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Research on the Perception of Community Public Space Vitality and Renewal Strategies Based on Deep Learning and Street View Data

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Abstract

Community public spaces serve as essential venues for the daily activities of urban residents, and their level of vitality directly affects the quality of the living environment and the sustainability of urban development. To scientifically evaluate the vitality of community public spaces and propose targeted optimization strategies, this study integrates deep learning techniques with multi-source street view data to construct a vitality perception evaluation framework focusing on five core dimensions: aesthetics, recognizability, functionality, comfort, and safety. Taking two representative neighborhoods in Shanghai—one in the city center and one in the suburban area—as case studies, the research employs visual semantic segmentation to perform pixel-level analysis of street view samples, quantifying the proportions of spatial elements such as buildings, greenery, roads, and public facilities. These data are then combined with Point of Interest (POI) information for kernel density and diversity analyses. The results show that central urban neighborhoods perform better in pedestrian paving, street furniture, POI density, and road accessibility, indicating a higher overall vitality perception level. In contrast, suburban neighborhoods exhibit slight advantages in traffic signage but generally suffer from lower green visibility, encroached pedestrian spaces, and insufficient green and environmental facilities, which constrain spatial vitality. The findings suggest that both types of neighborhoods insufficiently address user experience. Accordingly, this study proposes four renewal strategies—enhancing walkability, improving environmental attractiveness, enriching functional services, and strengthening safety perception—to maximize the effectiveness of public space use and provide a scientific basis for the optimization of urban living environments.

Keywords: deep learning, street view data, community public space, spatial vitality, perception evaluation, renewal strategies

1. Introduction

As China's urban development shifts from incremental expansion to stock optimization, public demand for high-quality and vibrant community environments continues to grow. As essential venues for social interaction, leisure, and physical activity, community public spaces have become key indicators of urban livability

and governance efficiency. Traditional methods for assessing spatial vitality—such as surveys and field observations—are often constrained by subjectivity, high cost, and limited spatial coverage. In recent years, the emergence of new forms of geospatial big data, represented by street view imagery, combined with artificial intelligence technologies, has provided a revolutionary means to objectively and extensively perceive urban spatial quality from a human-centered perspective.

Existing research based on street view data has achieved substantial progress, including the construction of multidimensional evaluation systems integrating POI and street view information to assess spatial quality around metro stations and commercial streets, as well as the application of semantic segmentation techniques for quantitative comparison of street space characteristics across cities. However, most studies have focused on macro-scale urban districts or transportation nodes, while research on the micro-scale vitality of community public spaces—particularly those employing deep learning for fine-grained perception—remains limited. (Durand J N L., 1986) As the fundamental unit of urban life, the vitality of community public spaces bears more direct relevance to residents' everyday experiences.

This study selects two representative neighborhoods in Shanghai—one located in the central urban area and the other in the suburban periphery—as case studies. It innovatively applies visual semantic segmentation, a deep learning technique, to analyze large-scale street view imagery, accurately extracting key physical elements that influence spatial vitality. Combined with POI and other functional data, a comprehensive evaluation framework is established to identify spatial vitality differences across neighborhood types, diagnose existing problems, and propose human-centered renewal strategies. (Weise G., 1953) The findings aim to provide data-driven insights and decision support for refined urban governance and community quality enhancement.

2. Research Subjects and Data Processing

2.1 Overview of Research Objects

This study selects two types of representative neighborhoods in Shanghai with distinct characteristics as comparative samples.

Central Urban Sample:

Located in the core area of Shanghai, this district is a highly built-up zone characterized by high population density and mature mixed-use development. It integrates commercial, office, and residential functions, with intense use of public spaces. It serves as a typical example of a high-density community in the urban core.

Suburban Sample:

Situated in the suburban area of Shanghai, this district has developed along major transportation corridors, surrounded by large residential areas or university campuses. It forms a new community serving specific population groups. The area has relatively lower development intensity and a newer road network structure, representing the typical pattern of suburban community development under urban expansion.

The two neighborhoods exhibit significant differences in spatial morphology, functional composition, construction period, and population characteristics, offering strong comparative research value. Their total areas are approximately 190 hectares and 240 hectares, respectively.

2.2 Data Sources and Processing

The study integrates three categories of core data:

Street View Image Data:

Based on the OSM road network, street view sampling points were set at 80-meter intervals within the study areas. A total of 447 panoramic street view images were initially collected. After removing redundant points caused by excessively wide roads, 383 valid sampling points were retained for deep learning analysis.

Spatial Base Data:

Urban road network and building footprint data were obtained from OpenStreetMap (OSM). After topological processing, they were used for grid partitioning and spatial analysis.

Functional Attribute Data:

Points of Interest (POI) data were collected via online map APIs, covering 13 categories such as catering, shopping, healthcare, and education. After data cleaning, 3,462 valid records were obtained, which were used to analyze the functional density and diversity of the neighborhoods. (Jia Qi Shen, Chuan Liu, Yue Ren & Hao Zheng, 2020)

3. Research Methods

3.1 Deep Learning-Driven Visual Semantic Segmentation

This study employs advanced deep convolutional neural networks (CNNs), such as DeepLabv3+ and U-Net, to perform pixel-level semantic segmentation on street view images. (Chan, Yick Hin Edwin & Spaeth, A. Benjamin, 2020) After being pre-trained on large-scale street view datasets, the models were fine-tuned using image data from the study areas to ensure high segmentation accuracy. Each pixel in the image was classified into semantic categories including buildings, roads, sky, greenery, vehicles, street furniture, and traffic signs.

By calculating the proportion of pixels belonging to each category relative to the total pixel count, the method enables the automated and quantitative extraction of spatial elements. This provides an objective data foundation for subsequent analyses of urban spatial vitality and perceptual evaluation.

3.2 Construction of a Multidimensional Urban Vitality Perception Evaluation System

Drawing on the analytical framework proposed a five-dimensional evaluation system for assessing the vitality of community public spaces. The framework integrates visual, functional, and environmental dimensions to comprehensively capture spatial perception:

- Aesthetic Quality: Reflects the visual attractiveness of the space, characterized by the pedestrian paving rate and street furniture installation rate.
- Legibility: Represents the spatial sense of orientation and readability, measured by the traffic signage installation rate, including signals and directional signs.
- Functionality: Evaluates the accessibility and richness of service facilities, quantified by POI density (number per hectare) and POI diversity (number of primary POI categories).
- Comfort: Relates to users' physical and psychological comfort, assessed through green view index (vegetation proportion), sky visibility ratio (sky proportion), and spatial enclosure degree (building wall proportion).
- Safety: Ensures the security and comfort of pedestrian movement, represented by pedestrian accessibility (sidewalk width to total road width ratio) and motorization level (carriageway width to total road width ratio).

This multi-criteria framework allows for a balanced assessment of both the physical and perceptual qualities of urban public spaces, bridging environmental design with human experience.

3.3 Spatial Analysis Methods

Using a GIS-based analytical framework, kernel density analysis, overlay analysis, and buffer analysis were conducted to integrate spatial and visual datasets. (Wu J, Guo X, Zhu Q et al., 2022) The spatial distribution patterns of POIs were spatially coupled with the quantitative results derived from street view segmentation, revealing the clustering, dispersion, and differentiation characteristics of vitality-related elements across the study areas.

