate economic growth. Numerous HER projects have been initiated nationwide from 2000 to 2020 to revitalize historic districts while preserving their cultural and historical significance. However, these projects have yielded mixed outcomes, with some leading to gentrification and commercialization, marginalizing local communities, while others have struggled to adapt to the evolving needs of urban residents, resulting in underutilized spaces. Many historic districts in China face a dilemma between "destructive construction" and "frozen preservation", underscoring the need for a balanced approach to HER that integrates public value [2].

The concept of "public value", originally introduced by Mark H. Moore in 1995 [3], emphasizes the importance of aligning public sector activities with the needs and values of the community. This concept is a reaction to neoliberal ideologies [4] and places emphasis on people's rights and urban justice, particularly the right to the city as articulated by Lefebvre [5]. Lefebvre argued that city dwellers have specific spatial rights, including the right to participate in urban space production, access the city's advantages, avoid spatial segregation, and access basic public services [6,7]. The regeneration of historic districts is crucial in the creation of public space, highlighting the necessity of integrating public value into the HER process. This integration ensures that regeneration projects benefit the public and contribute to the overall sustainability of urban development.

Existing research offers many meaningful insights into integrating public value concepts into cultural heritage. However, gaps still exist. Firstly, current methods for measuring the public value of heritage, such as the triangle model used by English Heritage, need refinement for practical application in urban planning and heritage protection. Secondly, many studies approach HER from a top-down perspective, focusing on economic growth and city image improvement, while neglecting public subjective well-being, which is a citizen's overall assessment of experience satisfaction [8]. Therefore, a bottom-up framework is needed to evaluate public value performance that is aligned with "people-oriented" urban development. Finally, traditional regression models are commonly used in existing studies, with fewer employing causal models to explore the interplay between different influencing factors [9]. The structural equation model (SEM) allows for the modeling of complex relationships, including reciprocal and mediated effects, which are not easily captured by traditional regression models [10]. It is particularly useful in fields where researchers need to analyze multiple dependent and independent variables simultaneously, reflecting the multidimensional nature of the subject [11].

To address these gaps, this study develops a public value model of HER from the public's perception point of view. The model considers spatial form, urban governance, and people's experiences, alongside intrinsic, instrumental, and institutional values. This research employs a structural equation model (SEM) to test the model using data from 1119 visitors across five case studies in China, regenerated between 2000 and 2020. The findings and conclusions aim to be generalizable to other HER projects, offering practical guidance for city authorities and planners on balancing preservation, development, and public interests. This research contributes to bridging the knowledge gap in the field of historic environment regeneration by providing a robust model grounded in both theory and empirical data.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Theoretical Framework

2.1.1. Public Value Model for Heritage

In 1997, English Heritage published a discussion paper titled "Sustaining the historic environment: new perspectives on the future" [12]. The paper serves as a foundation, introducing fresh perspectives on the significance of heritage; it highlights heritage as a cornerstone of society and community, acknowledges its crucial role in our quality of life, and stresses the importance of sustainable approaches to managing heritage and the historic environment [4].

There is a close connection between public value theory and stakeholder theory. Stakeholder theory, as outlined by Chen and Roberts [13], acknowledges the diverse expectations of stakeholders and the potential conflicts that may arise among them. Managing stakeholder expectations is vital, particularly in a public setting where local governments have greater accountability responsibilities towards their stakeholders than in the for-profit sector. Local government officials act as representatives of the citizens who elected them and must be answerable to society for the authority they wield [14]. As Moore has elucidated, private sector organizations generate value by generating profit for shareholders and offering goods and services to customers. In contrast, for public sector organizations, their stakeholders are essentially the legislators who allocate resources and permit them to operate, with their customers being the beneficiaries of their services (although they may not directly pay for them). Public sector organizations must create value both upstream for those who provide resources and downstream for those who utilize their services, albeit not necessarily in monetary terms [15]. Public value shifts the traditional "producer-led" approach to heritage management to a more "consumer-led" perspective [16].

Hewison and Holden combined ideas about value in heritage with Moore's concept of public value to develop a simple yet powerful model (Figure 1) for understanding how heritage organizations can generate value [17]. The model consists of an equilateral triangle, with each angle representing the equal significance of intrinsic value, instrumental value, and institutional value. While this model offers a straightforward framework for assessing the public value of heritage, it still requires further refinement for practical application in urban planning and heritage conservation.

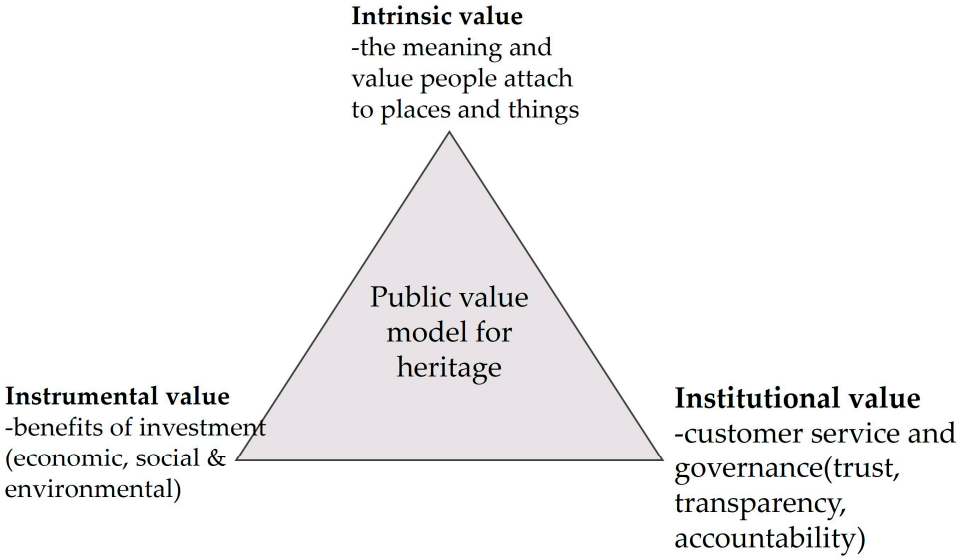

Figure 1. Public Value Model of Heritage, adapted from [17].

2.1.2. Historic Environment Regeneration Perspectives

The literature on heritage is mainly from perspectives of "protection and development", "renewal modes and concepts", and "social effect". History has proved that it is difficult to achieve the balance between protection and development from any single perspective, even achieving the sustainable revitalization of historical blocks [18]. Therefore, due to its complexity, diversity, and contradiction, the issue of historic area renewal needs to be understood and guided from a comprehensive perspective and a new paradigm.

