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Proceeding Paper

Empirical Research on Regional Revitalization: A Case of Old Urban Railways [†]

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Abstract: Historically, railway facilities have been intertwined with daily life, communities, geography, and history, contributing to a rich cultural heritage and collective memory. However, current research on railway reuse primarily focuses on converting railway architecture into artistic displays, with limited exploration of urban railway revitalization. Addressing the challenges of urban railroads requires reevaluating space reuse models. Therefore, local revitalization has emerged as a key driver of society. We empirically explored the benefits of reusing urban old railroads from the perspective of local revitalization using the SMART Ecological Innovation Framework in revitalizing old railroads. We identified five forces: storytelling, market sensibility, aesthetics, regeneration, and local cultural design. Measurement items for these concepts were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). With a solid theoretical foundation, we employed confirmatory factor analysis to affirm the reliability and validity of these concepts, ensuring their stability. This study aimed to delve into regenerating old railways in Taichung City and explore the reuse benefits of urban railways to offer valuable insights for similar cases. The confirmatory factor analysis result revealed that storytelling, market perception, aesthetics, regeneration capability, and local design significantly contributed to the benefits of railway revitalization. Furthermore, the concept of local revitalization was effectively applied through these five forces in planning and design, stimulating economic development in idle areas.

Keywords: regional revitalization; railway reuse

1. Introduction

Vacant spaces, a result of major industrial changes, pose challenges such as resource waste and negative urban impact [1,2]. Despite their drawbacks, these spaces embody rich historical heritage and are transformed into cultural hubs, nurturing emerging industries and attracting cultural tourism [3]. In Europe, such spaces have successfully evolved into sustainable, people-centric environments and cultural districts, activating creativity and consumer functions [4]. Taiwan's urban evolution, driven by different eras, uncovers historical, cultural, and artistic values within vacant industrial sites [5]. Railways, vital indicators of social change, hold cultural significance, becoming part of collective memory [3].

Chang and Chen (2020) explored why tourist railways in Taiwan struggle to vitalize regions [6]: (1) limited thinking on tourism, emphasizing transportation, (2) insufficient tourism planning, and (3) ineffective resource linkage, leading to potential vacant space crises post-revitalization [7]. Existing studies focus on economic benefits and business models post-railway reuse, neglecting urban railway renewal. To understand this, the mutual relationship between urban structure and railway vacant space reuse needs to be explored, especially in cities with diverse characteristics, necessitating a context-specific reassessment.

Placemaking, addressing vacant spaces, emphasizes local cultural industry cultivation. Governments support this with technology and human resources for sustainable local

economic growth, regional identity promotion, and heightened awareness of environmental protection [8]. Local development strategies integrate industry, geography, and talent to add value to local resources, reviving urban and rural areas, populations, and industries [9]. Taiwanese towns, possessing unique resources and challenges, can foster local identity through local support, simplified issue resolution, and resource integration from various sectors. David and Linda (2008) stressed the psychological importance of cultural identity, making placemaking's core lie in in-depth planning aligned with local culture, establishing identity, motivating collaboration, and achieving "sustainable operation" [10].

Placemaking is pivotal for a sound society. Addressing urban railway homogeneity demands reevaluating vacant space reuse models, using the SMART placemaking innovation forces proposed by [11,12]. After the renewal of an old railway, urban landmarks can expand, forming an industrial chain. The Taichung Green Space Corridor aligns with local cultural characteristics. Therefore, we explored the urban old railway reuse process and its benefits from a placemaking perspective.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Reuse of Idle Space

Shao and Liu (2018) categorized "Idle Space" into two main types: areas consistently excluded in city development and those previously used but abandoned due to uncontrollable factors [13]. The term "vacant space" in this study has evolved with time and history, arising from changes in functions and purposes during economic and industrial transformations [14]. When the original space loses its function or purpose, it presents positive reuse possibilities and latent development potential [15]. Huang (2003) viewed vacant spaces, especially transportation facilities such as railways, sugar factories, and distilleries, as "lost spaces" in urban development [16]. The concept of "reuse" is inspired by ideas about preserving historical buildings, encompassing renovation, rehabilitation, remodeling, recycling, retrofitting, environmental reshaping, extended use, and rebirth [17]. When the original space's function is updated, it rekindles vitality, offering development potential for the building and its surroundings. "Vacancy" is a condition, with "reuse" being the transformative means. Researchers noted the clustering of cultural and creative industries in urban areas to explore the factors stimulating this clustering and its impact on regional and economic development [18,19]. Vacant spaces cover excluded and abandoned areas, with reuse being crucial for revitalization [19,20]. It extends beyond buildings to enhance the vitality and development potential of the environment, contributing to urban regeneration, spatial sustainability, development, and increased space value [5,12,18,21].