This spatial coupling analysis provides a clear and intuitive representation of how different environmental components interact to shape urban vitality, offering valuable insights for evidence-based urban renewal and design optimization. (Hillier, B., Yang, T. & Turner, A., 2012)

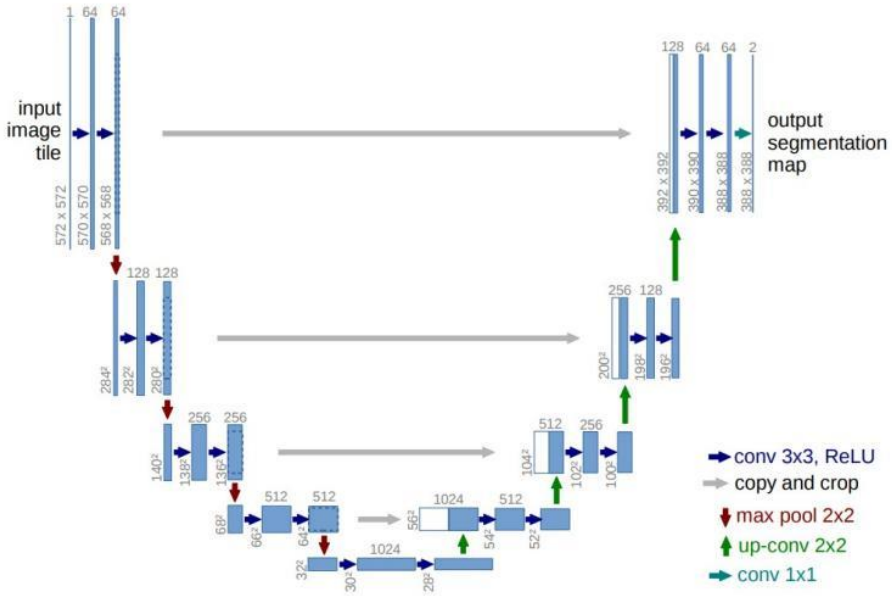

Figure 1. Deep Convolutional Neural Networks (U-net)

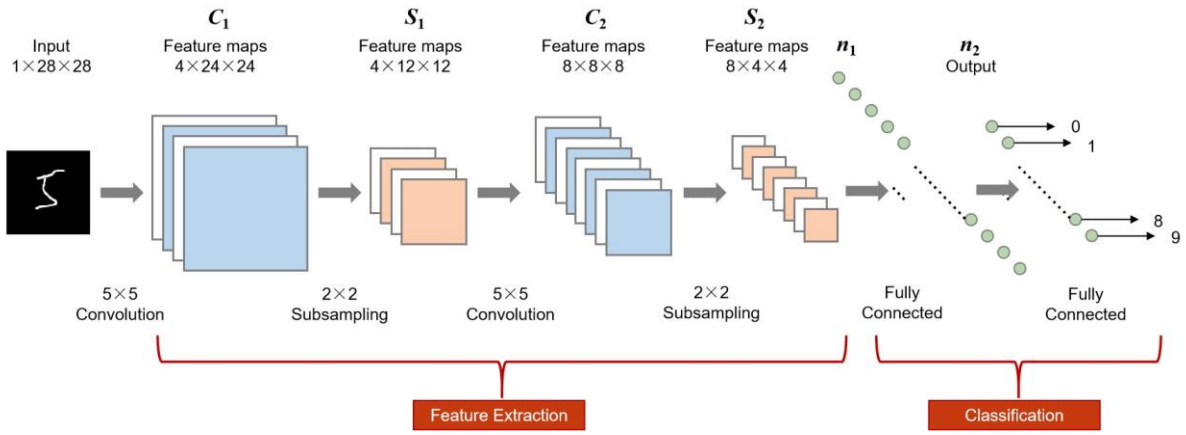

Figure 2. Deep Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs)

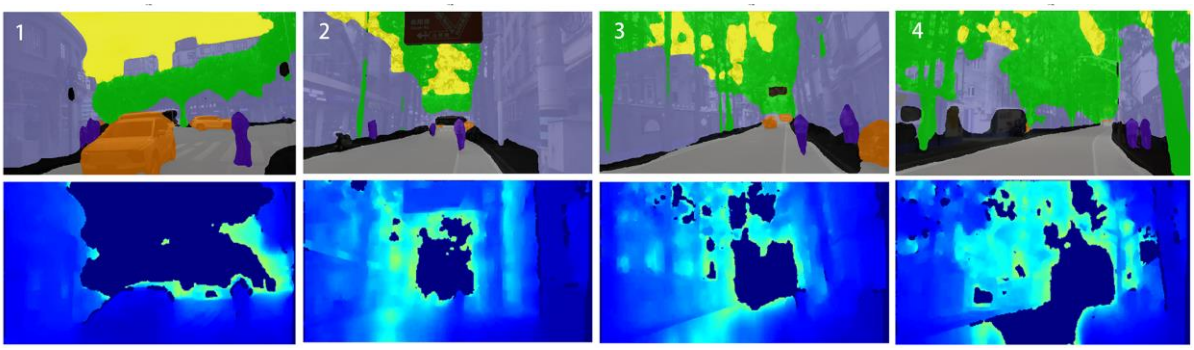

Figure 3. Semantic Analysis Results of Street View Images

4. Results

4.1 Overall Characteristics of Community Public Space Vitality

Integrating the multidimensional indicators reveals a clear contrast in the vitality of public spaces between central urban and suburban communities in Shanghai.

The central urban area, supported by a high density of functional facilities and a well-developed pedestrian network, demonstrates a stronger overall vitality perception. However, both urban types exhibit notable weaknesses: the green view index is generally low (mean value of 4.15%), and traffic signage coverage is severely insufficient (mean value of 0.005%). These results reflect an overall lack of attention to spatial aesthetics, legibility, and ecological comfort in current community design.

4.2 Comparative Analysis

- Aesthetic Quality:

The central urban area shows a significantly higher proportion of pedestrian paving (4.25%) and street furniture (2.15%) than the suburban area (2.30% and 1.45%, respectively). This indicates a stronger investment in environmental details and human-centered facilities, contributing to greater spatial cleanliness and visual appeal.

- Legibility:

The traffic signage rate in suburban communities (0.006%) is slightly higher than in the central area (0.003%). This may be due to the simpler road network in suburban districts, where way finding systems are clearer, whereas the complex, dense street patterns in central areas may reduce signage visibility and effectiveness.

- Functionality:

The POI density in the central area (15.20 per ha) far exceeds that of the suburban area (2.30 per ha), with a more even spatial distribution, resulting in superior accessibility and convenience. In contrast, suburban POIs are clustered and unevenly distributed, leaving distinct service blind spots within the community.

- Comfort:

The sky visibility ratio in suburban communities (39.50%) is higher than in central areas (28.60%), offering a stronger sense of openness due to lower building enclosure. However, the green view index in suburbs (3.70%) remains lower than in the central area (4.60%), indicating room for improvement in ecological comfort and landscape quality.

- Safety:

The pedestrian accessibility ratio in the central area (20.40%) surpasses that of the suburban area (13.80%), while the motorization level is lower (14.50% vs. 18.40%). This suggests stricter control over vehicular traffic in central districts and better protection of pedestrian spaces. In suburban areas, sidewalk encroachment by parked vehicles remains a common issue, posing safety risks for pedestrians.