Based on literature review, these three dimensions (object, subject, and perception) are the main elements of heritage in different theories [19]. Then, these elements compare with the theoretical framework of philosophy of science. There is a correlation between various paradigms of philosophy of science and the elements of historic environment. Historic environment regeneration can be seen as a process of space production. Lefebvre's triadic dialectics of spatial practice, representations of space, and spaces of representation can be applied to the research on heritage protection and can correspond to spatial form, urban governance, and people's experience, respectively (Figure 2).

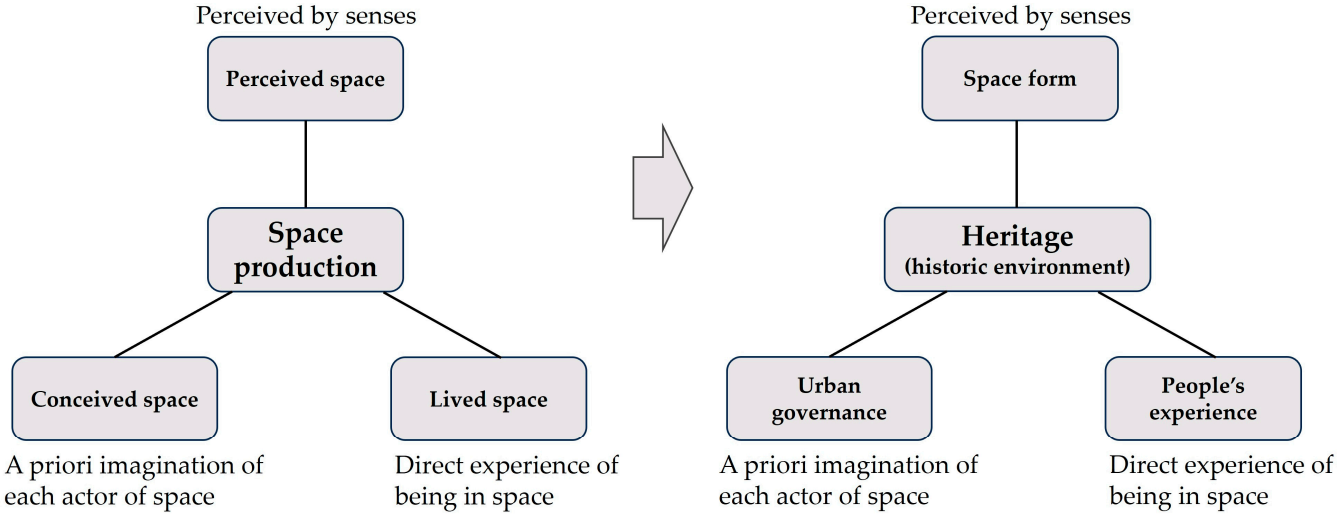

Figure 2. HER perspectives inspired by Lefebvre's spatial dialectics. (Source: drawn by the authors).

In the context of heritage protection, spatial practice (perceived space) can refer to the physical and material aspects of heritage sites, such as their architecture, layout, and infrastructure. This can include the preservation and restoration of historic buildings, the design of public spaces, and the planning of transportation networks. Spatial form is a term that is often used to describe the physical and material aspects of space, and it can be seen as corresponding to Lefebvre's concept of spatial practice.

Representations of space (conceived space) can refer to the policies, regulations, and plans that govern the preservation and management of heritage sites. This can include zoning laws, historic preservation ordinances, and cultural heritage management plans [19]. Urban governance originates from "spatial governance", which, in turn, originates from the definition of "spatial turn" in social science, where space is both a product of social relations and a producer of social relations. Urban governance refers to a systematic co-ordination process of the use, income, and distribution of spatial resources and elements, including the development of plans, policies, and regulations, the provision of public goods and services, and the management of public spaces and resources [18], and it can be seen as corresponding to the concept of representations of space.

Spaces of representation (lived space) can refer to how heritage sites are experienced and interpreted by different groups of people, such as tourists, residents, and community members. This can include the meanings, memories, and emotions that are attached to

particular places and spaces. People's experience is a term that is often used to describe how people interact with and interpret their environment, and it can be seen as corresponding to Lefebvre's concept of spaces of representation.

2.1.3. Conceptual Framework of Public Value Model of HER from Public's Perception' Point of View

In this study, based on the Public Value Model of Heritage (Figure 1) and taking the perspectives of historic environment regeneration into account, we construct a model to measure public value, as shown in Figure 3. Six variables, such as spatial form (SF), urban governance (UG), people's experience (PE), intrinsic value (VA), instrumental value (VB), and institutional value (VC), are selected in this model to investigate the determinants and consequences of public value with historic environment.

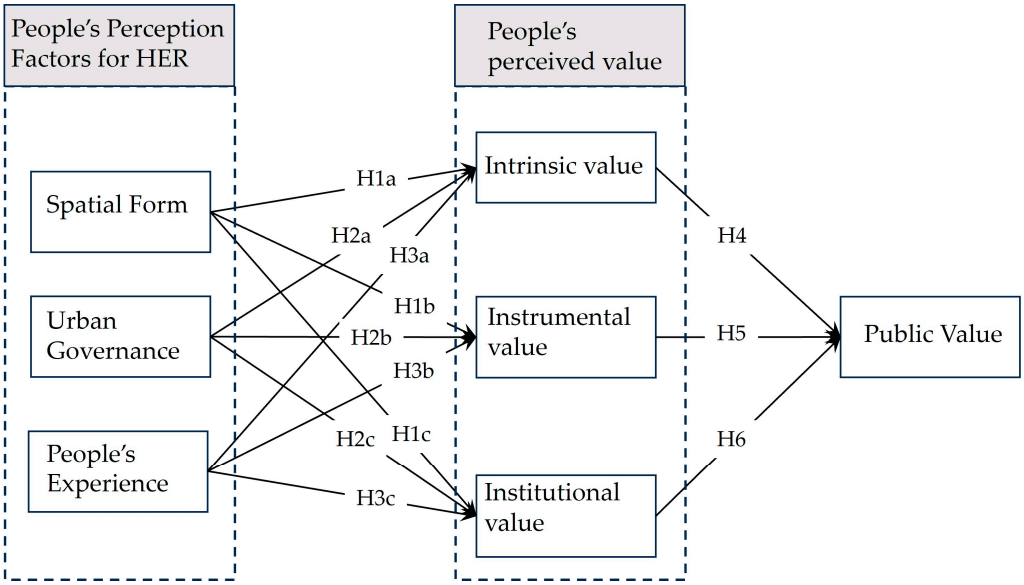

Figure 3. Public value model of HER from the public perception perspective (source: drawn by the author).

