

A Study on Exploring the Relationship Among Public Art, Urban Space, and Human Society

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Abstract. This study examines how public art, as an integrated entity of spatial practice, cultural representation and social responsibility, reconstructs the relationship between urban space and human society. Based on Lefebvre's theory of space production and Merleau-Ponty's embodied cognition theory, through comparative analysis of representative cases including the Jewish Museum Berlin and the CONSCIENCE installation in Stockholm, the research reveals the tension between aesthetic, ethical and commercial dimensions in public art. Ultimately, this research underscores public art's significance as a catalyst for societal reflection and transformation. It calls for ethical frameworks that prioritize heterogeneous narratives and participatory co-creation, ensuring public art remains a vital medium for spatial justice, cultural dialogue, and collective identity in evolving urban landscapes.

Keywords: Public art, Space, Jewish Museum Berlin, CONSCIENCE

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, public art is taking on more and more essential responsibilities in modern society. It plays an important role in connecting relationships among people, cities and societies. For instance, the Bean in Chicago not only serves as a sculptural landmark but also invites communal engagement through its reflective surface, transforming Millennium Park into a dynamic social hub. Moreover, its core is closely related to morality. The ethics of public art mean that it is not an isolated art display, but a deep integration with social moral norms, which must be ethical, because it is directly related to its guiding direction of social values. The Berlin Jewish Museum, for example, employs architectural dissonance and spatial disruption to confront historical trauma, illustrating how public art can ethically interrogate collective memory and societal accountability.

This paper examines the tripartite relationship between public art, urban space, and society, with a focus on three key dimensions: (1) spatial practice, investigating how public art reconfigures urban environments through Lefebvrian theories of social production; (2) cultural representation, analyzing its role in materializing identity and memory via embodied cognition (Merleau-Ponty); and (3) social responsibility, critiquing its ethical obligations in addressing inequality, environmental sustainability, and participatory justice. By comparing case studies—from the socially conscious CONSCIENCE installation in Stockholm to the commercially driven Casa Batlló light show—this study reveals tensions between aesthetic, ethical, and economic priorities in public art. It argues that effective public art must negotiate these dynamics to foster spatial justice, cultural dialogue, and

democratic urbanism. The findings aim to inform both theoretical discourse and practical frameworks for public art in an era of rapid urbanization and social transformation.

2. The relationship between public art and urban space

As an important part of urban space, public art has a deep influence on people and society through its creation, display and adoption. Lefebvre believes that space is a product of social production, public art plays this role in the socialization of space [1]. It transforms the original physical space into a place of social significance. For example, the BEAN in Chicago not only occupies part of the space of Millennium Park, but also becomes an iconic landscape through its unique mirrorlike reflection, symbolizing the city's modern and innovative spirit.

Certeau's practical theory of daily life focuses on how people creatively use space within the established spatial order and open up their own "space." He said, "footsteps intertwined paths give their shape to spaces." [2] Public artworks are placed in public spaces to attract people to stop, interact or participate in activities, which not only realizes the dialogue between artists and the public across time and space but also creates a unique way of space practice, changes the mobility of space, and even redefines the function of space. In addition, integrating art into daily life blurs the boundary between art and life, enabling people to contact and experience art more frequently in daily life.

In recent years, based on the theories of Lefebvre and Certeau, scholars have conducted in-depth research on public art. They discussed how public art, as a spatial practice, both produces space and is produced by space, and how the public can creatively use and transform urban space into their daily lives through participation in public art projects. These studies provide a new perspective for us to understand the social function and meaning of public art.

3. Cultural representation in public art

Public art is not only beautifying the city space but also representing the aesthetic taste, inner values and core spirit. But how does public art shape the meaning of a specific urban space through physical perception of human beings, cultural memory of the race, and spiritual experience of the group? According to the Embodied Cognition Theory [3], the human body is the subject of perceiving the world, and the space experience is realized through the direct participation and perception of the body. This theory challenges the traditional philosophy of the duality of people's minds and bodies and emphasizes the interweaving of the body and the world. In the field of public art, embodied cognition provides a theoretical framework for analyzing how audiences experience works of art through their bodies and senses. For example, Mark Johnson believes that human mind and human imagination play the central role in all meaning, understanding and reasoning [4], which elaborates the role of body in the construction of consciousness and provides support for the study of embodied public art.

Public art emphasizes the audience's physical participation and multi-sensory experience by integrating the concept of embodied cognition into various art forms. Here is an example. The Weather Project by Olafur Eliasson is an installation which uses hundreds of yellow lights to make a huge semi-circular disc as the sun and uses a humidifier to create a foggy environment in the exhibition all with a mirror ceiling. The public entering the exhibition hall will be simulated a very sensory impact of the sunset view, feeling damp, dark, depressing, and nervous in the hall that is visually doubled the scale of the real space. In this case, the audience is transformed from passive onlookers to active participants, enhancing the depth and breadth of the artistic experience. The

process makes public art become the generator of space and space meaning by human physically practicing the space and creating its own and personal existence.