4.3 Renewal Strategies for Community Public Spaces

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes four strategic directions for enhancing community public space vitality:

- Enhance Walkability:

Optimize road cross-section design, widen sidewalks, and improve accessibility through barrier-free facilities. Enforce stricter control over roadside parking to ensure continuous pedestrian paths. Introduce rest areas, benches, and shading structures to enrich the walking experience.

- Strengthen Environmental Appeal:

Promote vertical greening and pocket park construction to increase the green view index. Improve paving materials and color coordination to create visually distinctive nodes. Enhance street cleanliness and maintenance to maintain a high-quality urban environment.

- Improve Functional Services:

Based on POI density analysis, fill service gaps by adding convenience stores, community canteens, and outdoor fitness facilities. Encourage diversified street-level commerce to stimulate local vitality and social interaction.

- Reinforce Safety and Legibility:

Install clear and visible traffic signage and wayfinding systems to improve spatial readability. Strengthen nighttime safety through improved lighting and open sightlines. Deploy smart surveillance and emergency response facilities to build a resilient and safe public environment.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that integrating deep learning techniques with street view data enables a refined and objective assessment of community public space vitality. The findings reveal that while the central urban areas generally exhibit higher vitality, suburban neighborhoods possess certain advantages in terms of spatial openness. (Shibo Zeng, Gui Jin, Kaiyuan Tan & Xuan Liu, 2023) However, both

types of communities require significant improvements in greening, safety, and aesthetic quality.

Future community renewal should abandon the traditional focus on construction over experience, and instead prioritize residents' daily use and psychological perception. By employing scientific diagnosis and precise interventions, cities can continuously enhance the quality of public spaces and ultimately achieve the development vision of "a people's city built for the people." The methodological framework proposed in this study offers valuable insights for community evaluation and renewal planning in other urban contexts.

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"Artification": Market-Oriented Design Strategy of China Daily-Use Ceramics After Reform and Opening-up

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Abstract

After the Reform and Opening-up, faced with intense market competition and low-value challenges, China's ceramic industry began to shift its focus to design, attempting to expand domestic and international markets and increase product added value through the "artification of daily-use ceramics." In this process, designers sought to enhance the decorative and aesthetic qualities of daily-use ceramics by combining artistic expression with advancements in materials and technology, aiming to meet consumers' upgraded aesthetic demands. However, constrained by cost control, production technology, and design capabilities, many "artified" designs of daily-use ceramics have deviated from their original intent.

Keywords: China daily-use ceramics, artification, market, alienation

1. Introduction

In the late 1970s, China began to implement economic system reform and opening-up policies. Since then, China's daily-use ceramics have expanded in the international market with their low-cost advantage, but compared with similar products from Europe and Japan, their value is extremely low. To change the status quo and enhance market competitiveness, China's ceramic industry proposed the design concept of "artifying daily-use ceramics".

2. The Origin of "Artistic" Design of China Daily Ceramics

2.1 China's Ceramic Industry Advocating the "Artistic" of Products

In 1980, during the National Arts and Crafts Science and Technology Conference jointly organized by the State Science and Technology Commission and the Ministry of Light Industry, the Central Financial and Economic Affairs Leading Group proposed the dual objectives of "practicalizing handicrafts" and "artifying daily necessities." This initiative redirected product development priorities, emphasizing the export of daily-use handicrafts. The "dualization" strategy embodied the vision of integrating traditional decorative craftsmanship with contemporary design within the arts and crafts framework, aiming to elevate the quality of export goods. The concept of "artification" essentially means "artistic enhancement" —whether applied to daily necessities or practical items—primarily focusing on the

aesthetic refinement of product appearances.

Based on the "dualization" policy, China's ceramic industry proposed the slogan of "artistic ceramics for daily use and daily-use ceramics for artistic purposes," advocating the application of artistic ceramic techniques to the shaping and decoration of daily-use ceramics to enhance product quality and added value. In 1992, the Information and Statistics Department of the Ministry of Light Industry identified "artistic daily-use ceramics and daily-use ceramics for artistic purposes" as a global trend in ceramic development and proposed this as the main direction for China's ceramics[1]. Initially, China's "artistic daily-use ceramics" aimed to address the low value of exported ceramic products, making them more appealing to foreign consumers and boosting the export earnings of China's daily-use ceramic products. Later, with the development of the domestic market, the "artistic" direction of daily-use ceramics also became a focus for domestic sales. From the perspective of contemporary China's daily-use ceramics, the slogan "artistic ceramics for daily use and daily-use ceramics for artistic purposes" did not distinguish between artistic design and fine arts (pure art). Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, art and design have often been integrated in the ceramic industry, sharing a unified characteristic. The shift in terminology from "crafts and arts" to "artistic design" or "design art" reflects the growing emphasis on "art" in ceramic design.

From the creator's perspective, ceramic artists are often ceramic designers, and vice versa—there's no absolute distinction between these roles. Renowned figures like Zhang Shouzhi, Yang Yongshan, He Yan, Huang Chunmao, and Li Jianping are both ceramic designers and artists, while He Bingqin, Qiu Gengyu, Lü Jinquan, and Li Leiyin are artists who also work as designers. Globally recognized ceramic brands typically integrate artistic porcelain with daily-use ceramics, collaborating with celebrated designers and artists to develop new products. The British ceramic brand Wedgwood's design success is inseparable from its partnerships with artists. Artists from diverse backgrounds have enriched Wedgwood's ceramic designs with artistic flair, enhancing product value and appeal while boosting sales. In China, many ceramic enterprises hire national, provincial, and municipal-level master artisans to participate in new product development, floral pattern design, and technical training. Daily-use ceramic manufacturers also produce decorative and artistic ceramics, with porcelain painters frequently contributing to the decorative design of everyday ceramic products.

2.2 Aesthetic Consumption and Art Promoting the Artisticization of China's Daily Ceramics

As China gradually transitions to a consumer society, people's preferences for items have shifted from practicability to aesthetically pleasing, and the selection of new items is increasingly based on aesthetics. In the socio-cultural context, items can reflect the user's taste and carry symbolic significance. The "artistic" design of daily-use ceramics can be seen as a response to this lifestyle and changing demands.

From the perspective of the hierarchy of needs, "aesthetics" is a relatively higher-level demand for goods compared to "functionality." After the reform and opening up, the living standards of the domestic population have significantly improved, the proportion of the middle class has gradually increased, and social production has achieved tremendous development with the establishment of the market economy system. The contradiction between "the people's growing material and cultural needs" and "backward social production" has gradually been reconciled and improved, and China's economy has shifted from a "commodity shortage type" to a "commodity surplus type." The progress of productivity and the rapid development of manufacturing have led to an abundance of goods. The improvement in people's living standards is primarily material, manifested in the increase of disposable money and the adequacy of living necessities. When people's material needs are partially met, they will develop spiritual needs, which is reflected in the elevation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and also in the upgrading of material pursuits from "satisfaction," "warmth," "security" to "beauty," "grace," and "joy" as described by

[1] Department of Information and Statistics, Ministry of Light Industry. (1992). Development Trends of the World Light Industry and China's Future Priorities. *China's National Conditions and Strengths*, (2), 55.