SEM is essential for this research due to its ability to handle complex interrelationships among multiple variables, including both observed and latent constructs like "public value", which cannot be directly measured. SEM allows for the simultaneous testing of hypothesized causal relationships between spatial form, urban governance, people's experiences, and the dimensions of public value, going beyond simple correlation analysis to explore the direction and strength of these relationships. Additionally, SEM accounts for measurement error, providing more accurate estimates of relationships between variables, and it offers various fit indices to ensure the model is a valid representation of the phenomena under investigation.

2.2. Research Hypotheses

2.2.1. Spatial Form

Architecture and urban design education focuses on spatial form, emphasizing the study of historic environments through thorough historical–geographical analysis. This aids in understanding the evolution of human settlements and design principles [20]. The preservation of cultural heritage has always been central to the revitalization of China's historic districts, with a focus on protecting and utilizing cultural heritage. Studies from this perspective highlight the originality and integrity of physical spaces before and after renewal. By examining the urban fabric, plot patterns, building arrangements, mobility, and land use of historic environments, spatial form can guide the design process and help

define site-specific characteristics and program goals [21]. The design and layout of these spaces can improve the sociability of urban areas by creating public spaces that enhance civic life and public value [22]. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): *SF has a positive impact VA.*

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): *SF has a positive impact on VB.*

Hypothesis 1c (H1c): *SF has a positive impact on VC.*

2.2.2. Urban Governance

Urban governance plays a crucial role in generating public value by leveraging democratic principles, participatory approaches, and technological advancements [23]. The shift towards public value governance emphasizes the responsiveness of managers and institutions to democratically formulated goals, highlighting the importance of citizen engagement and inclusivity in decision-making processes [24]. Municipal citizenship and collaborative governance are key aspects that contribute to the creation of public value, emphasizing the role of individual residents as active problem-solvers and co-producers of services [25]. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): *UG has a positive impact on VA.*

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): *UG has a positive impact on VB.*

Hypothesis 2c (H2c): *UG has a positive impact on VC.*

2.2.3. People's Experience

People's experience plays a crucial role in shaping public value perceptions [26]. Experience with a public service can significantly influence how individuals value that service, with certain experiences being more impactful than continued exposure [27]. Additionally, the interaction between service users and providers is essential in co-creating public value, where the value derived from these exchanges can vary among different individuals [28]. Furthermore, individuals' experiences are key factors that affect their engagement and satisfaction, ultimately influencing public value perceptions [29]. The public experience is characterized by the intertwining of individual and collective experiences, highlighting how culture influences the formation of public experience and, consequently, public value [30]. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): *PE has a positive impact on VA.*

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): *PE has a positive impact on VB.*

Hypothesis 3c (H3c): *PE has a positive impact on VC.*

2.2.4. Intrinsic, Instrumental, and Institutional Value

The public value model for heritage (Figure 1) explains that heritage organizations can create value for the public by caring for, protecting, or providing access to what is significant to people, by delivering wider economic, social, and environmental benefits through doing so, and, finally, by ensuring that the way in which it does is accountable, trustworthy, fair, and delivers good value for money [17]. To verify the public value model for heritage, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): *VA has a positive impact on public value.*

Hypothesis 5 (H5): *VB has a positive impact on public value.*

Hypothesis 6 (H6): *VC has a positive impact on public value.*

3. Research Methodology

Figure 4 illustrates the workflow of the research methodology employed in this study. The process begins with the design of the questionnaire and the selection of cases, integrating both bottom-up and top-down approaches. The bottom-up approach, rooted in Grounded Theory, involves web scraping, factor extraction through coding, and classification to select variables. This method ensures that the questionnaire is grounded in real-world data and user experiences. Complementing this, the top-down approach draws from the relevant literature and existing research to draft the model and select variables, ensuring a comprehensive and theoretically sound framework. The combined methodology was refined through group discussions with professors and PhD candidates, followed by the administration of the questionnaire survey and data collection. Subsequent steps included reliability and validity testing, model fit testing, and hypothesis verification, culminating in robust and validated results.

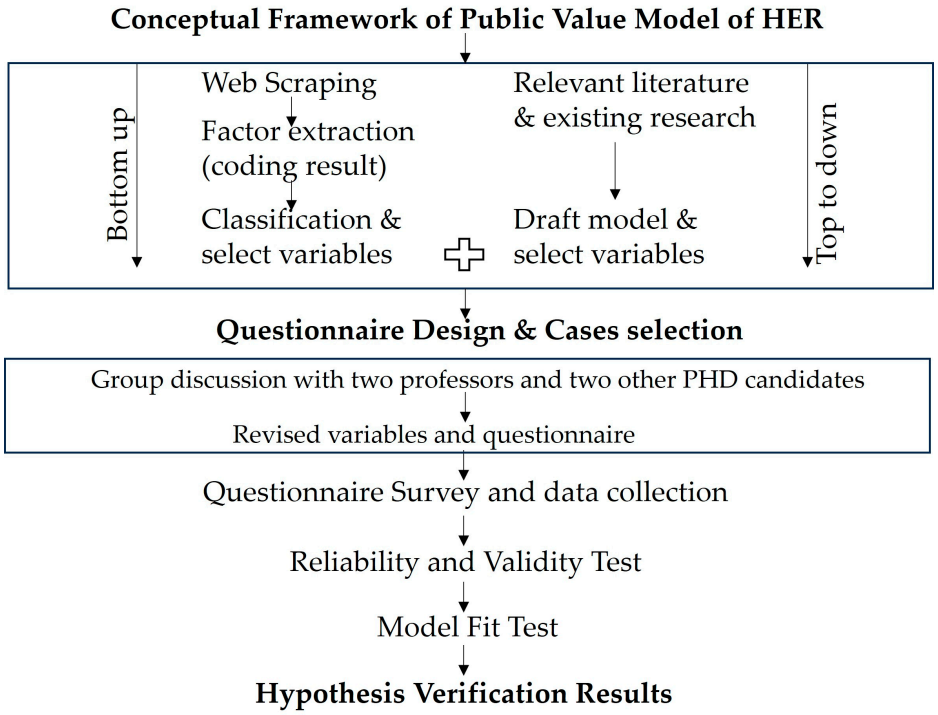

Figure 4. Workflow of the research methodology (source: drawn by the author).

3.1. Identifying People's Experiential Factors Based on Grounded Theory

To investigate the factors influencing users' usage intentions, it is necessary to consider the complexity of user experience comprehensively. This should not be limited to a review of the relevant literature but should also involve a more in-depth bottom-up investigation and analysis from the public's perspective, which aligns with the concept of public value. To this end, psychological research methods are adopted, and the feature identification approach is used to extract the perceived factors among visitors in historical districts, referred to as "manifest characteristics", to provide targeted research variables. To ensure the comprehensiveness of the research variables, data collection is conducted through online user reviews to obtain the raw data of the user evaluation system.