4. The social responsibility of public art

Public art has ethics. It is reflected in the concern for the people's welfare, social dilemma and moral justice.

First of all, its core lies in "publicity." Works of public art are considered to be intended for a wider audience and placed in places that attract public attention to provide an educational, commemorative, or entertaining experience and deliver information through content that can be universally understood [5]. It serves the public rather than private interests. Artists and organizers need to take the needs and feelings of all groups of people into consideration in their creative process to ensure that the work is inclusive and universal. Public art can advocate equality, justice and human rights by expressing or sarcasm with artistic skills. For example, some public artworks focus on issues such as refugees, poverty, racism, and gender equality, arousing the public's attention to the vulnerable groups in the society. Besides, public art can convey environmental awareness to avoid damage to nature such as selecting renewable materials and sustainable forms of presentation.

Secondly, when the aesthetics of public art are combined with the function of space, they can effectively enhance the practicality and comfort of urban space. For example, there was an outdoor installation, Please Be Seated, made by British designer Paul Cocksedge. It has a unique shape, round and wavy. It is an artistic bench as well. Or we can consider it a piece of urban furniture. It practically occupies a part of the city and human living space. Meanwhile, it attracts and enhances the citizens to have fun with it, to experience it. By inviting the public to participate in interaction, public art definitely breaks the one-way communication mode of traditional art like paper-drawing which just expresses the perspectives of the painter and forms a participatory aesthetic. There is no doubt that the behavior allows residents to connect, unite deeply, and raise the awareness of community cohesion and a sense of belonging.

Thirdly, public art owns its social function. Governments, enterprises, or sponsors may challenge public art as it performs its duty. It is an important issue that is how to strike or find a balance between power and public interests. In addition, when public art expresses multiculturalism, it needs to respect the sensitivities and values of different cultures. This will avoid cultural appropriation or offense, which may trigger controversy problem, and how to reach stability between artistic freedom and public acceptance is also a challenge.

5. Case studies and comparisons

With its unique spatial language, public art intervenes in the city, connecting individual memory, collective history and social reality. As follows, the author will take a few cases as examples to conduct analysis and explore how public art constructs the complex relationship between people, city and society from publicity, representation, symbology, aesthetics, ethic and social value.

The first artwork is The Jewish Museum in Berlin. The museum itself is an amazing work of public art, which is reflected in the face of historical truth and the awakening of traumatic memories. It invites the public to enter with an open attitude, looking directly into this history instead of burying it in dust. The architecture itself is a meaningful representation, such as the zigzagging building shape, broken spaces, sloping floor, dim light, and high and narrow atrium. All details are concretizing the suffering experienced by Jewish. As said, "A work of public art should be rooted in

its political, social and economic context, because it is the context that gives meaning to the work of art." [6] The whole museum creates an atmosphere of unease and repression, forcing the public to confront the heavy weight of history. This is closely linked to ethical appeals, prompting viewers to reflect on war, racial discrimination, and the fragility of human civilization. The social value of the Jewish Museum in Berlin is that it goes beyond its mere memorial function to become a bridge between the past, the present and the future, to remind people of the past and prevent tragedies from repeating themselves.

Another public art is CONSCIENCE by Les Ateliers BK for the Stockholm Noble Week Nights in 2002. It uses light installations and data visualization techniques. The scientific discoveries of the Noble Prize winner were connected by the global challenges facing humanity, promoting the public to ponder the fate of humanity and world. On the one hand, the publicity of CONSCIENCE is its location, the facade of the Stockholm City Hall. It means everyone can see it standing in the city center. If there were a couple who held their wedding ceremony inside, they should hold their children's hand and tell them about Daddy and Mommy's love story. That plays an important role in your family. And the special and personal memory will not just be a symbol of the city, but belong to them. On the other hand, it is reflected in its interactive nature, in which the audience can participate through a mobile app and project their own thoughts onto the lighting installation to form a collective dialogue and reflection. It endows the viewer with greater space for joining in. Through lighting and data visualization, the public artwork transforms abstract global challenge problems intuitive visual images, such as the red light representing sharp climate changes and the growing numbers representing the gap between rich and poor. This kind of clear and comprehensible representation is easier to get around the audience's resonance and thinking. Meanwhile, lights and data are themselves symbols of the information age. And CONSCIENCE uses them to build an artificial art space full of futuristic and technological sense, which inspires the emotional resonance of the public. It transforms complex scientific issues into easy-understanding topics. It promotes dialogue and cooperation between different groups and provides cutting-edge ideas for solving global challenges.