Mozi. [1] Among the internal categories of daily-use ceramics, the artification of tea sets is the most evident. The reason for this is that tea drinking, compared to dining, is a more leisurely lifestyle activity, and the users are mostly from the leisure class. During the use of tea sets, users not only savor the tea but also appreciate the vessels, paying more attention to the aesthetic elements of the tea sets.

From an international perspective, foreign consumers favor single-piece products with artistic value. High-end items like cups, plates, and teapots serve multiple purposes—functional, decorative, and collectible. Exquisitely patterned dinnerware not only functions but also enhances home decor, making artistic quality a key consumer consideration. Domestically, art has become both a means to culturalize products and a strategy for value enhancement in competitive markets. Jingdezhen's small tea sets exemplify this trend, featuring rapidly updated designs, rich regional cultural elements, and significantly higher added value than similar products. Li Huifeng, director of Jingdezhen Yubai Ceramics, observes: "Times have changed. Tea cups used to be mere drinking vessels, but now people seek spiritual fulfillment and cultural sophistication. We sell culture and artistic living." [2]At a 2006 ceramic industry symposium in the National Art Museum of China, Sun Guanghui, then vice mayor of Chaozhou, remarked: "Five years ago, I focused solely on industrialization. Now that Chaozhou's industries have matured, I realize our competitiveness stems not just from industrialization, but from the perfect fusion of ceramics with art and modern lifestyles."[3]

Since the 1990s, the booming domestic ceramic art market and the rise of modern ceramic art have directly influenced the artistic transformation of daily-use ceramics. Production hubs like Jingdezhen, Liling, Longquan, Dehua, and Zibo have applied traditional ceramic techniques—including painted designs, colored glazes, carved patterns, and sculptural forms—to everyday items such as cups, teapots, bowls, and plates. Chaozhou artisans employed openwork porcelain craftsmanship to create decorative plates and fruit stands, while Zibo innovated with colored glaze and carved porcelain for tea set adornments. Modern ceramic art's emphasis on material characteristics, unconventional shapes, and experimental firing methods has profoundly reshaped daily ceramic designs. Ceramic artists from Jingdezhen, Dehua, and Yichang have pioneered new approaches to artistic ceramics, fostering cross-cultural exchanges between diverse artistic styles. This has transformed traditional handmade ceramics into contemporary "living ceramics." Collaborations between Chinese and international designers, artists, and artisans have enriched product aesthetics, yielding notable works like the "Harmony 2007" coffee set co-created by Tsinghua University professor Zhang Shouzhi and Australian ceramicist Janet Debus, and the "Egret Soaring Through Clouds" first-class cabin tableware designed by Fujian master Chen Renhai and Greek designer Venia Giota for Xiamen Airlines.

British scholar Firthstone posits that human aesthetic activities have transcended the boundaries of pure art and literature, gradually permeating the "everyday life" of the masses, resulting in the "aestheticization of daily life." As a "cultural phenomenon," this aestheticization signifies the blurring of boundaries between art and life—where art becomes life-like and life becomes artistic. It also implies that all aspects of daily life, including mass-produced goods and their environments (designs), become objects of aesthetic appreciation. Daily-use ceramics, as common household items, have evolved from functional objects to aesthetic entities. The bowls, plates, teapots, and cups themselves possess formal qualities, and through over ten thousand years of development, they have acquired diverse shapes and decorations. When practicality is set aside, these "formally meaningful" daily-use ceramics easily become aesthetic objects free from utilitarian constraints. In everyday contexts, the aestheticization of daily objects promotes the artistic transformation of ceramics, while the artistic refinement of ceramics further enhances the aestheticization of daily life. Both

[1] Han Liu Xiang's "Shuoyuan" cites a lost text from "Mozi", which states: "One must always eat until full before seeking beauty; one must always wear warm clothes before seeking elegance; one must always live in peace before seeking joy."

[2] Chen Jin. (2015). Current Status and Development Trends of Daily-use Ceramics Enterprises in Jingdezhen. Jingdezhen Ceramic University, 36.

[3] Fan Di'an. (2006). *Guarding and Expanding: Proceedings of the Ceramic Conference at the National Art Museum of China*. Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Press, 15.

"aestheticization of daily life" and "everyday aestheticization" integrate the visual forms and user experiences of daily-use ceramics into aesthetic experiences. The gradual decline of Jingdezhen's artistic porcelain and the booming market for artistic small tea sets reflect not only the state's anti-corruption efforts but also the changing demands of users under the influence of aestheticized lifestyles.

2.3 Technological Progress Enriching the Artistic Presentation of China Daily Ceramics

The artistic design of daily-use ceramics is inseparable from advancements in materials and production technologies. Before China's reform and opening-up, domestic daily-use ceramic products were constrained by production conditions, resulting in frequent defects such as deformation, glaze shrinkage, and black spots. Due to the involvement of mold-making and trial firing in ceramic design, the R&D costs were high and market risks significant, leading to little innovation over the years. China's daily-use ceramics were predominantly transparent white porcelain, mainly decorated with overglaze appliqué. However, the silk screen printing pattern could only achieve 80-100 lines, requiring 4-5 color runs, which resulted in dull pigments, limited color variations, and a lack of diversity in color schemes. These limitations hindered the decorative effects and left the artistic and design approaches of the products constrained.

Since the 1990s, the refinement of raw materials and modern production techniques have significantly reduced surface imperfections in daily-use ceramics, achieving a flawless smoothness that laid the foundation for artistic enhancement. The invention of new ceramic materials further enriched the aesthetic appeal of these products. New ceramic varieties like synthetic bone china, Huaqing porcelain, and Hanguang porcelain elevated the artistic value of daily-use ceramics through their superior material quality.

The establishment of ceramic glaze factories in mainland China, including those from Taiwan and overseas, has significantly expanded the variety of domestic ceramic glazes. High-temperature colored glazes, reactive glazes, kiln-changing glazes, and decorative glazes are now widely used in daily-use ceramics. Improved printing technologies and premium glaze materials have diversified decorative paper types, now categorized into underglaze, overglaze, and midglaze varieties. Small-format decorative paper (water-transfer type) is gradually replacing large-format designs and has become standard in domestic ceramic production. This format offers better flexibility and adaptability to vessel shapes, while enabling printing of precious metal inlays and relief patterns. It supports overglaze, midglaze, and underglaze designs with adjustable color layer thickness. The growing popularity of high-temperature fast-burning midglaze techniques reduces glaze erosion and avoids material-induced lead/cadmium leaching. These methods also overcome the limitations of insufficient underglaze colors and inferior decorative effects compared to overglaze designs, significantly enhancing creative freedom and artistic impact in daily-use ceramics. High-resolution printing equipment can even replicate hand-painted effects, breaking the monotony of mass-produced items. Advanced mold materials and forming techniques enable more precise and intricate ceramic designs. Automated engraving machines, 3D printers, and high-pressure injection systems expand ceramic production capabilities, allowing designers to realize innovative concepts. Cutting-edge kiln systems and firing processes have dramatically improved yield rates for complex and irregular ceramic shapes, reducing production costs and supporting artistic innovation in the industry.