Firstly, a program is written using the Python-based framework, an open-source tool, to extract online user reviews from Dianping.com (China's most popular third-party consumer review website) on five historical districts. The data sources include 522 reviews of Chengdu KuanZhai Alley, 525 reviews of Shanghai TianZiFang Alley, 743 reviews of Guangzhou Enning Road (Yongqing Alley), 1027 reviews of Taiyuan Zhonglou Street, and 525 reviews of Beijing NanLuoGu Alley, totaling 3342 reviews extracted.

Based on the logical coding framework of grounded theory [31], this study employed open coding and axial coding to analyze and organize the conceptual-level logical relationships of perceived factor characteristics in user evaluations, with the aim of extracting core concepts. Consequently, the software NVivo12 was utilized to code 3342 valid text entries and to design nodes. Initially, a sentence-by-sentence analysis of the raw data was conducted. Through the analysis of the review texts, a series of high-frequency terms such as "alley", "characteristics", "bell tower", "culture", "architecture", "feeling", "snacks", "history", "food", "photography", "pedestrian street", "style", and "tourists" was clearly observed. These terms reflect the cultural experiences and perceptions of tourists in various tourist destinations.

Subsequently, this study employed a three-level coding process, where open coding analyzed the review texts to extract 19 initial concepts. For instance, from the comment "...Nanluogu Alley consists of parallel arrangements of wide alleys, narrow alleys, and well alleys, all featuring simulated ancient courtyard compounds with greenish-black brick tiles...", the initial concept of traditional architectural layout was extracted. These were then further developed into 6 subcategories and 3 main categories through axial coding and selective coding: tourist experience, cultural value cognition, and spatial form, which are the three core categories. The findings reveal that tourist experience and cultural value cognition influence each other, with spatial form serving as a bridge between the two. Fluidity and walking experiences are crucial to tourists' perceptions. The degree of commercialization and prices affect the tourist experience, while spatial layout and cultural elements enhance tourists' sense of participation and the quality of their experience. The coding process is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. User perception factor extraction (coding result).

Serial Number	Initial Concepts	Subcategories	Main Categories
A1	Cultural Experience and Willingness to Promote	Tourist Experience	Tourist Experience and Perception
A2	Scenic Area Pricing and Purchase Intention		
A3	Appreciation of Scenic Area Characteristics		
A4	A Fusion of Modern Aesthetics and Traditional Elements	Cultural Value Cognition	
A5	Urban Cultural Symbols		
A6	Tourist Flow	Spatial Form	Spatial Form and Cultural Connotation
A7	Mobility: Degree of Pedestrianization		
A8	Degree of centrality		
A9	Accesibility of Different Types of Public Spaces		
A10	Cultural Heritage and Innovation	Historical Identity and Status	
A11	Historical Authenticity of Heritage		
A12	Historical and Cultural Value		
A13	Cultural Commercialization	Public Functions	Public Value and Cultural Support
A14	Cultural Uniqueness		
A15	Social and Cultural Activity Experience		
A16	Traditional Historical Construction Elements	Traditional Architectural Cultural Support	
A17	Government Management and Maintenance		
A18	Traditional Architectural Cultural Landscape		
A19	Traditional Architectural Layout		

3.2. Selecting Variables from Relevant Literature and Existing Research

In terms of spatial form, previous studies have confirmed that pedestrian environments affect walkers' behaviors regarding 5D measures, density, diversity, design, destination accessibility, and distance to transit [32]. On this basis, our previous work, Zhang, R. et al. (2024), introduces an evaluation system to investigate the role of spatial form in creating public value in China's historic districts across macro, meso, and micro spatial dimensions [33]. The indicators and their corresponding questionnaire items, including centrality (SF1 and SF2), accessibility of public spaces (SF3), space permeability (SF4), degree of pedestrianization (SF5), mix of land use (SF6), urban fabric (SF7), and architectural imageability, construction techniques, and materials (SF8-SF10), were adopted in this study. This prior study established the validity and reliability of these measures, revealing the relationships between spatial form and public value. The present study maintains these indicators due to their proven efficacy and alignment with our public value model.

The urban governance (UG) indicators were chosen to reflect how public entities manage and influence historic districts, focusing on the public function of the space (UG1), the dissemination of project information (UG2), and initiatives to promote social and cultural vitality (UG3). These indicators are rooted in public value governance, emphasizing transparency, inclusivity, and responsiveness.

The people's experience (PE) indicators capture individual perceptions and interactions with historic districts, focusing on emotional engagement (PE1), participation in activities (PE2), and overall satisfaction (PE3). These aspects align with the concept of lived space, emphasizing subjective well-being and user feedback.

The intrinsic value (VA) indicators assess the inherent cultural and historical significance of the districts, focusing on historical and cultural significance (VA1), residents' sense of identity and pride (VA2), and the importance of historical authenticity (VA3).

The instrumental value (VB) indicators evaluate the tangible benefits derived from the regeneration of historic districts, focusing on local economic development (VB1), overall quality of life for residents (VB2), and the importance of tangible outcomes (VB3).

The institutional value (VC) indicators assess the effectiveness of management and governance, including local government management and maintenance (VC1), stakeholder participation (VC2), and residents' willingness to pay attention to related news (VC3).

The public value (PV) indicators measure overall public perception and acceptance of the regeneration, focusing on the degree of fondness (PV1), recognition of public funding expenditure (PV2), and recognition of public value (PV3).

The selection of these indicators is grounded in a robust theoretical framework of public value, as well as insights from the previous literature on heritage management and urban regeneration. They are designed to capture various dimensions of value from the public's perspective and are consistent with the model proposed in this study.

3.3. Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire for this study was designed using a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches to ensure both theoretical depth and relevance to real user experiences.

The bottom-up approach involved analyzing user reviews from Dianping.com, a popular Chinese consumer review website, to extract initial concepts related to tourist experience and cultural value cognition. For example, the question "VA1: I perceive that the Bell Tower Street historical district possesses unique historical and cultural significance" was inspired by the initial concept "A14: Cultural Uniqueness" from user reviews shown in Table 1.

The top-down approach focused on literature review. For variables without direct user review references, questions were primarily based on the relevant academic literature,

such as those about urban governance and public value. The "Reference or source" column in Table 2 indicates the main literature source for each question. It is important to note that Table 2's questionnaire content is based on Taiyuan Zhonglou Street as an example. For questionnaires used in other historic district cases, the references to Zhonglou Street and Taiyuan were replaced accordingly.

Table 2. Questionnaire on public perception (Taiyuan Zhonglou Street as an example).