2.2. Regional Revitalization

"Regional revitalization" traces its roots back to the Japanese colonial period, where it emerged to tackle challenges like the aging and depopulation of rural areas resulting from urban migration [22]. Taiwan confronts analogous issues, including economic deceleration, an aging demographic, diminishing birth rates, and an imbalance in urban–rural populations [23]. The current global economic climate further underscores the urgency for viable solutions [24–27].

On a global scale, there is a growing emphasis on preserving cultural heritage and repurposing unused spaces. Governments are increasingly directing their efforts toward urban renewal, aiming to breathe new life into central areas, generate additional value, and attract both industry and population to foster regional prosperity [28]. This collaborative endeavor necessitates the integration of various sectors and underscores the importance of grassroots participation [29].

Place shaping involves the interplay between people's perceptions and the inherent characteristics of spaces [30]. According to Hsu (2018), local revitalization involves crafting not just products but people's "life experiences" and fostering "cultural innovation". Key elements encompass food, housing, clothing, agriculture, health, environment, rehabilitation, art, entertainment, and community gatherings [23]. Lu (2019) identifies three

regenerative DNAs—memory, culture, and industry—as crucial components for inventorying resources in the pursuit of local revitalization [31]. Local brands, as proposed by Evan et al. (2017) [32], serve as tools to establish a sense of place and drive economic development. Hong (2021) introduced the "local entrepreneurship study" with five SMART local innovation forces: storytelling, market perception, aesthetics, regeneration, and local design. Local revitalization is a multifaceted approach that delves into the intricacies of a locality, uncovering development elements often overlooked but pivotal for local progress.

Local revitalization is a diverse and multifaceted concept. "Local entrepreneurship study" encompasses the perspectives of multiple scholars. Therefore, referring to SMART local innovation and its five forces [11] and using them as scale indicators, we analyzed local revitalization, encompassing the following [11]:

- Story: Residents and visitors can tangibly experience elements that evoke emotions and create memories.
- Market Sense: By adopting the perspective and considering the latent needs and desires of residents and visitors, one can propose content that meets and exceeds their expectations.
- Aesthetic: The interpretation and imagination of sensory experiences, coupled with personal engagement in learning and the experiential process, are essential for transforming and presenting experiences that resonate deeply with residents and visitors.
- Re-: Through methods such as revitalization, redefinition, and recycling, existing resources can be reorganized into new content, imbuing them with fresh meaning.
- Terroir Design: Transforming local resources into experiential products or content becomes possible through a thoughtful design approach.

2.3. Railway Reuse

Railways are considered important indicators of social change [3]. In terms of architecture, industry, and labor culture, the development of railways possesses unique and irreplaceable value. Alessandra and Stefania (2023) pointed out that engaging in new activities with existing railway structures positively impacted the urban and regional environment and socio-economic development [30]. Railways are closely tied to the daily lives of people as a part of a generation's collective memory. With the transformation of railway systems, they become objects of preservation and nostalgia, passed down and revitalized through cultural creative methods [33]. Additionally, Giacomo et al. (2017) emphasized that railway design should be preserved based on specific circumstances and regional characteristics [34].

We reviewed recent (from 2018 to 2023) research related to railways, which primarily focused on the economic benefits assessment of cultural landscapes, studies on business models for reuse, and preservation modes [35]. However, there is limited research on the renewal and reuse of urban old railways, failing to adequately reflect the changes in contemporary society, industry, entertainment, and economic conditions. This gap is also acknowledged in the study by Zhang and Chen (2020) on tourist railways [29].

Therefore, a thorough investigation into the interrelationship between urban structure and the reuse of abandoned railway spaces is crucial for urban development, especially for cities with different population structures and urban characteristics. These cities need to adopt context-specific approaches based on their unique features and reevaluate the multi-faceted influencing factors involved in abandoned space reuse policies, which is the focus of this research.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Framework