It can be said that since the reform and opening up, the progress of materials and technology has broadened the path of "artistic" design for China's daily ceramics. As British scholar Penny Spark said, "If consumer culture makes design inevitable, then technological progress makes design possible."[1]

3. The Expression of China Daily Ceramics Art Design after the Reform and Opening-up

In order to meet the market demand after the reform and opening up, the designer tries to add "artistic" to the decoration and modeling of daily ceramics, so that the products have higher aesthetic value.

3.1 Seeking Novel Visual Effects in Decoration

3.1.1 The Artistic Design of Decal Paper Patterns

[1] Penny Spark. (2012). *Introduction to Design and Culture*. Translated by Qian Fenggen and Yu Xiaohong. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 12.

Decal paper, which facilitates mass production, is a major decorative technique in China's daily-use ceramics. The pattern designs centered around decal paper are an important manifestation of the artistic development of China's daily-use ceramics. The content of decal paper designs has gradually become richer, encompassing not only traditional themes and floral patterns from both Eastern and Western cultures but also vegetables, fruits, birds and beasts, figures, and abstract designs. Compared to before the reform and opening-up, the patterns on decal paper are more aesthetically pleasing and diverse. To enhance the design innovation of decal paper and promote the artistic quality of products, Shenzhen Stechcol Ceramics draws inspiration from nature worldwide, documenting plants and birds through photography to create creative decal paper designs. The improvement of screen printing technology and the widespread use of computer plate-making have enhanced and diversified the printing quality of decal paper. By altering the base materials and pigments of decal paper, artistic effects such as enamel, pastel, doucai, watercolor, printmaking, and oil painting can be imitated.

Some ceramic enterprises replicate artists' artworks into ultra-high-resolution decal paper, making it hard to distinguish the genuine from the fake. Zhang Songmao, a renowned ceramic artist from Jingdezhen, has created plates from his porcelain painting "Peony Butterfly" and printed it into decorative decal paper for tableware and tea sets. Other companies transform famous Chinese and Western paintings into daily-use ceramic decal paper to enhance the "artistic" ambiance of their decorations. Chongqing Zhaofeng Ceramics once designed a series of tableware and tea sets inspired by Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh's oil paintings, which gained popularity among consumers worldwide. Designers from Beiliu Sanhuan Ceramics turned modern abstract artist Mondrian's famous paintings into decal paper, transferring them onto cups and plates with striking compositional appeal.

3.1.2 Application of Various Ceramic Decoration Techniques

Ceramic enterprises and artisans in Jingdezhen primarily enhance the artistic value of daily-use ceramics through hand-painted decorations, with limited variations in product designs. Small businesses and studios often source undecorated plain ceramic pieces from external suppliers for hand-painted embellishments. Traditional ceramic painting techniques such as blue-and-white porcelain, underglaze red, famille rose, enamel, ancient enamel, and modern enamel are widely used in daily-use ceramic decorations, particularly for tea sets. These products are typically hand-painted by skilled artisans following designer-provided samples. Some manufacturers produce decorative patterns as transfer paper for ceramic applications, while others combine semi-manual production with hand-painted blue-and-white designs to achieve both mass production efficiency and the unique artistic charm of hand-painted blue-and-white. Yufeng Porcelain Factory encourages designers to experiment with hand-painted decorations on cups and tea sets, testing market responses before converting popular designs into mass-produced transfer paper. Ceramic enterprises like Hongye and Wanglong combine high-temperature colored glazes with overglaze floral and bird paintings, showcasing rich ethnic artistic traditions.

Liling's daily-use porcelain industry has developed under the artistic direction of "artistic daily ceramics". By expanding the color palette of underglaze enamel and applying the unique Fen water and firing techniques of underglaze five-color porcelain, the products achieve enhanced artistic appeal. The underglaze five-color technique involves firing at 1380°C, resulting in subtle coloration that creates refined artistic effects. To adapt to mass production, Liling employs the "imprint Fen water" method: patterns are first made into leather impressions, dipped in water-resistant ink or pigments, then printed onto pre-fired bodies. The prepared colored powders are dissolved in tea water, with concentrations adjusted according to each pigment's color intensity. Workers fill the patterns using Fen water brushes, controlling the thickness of the colored material to achieve gradient and layered effects. Liling's "Red Official Kiln" and Zhenmei Art Ceramics Company's underglaze enamel tea sets and tableware stand out with their distinctive artistic style. Beyond traditional underglaze five-color decorations, Hunan Hualian Ceramics' stoneware products incorporate various decorative techniques like matte finish, reactive glaze, snowflake glaze, crackle glaze, cosmetic clay, and relief carving. These techniques combine with the unique shapes and

heavy-bodied forms of the ceramics, creating rich, varied, and highly personalized artistic effects.

Historically, ceramic cookware primarily featuring clay pots were predominantly decorated with monochromatic glazes like ivory yellow, brown, or black, resulting in limited aesthetic options. Since the 1990s, ceramic cookware has evolved to incorporate increasingly sophisticated designs. The trend toward pristine white and delicate finishes gained prominence, often achieved through hand-painted designs or decorative paper appliqués. Recent years have seen a surge in colorful glazes or a combination of colored glazes with appliqué, offering vibrant patterns and diverse hues that significantly elevate the artistic appeal of ceramic cookware. Notably, Guangdong Shunxiang Ceramics Co., Ltd. and Songfa Ceramics Co., Ltd. have moved beyond the traditional dull colors and rugged forms of ceramic pots, adopting light-colored glazes and shallow relief decorations. Their innovative dual-purpose cookware and serving vessels now combine functionality with sleek, contemporary aesthetics.

The traditional decorative techniques of porcelain, such as flower glaze, tea-leaf glaze, star-and raindrop glaze, twisted glaze and twisted body, and carved flower, are also used in the decoration design of high-grade daily-use ceramics.

3.2 Seeking Diversity Through Breaking Away from the Conventional Approach in Design

After the reform and opening up, China daily-use ceramics gradually broke the shape style of decades, began to seek the diversification of shape.

The design diversity of daily-use ceramics has significantly expanded, with increasingly unconventional shapes emerging. Ceramic manufacturers are seeking to boost product value by developing specialized designs that require advanced forming techniques, aiming to break free from the constraints of homogeneous, low-priced products. Drawing inspiration from international tableware styles, designers have moved beyond traditional circular forms to create innovative shapes including ellipses, squares, triangles, polygons, floral patterns, and nature-inspired designs, catering to the market's demand for differentiated products. The most notable evolution occurs in hotel ceramic tableware. Designers now focus not only on functional elements like materials and compatibility, but also visually showcase how exquisite tableware complements gourmet dishes, reflecting the hotel's prestige and elevating dining experiences. To enhance dish presentation, most hotel ceramics feature unadorned white porcelain. This has driven designers to emphasize creative shaping, with unconventional forms becoming prominent. Plates and cups showcase the richest variety: plate types include hat-shaped, leaf-shaped, conch-shaped, shell-shaped, star-shaped, wavy, stone-shaped, upturned-corner, and angled plates; cup types feature pumpkin-shaped, lotus-shaped, ingot-shaped, boat-shaped, and tripod-shaped designs. Tableware is tailored to specific dishes—fish plates match fish, goose plates suit goose, and long strips complement grilled meats. Decorative accessories like chopstick holders, seasoning tools, spoons, and towel plates also showcase diverse designs. Jingdezhen Ceramic Co., Ltd. alone offers over 20 unique hotel chopstick holders, including dragon, swan, Great Wall, ruyi (auspicious) symbol, zither, bridge, and mountain motifs.