Variables			Measurable Items	Reference or Source
Spatial form (SF)				
SF1	Degree of centrality in the contemporary city		I consider Zhonglou Street to be very accessible from other parts of Taiyuan City.	[33], Code Extraction from A6, A7, A8, A9, A16, A18, A19
SF2	Importance in the historical spatial structure		The Bell Street Historic District deepened my impression of Taiyuan as a historical and cultural city.	
SF3	Accessibility to different types of public spaces		I am satisfied with the public spaces, including streets, squares and courtyards, which are open and welcoming.	
SF4	Space permeability		It was easy for me to find my way around within Bell Street and it was very convenient to move between locations.	
SF5	Mobility: degree of pedestrianization		I am satisfied with the comfort of the pedestrianized streets here, without the distraction of motor vehicles.	
SF6	Mix of Land Use		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?	
SF7	Urban fabric		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.	
SF8	Architectural imageability	Constructive system	The traditional architecture here struck me as different from modern reinforced concrete buildings in the form of columns, beams and roofs.	
SF9		construction techniques	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.).	
SF10		Building materials	The traditional architecture of the area gave me a special sense of beauty in its building materials of brick, tile, stone and wood.	
Urban Governance (UG)				
UG1	Public function		I believe that Bell Tower Street serves as a public space with public functions, rather than being a private space exclusive to the use of a select few individuals.	[34–36]
UG2	Channels of dissemination		Through various channels of dissemination, including media news, WeChat public accounts, community promotion, and public discussions, I have acquired a certain level of knowledge regarding the renovation (conservation and renewal project) of Bell Tower Street in Taiyuan City.	[18]
UG3	Initiatives to promote social and cultural vitality		I contend that the government or other administrative entities have initiated certain measures to bolster and stimulate the social and cultural vibrancy of the Bell Tower Street historical district, such as through the facilitation of festival celebrations and similar activities.	Code Extraction from A17 (Table 1)
People's Experience (PE)				
PE1	Emotion		I find it refreshing and interesting to come to this historic district, which inspires a lot of thoughts in me.	[33]
PE2	Activity		I came to this historic district to have more social or cultural activities compared to other places.	
PE3	Overall experience		How would you rate your overall experience visiting or living in the regenerated historic district?	
Intrinsic value (VA)				
VA1	Historical and cultural significance		I perceive that the Bell Tower Street historical district possesses unique historical and cultural significance.	Code Extraction from A4, A10, A14
VA2	Residents' sense of identity and pride		I believe that the architecture and cultural heritage of Bell Tower Street contribute to reinforcing the residents' sense of identity and pride as Taiyuaners.	Code Extraction from A5, A15
VA3	The Importance of Historical Heritage Authenticity.		I contend that authentically preserving the historical and cultural heritage of Bell Tower Street—rather than demolishing genuine antiques and replacing them with pseudo-historical structures—holds greater significance than merely pursuing economic gains.	Code Extraction from A11, A12

Table 2. *Cont.*

Variables		Measurable Items	Reference or Source
Instrumental value (VB)			
VB1	Development of local economy	I believe that the conservation and revitalization of Bell Tower Street have contributed to the development of the local economy, such as by enhancing the tourism industry and creating employment opportunities.	[29], Code Extraction from A2
VB2	The overall quality of life for the residents	I contend that the conservation and renewal of Bell Tower Street have improved the overall quality of life for the residents of Bell Tower Street and its surrounding areas.	[18]
VB3	The Importance of tangible outcomes	I believe that the tangible outcomes of the Bell Tower Street conservation and renewal project, such as economic benefits, infrastructure improvements, educational value, and recreational amenities, are crucial for the long-term development and the preservation of historical heritage of Bell Tower Street.	[18], Code Extraction from A13
Institutional value (VC)			
VC1	Management and maintenance of local government	I believe that the local government or other administrative bodies have effectively managed and maintained the historical district.	Code Extraction from A17
VC2	Participation of different stakeholders	I believe that engaging a broader audience, including merchants and residents of Bell Tower Street, citizens of Taiyuan, experts and scholars in heritage conservation, and the media, in the preservation and renewal project of the Bell Tower Street historical district is of significant importance. Their attention and participation, such as providing historical photographs, stories, suggestions, and opinions, contribute vitally to the project.	[18]
VC3	Residents' willingness to pay attention	I am willing to pay attention to news and information related to the preservation and renewal of the Bell Tower Street historical district.	[17]
Public value (PV)			
PV1	Degree of fondness	I have an affection for Bell Tower Street and am inclined to visit here frequently.	Code Extraction from A1, A3
PV2	Recognition of public funding expenditure	I believe that the government's expenditure of public funds to preserve and restore this historical district is justified.	[37]
PV3	Recognition of public values	I am convinced that the revitalization of the Bell Tower Street historical district has imparted significant public value to the community.	[17]

Additionally, two professors and two doctoral candidates reviewed and modified the initial questionnaire draft to ensure clarity and accuracy. This combined approach ensured that the questionnaire was both grounded in real-world user experiences and theoreticall sound.

The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale for most items, except for SF6. For these items, the level of agreement increased with the score, where a score of 1 indicated complete disagreement and a score of 5 indicated complete agreement. In contrast, SF6 utilized a different scoring system: a score of 1 represented one activity, a score of 2 represented two to three activities, a score of 3 represented four to five activities, a score of 4 represented six to seven activities, and a score of 5 represented eight to nine activities. The specific items and their respective references are detailed in Table 2.

3.4. Cases Selection

This study selected five representative cases of historic district regeneration in China, each with distinct characteristics and renewal models. The cases were chosen to reflect diverse regional contexts, development levels, and renewal timelines ranging from 2000 to 2020.

Western China: Chengdu Kuanzhai Alley (2003–2008): Inspired by the Shanghai Xintiandi model, this project transformed a residential area into a commercial space, opening to the public in 2008. Led by real estate developers, it is positioned as "China's first courtyard-style scene consumption experience area." Covering 6.66 hectares, the project involved a one-time large-scale transformation from living space to commercial space. While original residents were removed, tourism has thrived for many years.

Eastern China: Shanghai Tianzifang Alley (2004–2010): This project underwent a significant shift in urban renewal, with community residents playing a pivotal role. Initially slated for demolition to build a commercial complex, residents successfully advocated for its preservation. By 2010, Tianzifang had become one of Shanghai's iconic landmarks. However, it has recently faced declining consumption. The project covers 7 hectares and involved small-scale, gradual improvements. Most residents rented out their houses and benefited financially, but tourism has declined in recent years.