The main concept of this study involves an investigation into the urban old railway in the context of local revitalization, utilizing the SMART Cultural Innovation Pentad as a set of indicators. Through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), we validated its theoretical

framework, establishing the practical applicability of the SMART Cultural Innovation Pentad as an indicator for local revitalization (Figure 1).
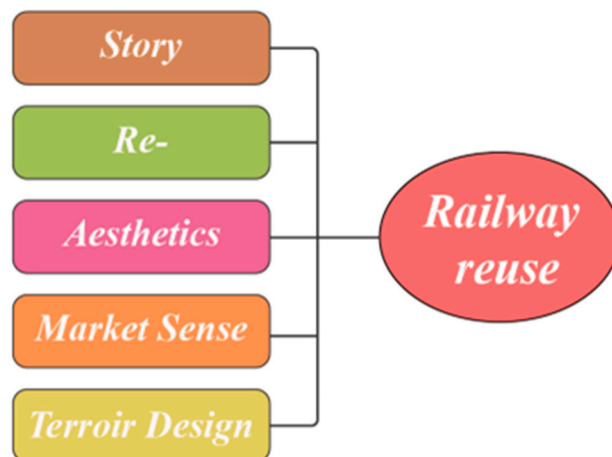

Figure 1. Research framework.

3.2. Pioneering Studies

In the context of local revitalization, we explored the introduction of the concept of repurposing old railways to understand the strength of influencing factors and assess whether the spatial design outcomes of reusing old railways maximize the potential for repurposing railway idle spaces. We selected the Greenway Railway in Taichung City as the research site, with Taichung Train Station as the starting point, as the surrounding space holds unique historical significance. We referred to Hong (2021) for the SMART local innovation pentagon as the evaluation indicator [11]. Through convenience sampling, open-ended interviews were conducted with visitors and local residents of the Taichung Greenway Railway with the interviews recorded for content analysis, having coded the interview content.

The results of the study indicated that design elements of railway reuse, such as elevated railway bridges and railway signals, successfully blend modern and retro elements. This allows for contemporaneity while evoking connections to Japanese history and preserving local historical narratives. These design elements significantly influence the reuse of old railways, transforming them into catalysts for local vibrancy. They closely connect previously dispersed roads, provide more convenient transportation, enhance pedestrian safety, and simultaneously preserve cultural heritage. The integration of past historical buildings and stories with modern design creates a cohesive experience. These findings serve as substantial references for the future planning of old railway areas in other regions, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the overall history of the area.

3.3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis, CFA

CFA was used to examine the reliability and validity of the measurement variables. Hair et al. (1998) proposed that the fit indices for assessing the adequacy of the hypothetical model include χ^2/df (<5), RMSEA (<0.08), and CFI, NNFI, and GFI (>0.9). The analysis results of this study demonstrated that all indicators of the research model were well fitted (χ^2 = 119.73, df = 55, χ^2/df = 2.17, RMSEA = 0.065, CFI = 0.95, NNFI = 0.97, GFI = 0.98), indicating the excellent overall fit of the assumed model [36].

4. Research Results

We conducted a sample survey on the socio-economic background of tourists and local shop owners along the Taichung Greenway (Table 1). The basic information included gender, marital status, age, education level, occupation, average monthly income, and place of residence. The majority of the respondents were male, accounting for 63.5% (179 people). A total of 63.8% (180) were married. The age group of 30 to 39 years old was the most

common, representing 27.7% (78). As for education level, the majority had a college degree, constituting 56.7% (160). The most common occupation was "other", with 29.1% (82), followed by professional/service personnel at 23.8% (67). Regarding average monthly income, 42.2% (119) earned less than 30,000, and the majority resided in the central region, accounting for 77.3% (218 people).

Table 1. Five innovation forces, interview script.

Innovation Capability	Interview Questions
Story	1. In light of the current transformations in the old railway, what elements resonate with you? 2. Based on your personal impressions, what cultural characteristics do you observe in this old railway? 3. Are there specific places along this old railway that evoke emotions and memories for you?
Market Sense	4. Why did you choose to experience this old railway for leisure? 5. Regarding your experience with the old railway, what needs do you think should be addressed?
Aesthetics	6. Do you believe there is an aesthetic requirement for tourism or revitalization of the old railway? If so, what aesthetic elements do you consider important?
Re-	7. How effective do you think the current repurposing of the old railway is? Which revitalization elements do you find most beneficial?
Terroir Design	8. In your opinion, what local design elements are present in this old railway area?