The thermal stability of ceramic cookware is related to its shape, so traditional cookware mainly features circular designs with little variation. As people's aesthetic demands for ceramic products increase, the shapes of cookware also show a tendency towards artistic design. Domestic daily-use ceramic enterprises have improved the rolling and pressing molding method, enabling the production of new shapes such as oval and square products. Dehua Guanfu Ceramics Company adopted a biomimetic design method inspired by purple clay teapots, shaping the heat-resistant pot into a pumpkin form and mimicking the colors of natural objects in the use of glaze. Jingdezhen Leicester Special Ceramics Co., Ltd., based on the research and development of new materials, hired China's master of arts and crafts and sculptor Zhang Yuxian to design the shapes of high-end heat-resistant ceramic pots, combining the images of zodiac animals with the objects themselves, and launched products such as "Prosperous Dragon" and "Success Comes Like a Horse." The aesthetically refined ceramic cookware has not only gained popularity among domestic consumers but also received praise in the international market, with products exported to countries such as Australia, South

Korea, and Japan.

3.3 Stylistic Expression Combining Modeling and Decoration

The designer also draws on artistic expressions to integrate decoration and modeling, making the daily-use ceramics more stylized.

Faplan Ceramics has become an internationally renowned ceramic brand through its unique artistic design and craftsmanship. The slogan of Faplan Ceramics is to create "functional art," meaning that Faplan Ceramics is not only a functional daily item but also an artwork with aesthetic value. Faplan Ceramics' tableware or coffee sets often appear in a series, including vases and decorative plates primarily for display, enriching the artistic beauty of the products. The "artistic" nature of Faplan Ceramics is based on materials and technology. High-quality raw materials, a wide variety of colors and glazes, advanced mold-making and demolding techniques, and superb firing processes create a perfect presentation of design creativity. The colors and glazes of Faplan Ceramics are specially formulated by a well-known Taiwanese glaze-making company, free from harmful substances such as lead and cadmium. In terms of molding techniques, Faplan Ceramics employs 3D printing molds and its exclusive patented "bevel demolding method," breaking through conventional craftsmanship and the rigid, practical limitations of daily-use ceramics to produce complex and varied three-dimensional shapes. Faplan Ceramics blends traditional Chinese aesthetics with Western Art Nouveau styles, gradually forming its own unique design characteristics. Designers draw inspiration from nature and traditional Chinese culture, often using three-dimensional plants and animals as the main shapes or decorative elements, adorned with high-temperature underglaze colors, resulting in vibrant and layered hues. Faplan Ceramics products are like living vessels that transcend their form, where the vessel and its image coexist harmoniously, achieving a realm where the fluid, swirling "Art Nouveau" curves, flat paintings, three-dimensional reliefs, or sculptures blend seamlessly with the objects themselves, offering a unique artistic experience. Faplan Ceramics frequently collaborates with artists both domestically and internationally. The base marks of Faplan Ceramics are signed by designers, potters, or molders. Falan porcelain offers mass-produced items, yet many are limited-edition pieces or one-of-a-kind masterpieces. The "Butterfly Dance" series, designed by renowned Taiwanese designer He Zhenwu, won the "Best Gift Award" at the New York International Gift Exhibition. Featuring delicate colors and harmonious decoration, the collection centers on three-dimensional butterflies complemented by floral motifs, with fluid lines and lifelike forms that blend motion and stillness into a captivating composition. By integrating vases with coffee sets in a cohesive series, designers blur the line between art and functionality while enhancing artistic value. Flan porcelain artists often incorporate renowned Chinese and Western paintings into ceramic designs through relief and sculptural techniques, creatively merging styles like the Van Gogh series, Wu Guanzhong series, and the "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains" series. The Van Gogh series reimagines Dutch masterpieces featuring irises, sunflowers, and peach blossoms, skillfully blending three-dimensional and two-dimensional elements, relief and painting, objects and decoration—hallmarks of Flan porcelain's artistic expression. While the designs exude contemporary appeal, resembling decorative artworks and collectibles, some products prove impractical due to complex structures prone to damage and difficult cleaning. While Flan's success offers valuable lessons for daily-use ceramic brands, its design philosophy and production methods shouldn't be blindly copied. Tangshan Asia Times Ceramics Co., Ltd. remains committed to hand-painted decorative products. The company maintains a design and hand-painting team of hundreds, employing exquisite gongbi (meticulous brushwork), abstract ink wash, and watercolor techniques to adorn bone china. Its designs blend the best of Chinese and Western artistry—some are meticulously crafted with unique elegance, others exude natural simplicity, while many radiate a strong contemporary vibe, establishing Tangshan bone china as a hallmark of artistic excellence.

Since the 1990s, influenced by modern ceramic art from Japan and the United States, craft ceramics have emerged as "lifestyle ceramics," featuring both daily-use items like bowls, plates, cups, pots, and jars, and decorative pieces such as vases and incense burners. Lifestyle ceramics aim to overcome the limitations of modern ceramic art that overemphasizes form and spirituality while neglecting functionality. They

focus on showcasing the artist's individuality and artistic expression through handmade craftsmanship, often employing traditional techniques like potter's wheel shaping and coil-building. Unlike traditional craft ceramics that prioritize neatness and refinement, lifestyle ceramics embrace irregular forms and decorations, preserving production marks from shaping, decorating, and firing. They utilize various glazes and decorative clay to enhance visual appeal, highlighting material textures and warmth while demonstrating meticulous craftsmanship in details. Young ceramic artist Bian Xiaocen primarily creates functional lifestyle ceramics, mostly bowls, jars, and pots, often coated with decorative clay or matte glaze. His style draws inspiration from folk kiln roughware and Japanese ceramic art, blending practicality with rustic, timeless artistic charm. Lifestyle ceramic production is concentrated in traditional ceramic regions like Jingdezhen, Yixing, and Dehua. Some artists have developed distinctive styles and gained recognition, while others explore small-scale production or collaborations with ceramic enterprises.

4. The Alienation of "Artification" of China Daily Ceramics Since Reform and Opening-up

Due to the lack of design talent and the deviation of design cognition, China's daily ceramic design has also undergone alienation in the process of "artification", which is mainly manifested as the form hindering the function and concealing the defects of the product.

4.1 Form Hindering Function

Many domestic enterprises oversimplify the artistic design of daily-use ceramics as mere painting or sculpting. Whether to cater to consumers 'aesthetic demands or to boost product value, "artification" has become a panacea. This approach transforms even low-quality ceramic objects into "artworks" through the "magic" of painting and sculpting, resulting in a flood of artistic "junk" and an "alienation" of artification. In the history of global design, the British "Crystal Palace" industrial products' overuse of artistic techniques drew criticism from John Ruskin and William Morris, sparking the British "Art and Crafts" movement that ultimately unified technology and art in Western modern design.