Southern China: Guangzhou Enning Road (2007–Present): This ongoing project employs a Build–Operate–Transfer (BOT) model involving multiple stakeholders. Led by the government and operated by enterprises, it aims to improve infrastructure, enhance livelihoods, and establish new urban landmarks. Covering 16 hectares, the project turned from demolition to protection, including the transfer of property rights, repair, renovation, and reasonable utilization. The project has improved the city's image, tourism, and the living environment of residents.

Central China: Taiyuan Zhonglou Street (2014–Present): This project involved a one-time large-scale transformation, including demolition (over 60%), modification, retention, and utilization. The goal was to restore the memory, create the name card of the city, and improve the quality of the region. Covering 10.65 hectares, the project was led by the government for construction and repair work, with enterprises operating the project. Citizens' happiness improved and public space was created but original residents were removed.

Northern China: Beijing Nanluogu Alley (2016–2017): This project focused on cultural preservation and explored the integration of design guidelines with urban governance. Initially overlooked due to excessive commercialization, it underwent renewal and protection following the issuance of specific guidelines by the Beijing Municipal Government. Covering 84 hectares, the project involved one-time protection and improvement on the facades and environment. The goal was to build this area into a livable model for the protection and revitalization of historical and cultural areas. The city image and living environment of residents have improved.

3.5. Data Collection

This study's data were collected through a survey administered using the "Wenjuanxing" (Questionnaire Star) mini-program free version on WeChat. The survey was divided into two parts: on-site data collection and online distribution.

For on-site data collection, approximately one fifth of the questionnaires were randomly distributed to visitors at historical districts. These visitors were invited to participate by scanning a QR code that directed them to the online questionnaire on the "Wenjuanxing" platform, ensuring that respondents were actual visitors who could provide firsthand insights. The remaining surveys were distributed online through social networks, with the research team and their acquaintances sharing the survey link within their WeChat circles. This approach helped reach a broader audience, including those not present during on-site data collection.

The survey was conducted across five historical districts in different cities between 2023 and 2024. Respondents were asked if they had visited the district post-renovation, with only affirmative responses considered valid (Table 3). A total of 1119 valid responses were collected, meeting the requirement that the sample size should be 5–10 times the number of observed variables [33]. Before the aforementioned questionnaire survey, there were several questions for collecting basic personal information, such as gender, age, and education level, with nominal measurement scales. The diverse sample covered different genders, ages, addresses, and income groups. Notably, 85.54% of respondents were local residents who frequently visit the historic districts for recreational activities. As major stakeholders,

their insights are crucial for evaluating the redevelopment's impact, suggesting that the collected samples are valid and the evaluation results are reliable.

Table 3. Sample characteristics of 1119 respondents of five cases.

Category	Classification	Frequency						
		Chengdu KuanZhai Alley	Shanghai TianZiFang Alley	Guangzhou EnNing Road	Taiyuan ZhongLou Street	Beijing NanLuoGu Alley	Sum	Percentage (%)
Ever been to the historic district	Yes	208	213	215	252	231	1119	97.47%
	No	3	2	3	18	3	29	2.53%
Gender	Male	110	124	100	106	137	577	50.26%
	Female	101	91	118	164	97	571	49.74%
Age	Under 18	31	42	38	6	37	154	13.41%
	18–25	68	66	57	27	75	293	25.52%
	26–40	59	60	62	128	59	368	32.06%
	41–60	36	38	52	89	45	260	22.65%
	61 and over	17	9	9	20	18	73	6.36%
Address	Within 3 km away from the site	85	91	73	72	103	424	36.93%
	More than 3 km away from the site	93	90	109	179	87	558	48.61%
	Visitors from other cities	33	34	36	19	44	166	14.46%
Yearly income	Less than 20,000 CNY	27	26	23	47	32	155	13.50%
	20,000–60,000 CNY	43	34	37	81	41	236	20.56%
	60,000–120,000 CNY	71	65	79	104	67	386	33.62%
	120,000–300,000 CNY	48	58	54	35	60	255	22.21%
	More than 300,000 CNY	22	32	25	3	34	116	10.10%

4. Results

4.1. Reliability and Validity Test

This study conducted a comprehensive assessment of the questionnaire's reliability and validity. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha (CA; represents the extent to which the indicators within each structure are internally consistent) and composite reliability (CR; reflects the extent to which a set of items can represent potential constructs) [38], while validity was assessed through factor loading (FL) and average variance extracted (AVE). SPSS 27.0 software was employed in this study. The results are given in Table 4.

Reliability: The factor loading values (FL) for all items exceeded 0.7, indicating strong explanatory power of each item within its respective construct and meeting the requirements for measurement validity. Additionally, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients (CA) for all constructs were greater than 0.7, demonstrating good internal consistency reliability. Furthermore, the composite reliability (CR) for all constructs was above 0.8, meeting the standards for reliability assessment. These findings indicate good overall reliability of the questionnaire and sufficient internal consistency across all constructs.

Validity: The average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs exceeded 0.5, indicating good convergent validity of the instrument. The AVE values were as follows: PE (0.624), PV (0.609), SF (0.617), UG (0.627), VA (0.644), VB (0.656), and VC (0.613). These results demonstrate that the items within each construct effectively explain the variance in that construct, further supporting the convergent validity of the questionnaire.

Table 4. Reliability and convergent validity tests.

Construct	Ltem	FL	CA	CR	AVE
PE	PE1	0.791	0.832	0.833	0.624
	PE2	0.794			
	PE3	0.784			
PV	PV1	0.766	0.823	0.823	0.609
	PV2	0.774			
	PV3	0.8			
SF	SF1	0.804	0.941	0.941	0.617
	SF2	0.782			
	SF3	0.797			
	SF4	0.805			
	SF5	0.776			
	SF6	0.713			
	SF7	0.789			
	SF8	0.784			
	SF9	0.793			
	SF10	0.805			
UG	UG1	0.799	0.834	0.834	0.627
	UG2	0.814			
	UG3	0.761			
VA	VA1	0.824	0.843	0.844	0.644
	VA2	0.806			
	VA3	0.776			
VB	VB1	0.797	0.85	0.851	0.656
	VB2	0.791			
	VB3	0.84			
VC	VC1	0.745	0.825	0.826	0.613
	VC2	0.799			
	VC3	0.804			

In conclusion, the questionnaire exhibited good reliability and validity, making it suitable for further analysis. This suggests that the items in the questionnaire have high consistency and explanatory power in measuring each construct, and the instrument possesses good convergent validity.