The CFA model in this study was examined using common parameter estimation procedures and adhering to the assumption of multivariate normality. The skewness and kurtosis of the five SMART innovation forces ranged from −0.54 to −1.27 and from −0.100 to 1.197, indicating a normal distribution of the measurement variables. All variables had t-values ranging from 8.55 to 16.23, all exceeding the absolute value of 1.96, demonstrating statistically significant correlation coefficient estimates. Finally, according to the standards proposed by Hair et al. (1998) [36], the standardized factor loadings should exceed 0.5. However, in the "Re-" dimension, the standardized factor loading of the measurement variable "Having many locally native plant designs (planting)" was 0.2, and the measurement invariance was insufficient for a10 "Distinctive art installations" and a11 "Stitching together urban old spaces fragmented spaces". Therefore, it is recommended to remove these measurement variables to ensure the integrity of the model. The standardized factor loadings for the five latent constructs were as follows: "Story" at 0.82, "Market Sense" at 0.69, "Aesthetics" at 0.72, "Re-" at 0.73, and "Terroir Design" at 0.77. This indicates that the five SMART innovation forces have good compositional reliability (Table 2).

Table 2. Parameter estimation summary.

Latent Constructs and Measurement Variables	Standardized Factor Loadings	t-Value	Standard Errors	R^2	Composite Reliability
Story (s)					0.82
Old industrial cultural space (a1)	0.85	16.17	0.04	0.72	
Spaces of past life memories (a2)	0.66	11.54	0.06	0.42	
Integration with surrounding historical architectural spaces (a3)	0.81	15.11	0.05	0.66	
Market Sense (m)					0.69
Enhance human–environment safety measures (a4)	0.51	8.44	0.05	0.26	
Improve the connectivity of corridor spaces (a5)	0.66	11.61	0.04	0.46	
Provide cultural and educational environmental venues (a6)	0.63	10.84	0.05	0.40	

Latent Constructs and Measurement Variables	Standardized Factor Loadings	t-Value	Standard Errors	R^2	Composite Reliability
Revitalize social interaction spaces (a7)	0.60	10.35	0.05	0.34	
Aesthetics (b)					0.72
Old railway elements (a8)	0.80	14.66	0.04	0.58	
Old railway elements (a9)	0.70	12.43	0.05	0.49	
Re- (r)					0.73
Increase the number of visitors (a12)	0.73	12.37	0.05	0.41	
Enhance the functionality of the surrounding environment (a13)	0.78	13.08	0.05	0.46	
Terroir Design (w)					0.77
Integrate local historical context (a15)	0.81	14.96	0.04	0.66	
Preserve past characteristics (a16)	0.78	14.27	0.04	0.61	

Regarding discriminant validity, based on the analysis results in Table 3, the confidence intervals for the latent constructs do not include the value of 1.00, indicating that the "Story", "Market Sense", "Aesthetics", "Re-", and "Terroir Design" latent constructs of the five SMART innovation forces have discriminant validity. Combining the above results, the revised measurement model of the five SMART innovation forces is presented in Figure 2.
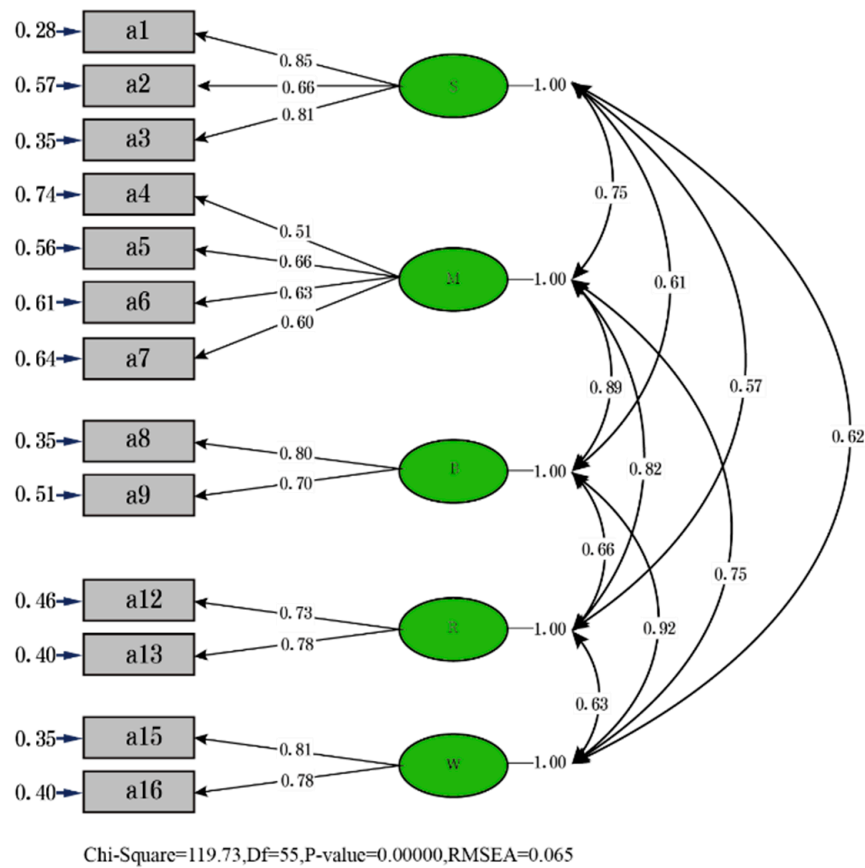