While artistic hand-painting and well-crafted sculptural designs can enhance the "artistry" of daily-use ceramics, crude repetitive hand-painting and bizarrely forced shapes not only fail to add aesthetic value but also disrupt the simplicity of the objects themselves, making artistic refinement impossible. As a decorative technique, hand-painting should not be equated with "artification" when contrasted with appliqué and printed designs. Under the banner of innovation and "artification," some production areas have seen bizarre animal-shaped teaware that lacks formal beauty and instead evokes negative associations, diminishing even the willingness to use them. Mr. Yang Yongshan argues that "inappropriate and unattractive designs like cat teapots and dog teapots, which degrade aesthetic taste, should not be promoted." [1] He further emphasizes that ceramic design should follow its own principles rather than applying general artistic creation methods. "Daily-use ceramic decoration design shouldn't simply involve painting patterns or traditional Chinese paintings on shapes; it should be an overall design based on the characteristics of the form, material texture, and color." The white porcelain panda teaware produced by a ceramic factory in Dehua failed to effectively combine artistic design with functional structure, resulting in products that are neither "beautiful" nor "practical." Its complex design makes production difficult, and it can hardly be considered "cost-effective." Some traditional production areas judge product value by "workmanship" (the amount of decorative patterns), with high prices for elaborate designs and low prices for simpler ones, which clearly narrows the value of "art" into a narrow quantitative measure.

After the market boom following the reform, Jingdezhen ceramics shifted focus to artistic porcelain, with its techniques also influencing daily-use ceramics like tea sets. The distinctive Jingdezhen-painted tea sets, though aesthetically pleasing, struggled to sell due to their thin, non-functional bodies that were too hot to handle and prone to breaking. "Most artists simply painted artistic designs on everyday ceramics, treating them as art—without achieving any fundamental

[1] Yang Yongshan. (2001). *On Tao Yuanming's Art Theory*. Harbin: Heilongjiang Fine Arts Publishing House, 125. Peng Yuwang. (2013). *Ceramic Sea: A Glimpse of the Past*. Nanchang: Jiangxi People's Publishing House, 255.

transformation in ceramic form."[1]

4.2 Concealing Product Defects

The "artification" of daily-use ceramics first requires solving process issues to achieve high-quality appearance. Taking white porcelain as an example, good transparency, gloss, whiteness, and surface defects-free are not only product quality standards but also important indicators of aesthetics. Some ceramic enterprises overemphasize "artification," leading to safety hazards in daily-use ceramic products. Since heavy metals such as lead and cadmium are added during the decoration and firing of daily-use ceramics to reduce firing temperature and enhance glaze smoothness and color vibrancy, many small daily-use ceramic enterprises often use inferior materials to cut costs and highlight aesthetics. Coupled with outdated production techniques, this frequently results in excessive lead and cadmium leaching, posing health risks to users. In previous national quality inspections, issues such as excessive heavy metal leaching and poor resistance to sudden deformation in daily-use ceramics have consistently existed, hindering the high-quality development of China's daily-use ceramics. Additionally, a large number of hand-painted tea sets with rough artwork flood the ceramic market, masking defects in the porcelain body and glaze. Peter Dohme believes that "the beauty of useful objects is determined by their functionality and honesty in materials and structure." [2] However, narrow "artification" overlooks the basic usefulness and safety of daily-use ceramics, becoming a tool for product embellishment.

Shen Yu argues that the production of daily consumer goods (China's light industrial products) has consistently followed two interconnected misguided paths: "artification of practical items" and excessive "crafts artification". [3] While emphasizing equipment upgrades and process improvements over product aesthetics, advocating the "artification" of functional items holds progressive value. However, neither "artification" nor aesthetic enhancement should be the sole objective or ultimate goal of daily ceramic design, nor should they serve as evaluation criteria. Reducing ceramic design development to simplistic notions of "artification" or "artistry" still reflects narrow craft art thinking, oversimplifying complex design behaviors and consumer demands. "Blindly pursuing artistic qualities while neglecting functionality is clearly putting the cart before the horse. To successfully advance the artification of daily ceramics, we must innovate design concepts beyond mere functionality and practicality." [4]Since the new century, the "human-centered" approach has become a key trend in design development. The comprehensive optimization of user experience—encompassing practicality, aesthetics, and emotional engagement—has expanded the conceptual framework for ceramic artification.

5. Conclusion

In the market context, the "artistic" design strategy of China's daily-use ceramics reflects a correction to the pre-Reform and Opening-up era's neglect of product form in favor of quantity alone. It promotes the integration of functionality and artistry in China's daily-use ceramics, enriches decorative and sculptural designs, and attempts to bring these products into the "aesthetic realm," catering to consumers' aesthetic demands to some extent and boosting trade growth and added value. This demonstrates China's daily-use ceramics' exploration in transitioning to modern design. The "artistic" approach in China's daily-use ceramics reflects the continuation of traditional craft art philosophy, with its essence still being the enhancement of product value through "craftsmanship." However, this "artistic" focus primarily emphasizes the beautification of "objects" rather than truly addressing the diverse needs of "people." The "artistic" design of daily-use ceramics should not equate to "artification." In a narrow sense, "artistic" design simplifies complex design issues into formal problems, revealing the limitations of China's ceramic industry's understanding of daily-use ceramic design in a market-driven environment. Looking ahead, the artistic design of China's daily-use ceramics should transcend the notion of "beautiful objects" and instead

[1] Peng Yuwang. (2013). *Ceramic Sea: A Glimpse of the Past*. Nanchang: Jiangxi People's Publishing House, 255.

[2] Peter Dohmer. (2010). *Design Since 1945.* Translated by Liang Mei. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 65.

[3] Shen Yu. (2017). *History of Modern Design Concepts in China.* Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House. 209.

[4] Porcelain Capital Evening News. (2013 March 6). "Qing Luan" (a Chinese term for premature maturity): The Inverted Priorities of Everyday Ceramics Artification.

focus on the interactive relationship between people and objects, as well as the experiences of beauty in the process, aiming for the artisticization of life.

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Residential Exclusion Mechanisms of Architectural Rehabilitation as an Urban Renewal Tool in the Old City of Barcelona

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Abstract

This paper examines architectural rehabilitation as a mechanism of residential exclusion within the broader framework of urban renewal in the Old City of Barcelona. It argues that rehabilitation, though often framed as preservation and improvement, functions as an instrument of neoliberal transformation that reorganizes social hierarchies while aestheticizing inequality. Drawing on the theories of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Michel Foucault, and Sharon Zukin, the study situates rehabilitation within the production of space as a field of power where architecture, governance, and capital converge. The transformation of Ciutat Vella, particularly in Raval, is analyzed as both material and symbolic: the renewal of buildings accompanies the displacement of working-class and migrant populations, while heritage becomes a tool of market valorization and cultural branding. The research exposes the contradictions of socially conscious rehabilitation, where participation and inclusion operate as ideological instruments that legitimize inequality through design and visual order. It concludes by calling for a re-politicization of architectural practice and urban renewal, reclaiming the right to the city as a collective capacity to inhabit and define space beyond capital and spectacle.

Keywords: architectural rehabilitation, urban renewal, Ciutat Vella, Raval

1. Introduction

Architectural rehabilitation occupies a complex position in the contemporary discourse of urban renewal. It is often celebrated as a form of urban repair that reactivates the life of the city through the restoration of its physical fabric and the preservation of its historical identity. Unlike the aggressive demolitions of mid-twentieth-century modernist planning, rehabilitation presents itself as a more humane and culturally sensitive approach. It implies care, continuity, and respect for collective memory. Yet behind this rhetoric of preservation lies a deeper transformation in how cities govern space, value, and social life. Architectural rehabilitation, particularly within historic urban cores, has become a strategic tool for the reinvention of urban identity in a global economy that prizes heritage, aesthetics, and lifestyle as sources of economic capital.