In the analysis of discriminant validity (Table 5), the correlation values between constructs are used to assess whether different constructs can be effectively distinguished. As shown in the results, the diagonal values in the matrix (i.e., the correlation between a construct and itself) are generally high, with PV having a correlation of 0.78 with itself and VC having a correlation of 0.783 with itself. This indicates strong cohesion within each construct, which is as expected. In an ideal scenario, different constructs should maintain low correlations to ensure they measure independent dimensions. The results show that the correlations between constructs are low, demonstrating good discriminant validity. For instance, the correlation coefficient between PV and VC is 0.294, between PV and VA is 0.308, and between VC and VA is 0.34. These values indicate that the constructs can be effectively distinguished from each other. Overall, the analysis of discriminant validity suggests that all constructs can effectively differentiate from one another.

Table 5. Discriminant validity results.

Construct	PV	VC	VA	VB	PE	UG	SF
PV	0.78						
VC	0.294	0.783					
VA	0.308	0.340	0.802				
VB	0.303	0.307	0.294	0.81			
PE	0.210	0.317	0.280	0.255	0.79		
UG	0.282	0.330	0.304	0.279	0.315	0.792	
SF	0.242	0.083	0.295	0.071	0.217	0.297	0.785

4.2. Model Fit Test

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are grounded in the principles of structural equation modeling (SEM), which posits that latent variables can be measured through observed indicators. In line with this, the initial phase of the analysis involved a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the measurement model's validity and reliability, drawing on the established theory that a well-fitted measurement model is a precursor to accurately evaluating the structural relationships among variables. The CFA results (Table 6) indicated good model fit, with indices such as a χ^2/DF ratio of 1.231, GFI of 0.975, and AGFI of 0.969, which are in accordance with the recommendations by Bentler and Bonett [39] for acceptable model fit. The NFI, IFI, TLI, and CFI values above 0.9, as suggested by Hu and Bentler [40], further confirmed the strong model fit. Additionally, the RMSEA of 0.014 was well below the cutoff of 0.05 proposed by MacCallum, Browne, and Sugawara [41], indicating an excellent model fit.

Table 6. Model fit testing.

Fit Indices	Evaluation Index	Evaluation Standard	CFA	SEM	Result
Absolute fit indices	χ^2/DF	<3.0	1.231	1.582	Good
	GFI	>0.90	0.975	0.966	Good
	AGFI	>0.90	0.969	0.959	Good
Relative fit indices	NFI	>0.90	0.976	0.968	Good
	IFI	>0.90	0.995	0.988	Good
	TLI	>0.90	0.995	0.986	Good
	CFI	>0.90	0.995	0.988	Good
Parsimony Fit Indices	RMSEA	<0.08	0.014	0.014	Good

Subsequent to the CFA, the structural equation model (SEM) was employed to evaluate the hypothesized relationships between the variables, based on the theory that structural parameters can reveal the causal pathways among latent constructs. The SEM analysis also supported the theoretical framework, with all fit indices—such as the χ^2/DF ratio of 1.582, GFI of 0.966, and AGFI of 0.959—falling within the acceptable ranges as per the guidelines by Kline [42]. The NFI, IFI, TLI, and CFI values exceeding 0.9, along with an RMSEA of 0.023, which is below the 0.05 threshold, provided empirical evidence that the structural model was consistent with the theoretical propositions and effectively reflected the data structure.

4.3. Hypothesis Verification Results

This study employed the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) software AMOS 26.0 to conduct path analysis and examine the causal paths between various variables. The analysis (Table 7) showed that SF significantly positively influenced VA, while its effects on VB and VC were not significant. Similarly, UG and PE both had significant positive impacts on VC, with UG also significantly affecting VA and VB, as did PE.

Furthermore, the study found that UG, PE, VA, VB, and VC all played a role in influencing PV, with each variable demonstrating a significant positive effect. This suggests that these variables are central to the path model's functionality.

Specifically, the results underscored the importance of SF's impact on VA, and the significant contributions of UG, PE, VA, VB, and VC to PV, revealing the core functions of these variables within the path analysis model.

Table 7. Path analysis results.

Path	Std	Ustd	S.E.	C.R.	*p*	Hypothesis Supported
SF→VA	0.197	0.207	0.036	5.831	***	Yes
SF→VB	−0.04	−0.041	0.035	−1.179	0.239	No
SF→VC	−0.05	−0.049	0.033	−1.468	0.142	No
UG→VC	0.284	0.301	0.041	7.335	***	Yes
PE→VC	0.254	0.259	0.038	6.768	***	Yes
UG→VA	0.208	0.236	0.042	5.576	***	Yes
UG→VB	0.246	0.27	0.042	6.386	***	Yes
PE→VA	0.19	0.207	0.04	5.218	***	Yes
PE→VB	0.202	0.214	0.039	5.42	***	Yes
VB→PV	0.206	0.175	0.03	5.835	***	Yes
VA→PV	0.215	0.177	0.029	6.056	***	Yes
VC→PV	0.181	0.159	0.031	5.071	***	Yes

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Discussion

The regeneration of historic environments (HER) is a multifaceted process that intricately weaves together public value with spatial form, urban governance, and people's experiences. This paper underscores the critical need to integrate public value into the planning and assessment of HER to ensure sustainability and community engagement.

Spatial form's role. Spatial form plays a crucial role in how individuals interact with and perceive historic environments. It goes beyond mere aesthetics, influencing how people connect with a place. Well-designed spaces can evoke historical continuity and cultural identity, fostering a sense of connection. The challenge lies in harmonizing historic architectural styles with modern amenities to enhance visitor experience. However, while spatial form (SF) has a significant positive impact on intrinsic value (VA) ($\beta = 0.197$, $p < 0.001$, Table 7), its effects on instrumental value (VB) and institutional value (VC) are not significant. This suggests that spatial form primarily contributes to the historical and cultural aspects of heritage, aligning with the focus of architectural and urban design education on the physical aspects of historic environments [32]. Effective urban governance and inclusive planning are crucial to aligning spatial form with community needs. Future research could explore dynamic integration of spatial form with governance and community engagement to create resilient historic environments.

Empirical analysis. The empirical analysis in this study utilized structural equation modeling (SEM) to investigate the complex interrelationships between spatial form, urban governance, and people's experiences in shaping public value. This analysis goes beyond simply identifying correlations; it explores how these elements interact to influence perceptions of value in historic environment regeneration projects. The findings indicate that, while spatial form has a foundational role in fostering intrinsic value, urban governance (UG) and people's experiences (PE) are crucial for enhancing instrumental and institutional values. Specifically, UG and PE have significant positive impacts on VA, VB, and VC (Table 7). This suggests the need for a balanced strategy in heritage regeneration that considers physical aspects, governance structures, and the subjective experiences of users. The study of five cases in China underscores the importance of these multifaceted approaches to meet the needs of community residents and visitors. For example, the case of Shanghai Tianzifang, while maintaining its historical spatial form, has faced challenges in residents' experiences and institutional recognition due to excessive commercialization. This illustrates why spatial form alone is insufficient to drive instrumental and institutional values.