Chi-Square=119.73,Df=55,P-value=0.00000,RMSEA=0.065

Figure 2. Standardized parameters of revised smart measurement model for innovation forces.

Table 3. Validity testing.

Latent Construct	Correlation Coefficient	Standard Error	Confidence Interval	Discriminant Validity
Story(s) and Market Sense (m)	0.75	0.05	0.85–0.65	Support
Story (s) and Aesthetics (b)	0.66	0.05	0.73–0.49	Support
Story (s) and Re- (r)	0.64	0.06	0.69–0.45	Support
Story (s) and Terroir Design (w)	0.62	0.05	0.72–0.52	Support
Market Sense (m) and Aesthetics (b)	0.93	0.04	0.98–0.79	Support
Market Sense (m) and Re- (r)	0.93	0.04	0.92–0.72	Support
Market Sense (m) and Terroir Design (w)	0.75	0.05	0.85–0.65	Support
Aesthetics (b) and Re- (r)	0.88	0.05	0.78–0.54	Support
Aesthetics (b) and Terroir Design (w)	0.93	0.04	0.98–0.84	Support
Re- (r) and Terroir Design (w)	0.77	0.05	075–0.51	Support

Note: Discriminant validity = Correlation coefficient $\pm$ (Standard error $\times$ 1.96).

5. Conclusions

We clarified the conceptual composition of "Story", "Market Sense", "Aesthetics", "Re-", and "Terroir Design" within the five SMART innovation forces and explored the interrelationships among these five latent constructs in the model. Using CFA, we validated the compositional model of the five SMART innovation forces: "Story", "Market Sense", "Aesthetics", "Re-", and "Terroir Design". In the "Aesthetics" dimension, the measurement variable was "Distinctive art installations", and in the "Re-" dimension, the measurement variables "Having many locally native plant designs (planting)" and "Stitching together urban old spaces fragmented spaces" did not meet the fit criteria. Therefore, we deleted these to ensure the integrity of the model. Other dimensions and variables met the standards, demonstrating that the overall research measurement model is acceptable. Furthermore, the t-values of the retained variables ranged from 8.55 to 16.23, indicating that the estimated correlation coefficients are statistically significant. The compositional reliabilities of the latent constructs were "Story" at 0.81, "Market Sense" at 0.69, "Aesthetics" at 0.72, "Re-" at 0.73, and "Terroir Design" at 0.77. The five SMART innovation forces constructed from the five dimensions have relatively high compositional reliability.

We examined the factor structure of the SMART innovation pentagon. The sampling results of this study provided a socio-economic background of tourists, revealing the distribution in gender, marital status, age, education level, occupation, average monthly income, and place of residence. This information contributes to a better understanding of the characteristics and needs of the audience in practical applications. Regarding the factor structure of the SMART innovation pentagon, an overall acceptable model had relatively high composite reliabilities of the latent factors. This suggested the reliability of the five dimensions constituting the SMART innovation pentagon. Notably, the retained variables statistically showed significant correlations, and the overall measurement model was acceptable in most cases.

For applications, specific consideration needs to be added to the results of the narrative power (Story) dimension. In the design of local revitalization, a similar strategy can be employed by integrating historical elements into everyday spaces. This design approach promotes the display of local cultural characteristics and contributes to enhancing the psychological and physiological well-being of the population, thereby establishing a resonant emotional connection within the community. By harnessing the power of story, the design of local revitalization becomes more than shaping physical spaces; it becomes a process of integrating history and culture into contemporary life. This cultural integration can inspire a sense of identity within the local area, encouraging active participation of community members in the preservation and promotion of local traditional values. Additionally, it

provides an opportunity to reflect on the past, present, and future, enabling people to comprehensively understand and cherish the evolution of their environment. Therefore, in local revitalization, the elements of storytelling from this research into design strategies can help to create spaces that are more meaningful and connected to the local community. This thoughtful and innovative application allows for new perspectives and possibilities, further enhancing community sustainability and quality of living.

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