Compared with CONSCIENCE, another famous performance called the Casa Batllo light show is different. It uses the facade of Gaudi's architectural masterpieces as a canvas, applying advanced technology to project a dynamic picture full of fantastic colors. At nighttime, the transformation historical building is extremely stunning and attractive to both residents and visitors. There is no doubt about its aesthetic, brilliant colors, vivid patterns and Gaudi's special architectural style complement each other. It brings a visual feast to the audience. However, its ethics are weak. It focuses more on commercial promotion and sensory stimulation and lacks deep discussion of social issues. The social value of the great combination of commercial and artistic mainly lies in promoting the development of tourism and the spread of urban culture. It is also a good approach to create the image of the city. Although it is not a brand new tool to achieve the goal, the placement of works by Picasso, Moore and Calder in prominent public spaces in the country was already planned. The purpose of these sculptures, which are mainly presented as abstract forms but with biomorphic works is to humanize the building and give it an optimistic urban identity [7]. In the past, due to the public's unfamiliarity with abstract public art, it made many people feel scared and unhappy at that time. For the popularization and publicity of art, using public art to create the image of the city. As a Chinese scholar said, there are several such public art in a city, which will undoubtedly become an important symbol of the city, an impressive symbol, a symbol of a new public art, adding unique beauty and charm to the city [8].

With its profound historical reflection and strong ethical appeal, the Jewish Museum in Berlin becomes an icon of public art's intervention in social issues. CONSCIENCE uses technology to transform public art into a platform for public engagement and dialogue, demonstrating the potential of public art to promote social progress. While the Casa Batllo light show tells us that it can also be used as a purely aesthetic experience to create a portrait of the city. All in all, the publicity, aesthetics, ethics and social values of public art do not exist in isolation but are interwined and influence each other. Great public artworks should be able to strike a balance between these dimensions, both to provoke the public to think and resonate, but also inject vitality and meaning into the urban space and even the whole society.

6. Discussion

Public art attracts people to stop and even interact, allowing humans to participate through physical activity, and then transform a place into a lively space. These spatial practices give this place have the timeliness, culture and sociality. Public art constructs the meaning of space through spatial representations, including symbols, images and discourses. Art conveys various emotions and meanings, such as cultural, historical, political, or a sense of belonging and identity. It changes the visual landscape of the city through physical forms and affects people's perception of space. As part of urban planning, it reflects the intentions and ideologies of the politicians and designers. Therefore, public art has its symbolic expression of cultural and social functions.

Public art personifies the feeling in the space and emphasizes the importance of people's perception and identification of the city or the space. Moreover, inserting local history and consensus into spaces makes public art carriers of memory and identity. In addition, public art endows space with symbolic meaning and makes it become the field of meaning generation. It is a wise method to promote cultural dialogue and spiritual resonance in modern society. Thus, it can be seen that embodied cognition theory provides important academic support for the research and practice of public art, emphasizing the main role of the body in artistic expression. Through interactive installations, multi-sensory experiences and physical space design, public art enhances the audience's emotional resonance and social interaction instead of just decorating the corners of the city. Future research could further explore the application of embodied cognition in different cultural contexts and how to enhance the embodied experience of public art through technological means, such as visual reality.

From the perspective of social responsibility, the value of the ethics and aesthetics of public art, as well as the criticism and guidance of social issues, make it an indispensable part of urban space. Public art not only improves the quality of urban space through aesthetic forms, but also promotes public concern and reflection on social events through critical expression and social participation.

7. Conclusion

Therefore, public art is not only a decoration tool to beautify the city but also a carrier of social relations, a platform of power structure, and an expression of urban spirit. First of all, public art has a profound impact on the sociality, functionality and symbolism of urban space by performing the relationship among the spatial practice, representations of space and representational space. Public art transforms urban space from a simple physical existence place to a dynamic field with social functions and cultural representations. Secondly, through the interweaving of material, nature, location, time, memory and meaning, it creates various interesting, dynamic, colorful and meaningful urban spaces, which makes the city more readable, ornamental and experiential. Finally,

the ethics and aesthetics of public art, as well as the criticism and value guidance of social issues, make it an indispensable part of urban space.

Nowadays, the concept and creation of public art need to follow some certain rules and principles but also face the need for constant renewal and transformation. The key to these problems is the moral dimension. Creating ethical public art is important for meeting its social responsibilities, which means we need to have open conversations and listen to different viewpoints. This will help us rethink how public art works and make sure it truly represents the varied needs of society. Ethical public art needs to accommodate heterogeneous narratives and voices and avoid misunderstanding of single, separate and one-sided pursuit of consensus. It does not blindly pursue absolute objective truth and supreme good standards; it truly reflects those things closely related to public interests in society and becomes a vivid reflection of social reality.

In addition, public art assumes the responsibility of exploring the concept of space and conducting research on space production strategies through social practice. Through the discussion of different space concepts and the practice of space production strategies, public art can give social space richer cultural connotation and social value, promote the in-depth interaction between the public and space, enhance the vitality and quality of social space, and thus play a positive role in shaping the social environment and promoting social development in a more inclusive and profound way.

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