Public value framework. This study's proposed hexagon public value model (Figure 5) emphasizes public perception and a holistic approach to heritage regeneration. It integrates spatial form, urban governance, and people's experiences to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive regeneration. The success of HER is measured not only by economic or aesthetic

outcomes but also by its impact on residents' and visitors' quality of life. This framework encourages a multifaceted approach to public value and evidence-based decision-making.

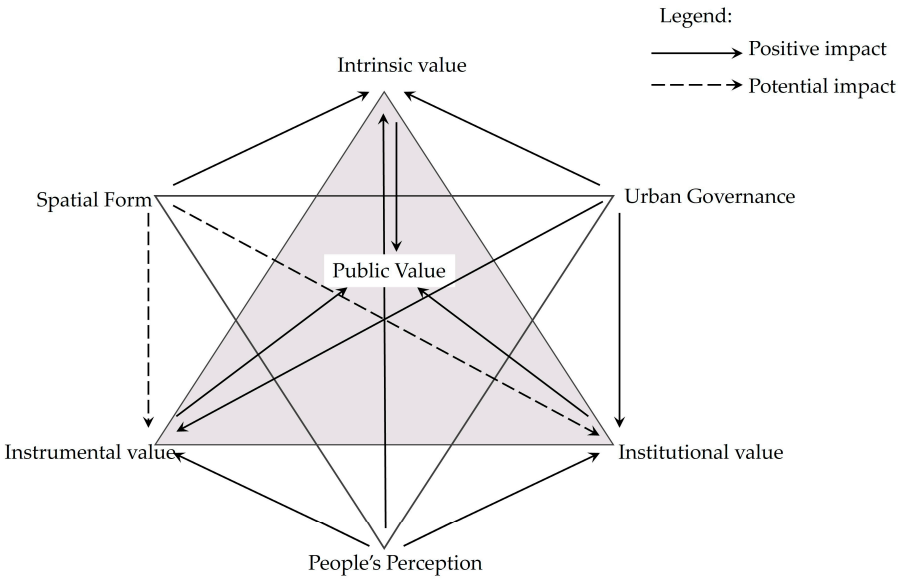

Figure 5. A hexagon public value model (source: self-drawn by the authors).

Synergistic effects. The interplay between spatial form, urban governance, and people's perceptions creates a synergistic effect that amplifies the overall public value of historic environment regeneration. Spatial form provides a tangible connection to history and culture, which is crucial for fostering a sense of place and identity. Urban governance ensures effective management through inclusive and transparent policies and practices. People's perceptions act as a feedback loop, reflecting the success of these efforts and guiding future improvements. When these aspects are harmoniously balanced, they enhance not only the aesthetic and functional qualities of historic districts but also cultivate a deeper sense of community ownership and pride. This holistic approach ensures that regeneration projects focus not only on physical restoration but also on revitalizing the social fabric and economic vitality of these valued spaces. The combination of these three elements helps in evaluating whether spatial forms are conducive to heritage preservation, urban governance represents stakeholder interests, and if people's experiences are fulfilling.

Lefebvre's spatial dialectics. This study also adopts Lefebvre's spatial dialectics as a theoretical framework, constructing a model with the dimensions of spatial form, urban governance, and people's experience. Although the relationships between these elements were not empirically validated in this study, this triadic approach suggests that their interplay ultimately creates public value. Lefebvre's dialectics emphasize the relationships between the production of space, representations of space, and spaces of representation, which align with the triadic structure of spatial form (perceived space), urban governance (conceived space), and people's experience (lived space) in this study. Further research could explore the dynamic relationships among these three elements in different historical and cultural contexts, leading to a more nuanced understanding of sustainable historic district regeneration.

Limitation and future research. This study, while insightful, is limited by its reliance on subjective perceptions of spatial form rather than objective physical measurements [32] and by the omission of key factors like green spaces, water bodies, and socioeconomic contexts [43,44]. Future research should integrate objective spatial data, expand the scope of influential factors, conduct longitudinal studies to assess long-term impacts, diversify case studies across different regions and cultures, and explore the diverse perspectives of stake-

holders involved in urban regeneration. These steps will help create more comprehensive models for evaluating public value.

6. Conclusions

This study explores the crucial role of public value in the regeneration of historic environments (HER), particularly within the framework of urban development. It emphasizes that integrating public value into HER processes not only enhances the sustainability of these projects but also strengthens the connection between communities and their historic spaces. The research proposes a framework for evaluating public value performance, focusing on public perception and how individuals experience and value regenerated historic environments. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the impact of urban governance and spatial form on community satisfaction.

The empirical analysis, conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM) across five case studies in China, reveals the diverse experiences of users in historic districts. This methodology examines the relationships between spatial form, urban governance, and public value. The findings indicate that effective urban governance and thoughtful spatial design are crucial for maximizing public value, ensuring that regeneration efforts meet the needs of local residents and visitors alike. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on heritage regeneration by advocating for a balanced approach that prioritizes public interests and calls for further studies to explore the complexities of user experiences and the relational dynamics among various stakeholders involved in HER. Ultimately, successful regeneration hinges on recognizing and integrating public value into planning and decision-making processes.

The interplay between spatial form, urban governance, and people's experience creates a synergistic effect that amplifies the overall public value of historic environment regeneration. Spatial form provides a tangible, experiential connection to history and culture, essential for fostering a sense of place and identity. Urban governance ensures effective management, with policies and practices that promote inclusivity, transparency, and sustainability. People's experience acts as a feedback loop, reflecting the success of these efforts and guiding future improvements. When harmoniously balanced, these aspects enhance historic districts' aesthetic and functional qualities and cultivate a deeper sense of community ownership and pride. This study also highlights that the spatial form has a significant positive impact on intrinsic value, while urban governance and people's experiences have significant positive impacts on intrinsic, instrumental, and institutional values.

To enhance the practical application of these findings, several key policy actions are recommended: promote participatory governance by actively engaging communities in HER decision making to ensure diverse needs are met; prioritize integrated spatial design that preserves original physical spaces while incorporating modern elements to improve accessibility and usability; focus on enhancing user experience by creating engaging public spaces for social and cultural activities, as well as improving essential services; establish public value evaluation frameworks that use public perception to assess and monitor intrinsic, instrumental, and institutional values in heritage projects; and ensure authentic cultural heritage preservation that balances economic development with the protection of cultural authenticity and uniqueness. By implementing these recommendations, urban planners and managers can better integrate public value into HER, fostering sustainable and economically viable projects that enhance the quality of life for all stakeholders.

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