The Old City of Barcelona, or Ciutat Vella, exemplifies these contradictions with particular intensity. Its dense urban fabric, layered with centuries of history, has been a stage for multiple cycles of transformation that mirror broader

urban shifts across Europe. In the late twentieth century, as Barcelona sought to reposition itself within the global hierarchy of cities, the rehabilitation of Ciutat Vella became a key component of its development strategy. The project was framed as a moral and aesthetic imperative to recover the city's lost heart, to restore architectural dignity, and to bring life back to areas long associated with poverty and decay. Yet the process also introduced a new social order, one that prioritized cultural visibility and economic valorization over the right of residents to remain. In this sense, rehabilitation in Barcelona became less about conservation and more about conversion: the conversion of urban heritage into an instrument of market growth and symbolic power.

Ciutat Vella's transformation cannot be understood only as a series of architectural interventions but as a process of social restructuring. The restoration of façades, the redesign of public spaces, and the adaptive reuse of historic buildings were not neutral acts of improvement. They redefined the meanings of value and belonging within the city. As property values rose and new forms of cultural consumption emerged, long-standing communities—many of them working-class or immigrant—found themselves displaced by economic pressures and regulatory reforms that favored investment over habitation. The same cobblestone streets and restored balconies that now serve as icons of urban beauty mark the sites of exclusion and dispossession. Rehabilitation thus operates as both a visual and political project, one that reshapes the lived experience of the city while preserving the illusion of continuity.

The politics of rehabilitation in Barcelona reveal the entanglement of architecture, governance, and economy. Architectural practice, once associated primarily with material form, has become intertwined with urban management and social engineering. Through planning instruments such as the *Pla Especial de Reforma Interior* and broader programs of urban regeneration, the city government has employed architecture as a means of negotiating between preservation and profit. In this negotiation, the rhetoric of improvement masks a deeper logic of urban commodification. What appears as the recovery of urban life often serves as its reorganization around the demands of tourism, cultural branding, and global capital. The streets of El Raval or El Born, once marked by precarious living conditions, now perform the role of open-air museums, their authenticity carefully maintained as a marketable image.

To explore architectural rehabilitation as an urban renewal tool in the Old City of Barcelona is to interrogate the ways in which design and policy converge to produce exclusion. The process is not overtly violent, yet its effects are profound. Displacement occurs through the slow attrition of affordability, the redefinition of what counts as desirable habitation, and the transformation of everyday life into spectacle. Rehabilitation becomes a form of governance, shaping not only the physical environment but also the social possibilities of those who inhabit it. The aesthetic project of preservation conceals a disciplinary logic, one that manages populations through the regulation of space and the production of desire. In this way, the rehabilitated city becomes both a cultural artifact and a mechanism of control.

2. Theoretical Framework: Urban Renewal, Space, and Power

Urban renewal embodies the spatial articulation of social, political, and economic transformations. It is a field where architecture and governance converge to shape the lived experience of the city. In the contemporary era, the rhetoric of renewal is often framed in terms of sustainability, heritage preservation, and social improvement, but beneath these moral imperatives lies a deeper logic of power. Urban renewal, when examined critically, reveals how space becomes a medium of control, accumulation, and representation. Architecture, as both a physical and symbolic practice, participates in this process not as a neutral art but as a material expression of the social order. To understand the mechanisms through which architectural rehabilitation in the Old City of Barcelona operates, it is necessary to explore the theoretical relations among urban renewal, the production of space, and the exercise of power.

2.1 Urban Renewal and the Logic of Capital

The evolution of urban renewal is inseparable from the history of capitalist urbanization. The city has always served as both the stage and the instrument of capital accumulation. David Harvey identifies the urban process as a spatial fix that absorbs surplus capital during cycles of overaccumulation. When traditional avenues of profit become saturated, capital turns to the

built environment, investing in real estate, infrastructure, and spatial reconfiguration as means of renewing accumulation. Rehabilitation fits within this logic as an apparently benign form of reinvestment. It converts neglected spaces into profitable assets by attaching cultural and aesthetic value to them. The Old City of Barcelona offers a clear example of this transformation, where centuries-old buildings have been reimagined as commodities of heritage, attracting new capital flows under the guise of preservation. This process, which Harvey terms accumulation by dispossession, displaces earlier uses and users, converting lived neighborhoods into sites of speculative investment.

Neil Smith's theory of the rent gap provides an analytical tool for understanding the economic mechanics behind this phenomenon. The rent gap refers to the difference between the current rental income of a property and the potential rent that could be earned after reinvestment and redevelopment. In historically disinvested areas, the rent gap widens as the physical environment deteriorates and property values decline. When this gap reaches a profitable threshold, developers, aided by municipal policy, initiate renewal. Rehabilitation becomes the means of closing the rent gap by revalorizing space. In Ciutat Vella, once characterized by working-class housing and migrant communities, this revalorization has taken the form of architectural restoration and cultural repurposing. The transformation of modest apartment blocks into boutique hotels or short-term rentals illustrates how the rent gap is closed not through destruction but through aestheticization. The old is preserved, but its social meaning is rewritten.

The intersection of capital and culture in urban renewal has been explored by Sharon Zukin through her concept of the symbolic economy. For Zukin, the modern city derives much of its economic vitality from the commodification of culture, image, and identity. Urban renewal is no longer driven solely by industrial or infrastructural investment but by the production of symbolic value that can be marketed globally. Architectural rehabilitation becomes a strategy of image-making. By restoring historical façades and reorganizing urban spaces around leisure, art, and tourism, cities construct a brand that circulates through media and capital networks. The restored quarters of Barcelona are not only places of residence but also spectacles of authenticity, carefully curated for consumption. The power of architecture in this context lies in its capacity to generate and stabilize meaning, transforming material form into a sign of value. What appears as cultural preservation functions as economic differentiation, reinforcing hierarchies through taste and visibility.

2.2 The Production of Space and the Politics of Belonging

Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space offers a conceptual framework that situates these dynamics within a broader understanding of social relations. Lefebvre rejects the notion of space as a passive container, asserting instead that space is actively produced through the interaction of economic, political, and ideological forces. Every spatial configuration reflects the conditions of its production. The built environment embodies the dominant mode of production and serves to reproduce its social order. In this sense, rehabilitation is not a neutral act of repair but a reconfiguration of social relations. It reorganizes patterns of habitation, ownership, and visibility according to new regimes of value.

Lefebvre identifies three moments in the production of space: the perceived space of everyday practice, the conceived space of planning and representation, and the lived space of experience and imagination. Architectural rehabilitation operates primarily within the second moment, the space of representation. Planners and architects conceive of space as an object to be restructured according to functional and aesthetic principles. Yet these representations impose an abstract order on the lived reality of residents. In Ciutat Vella, the rehabilitation of streets, courtyards, and buildings imposed a vision of urban beauty and harmony that corresponded less to the needs of inhabitants than to the expectations of visitors and investors. The lived space of community and improvisation was replaced by a conceived space of regulation and display. Lefebvre's analysis reveals how this transformation is not merely visual but ontological. It redefines what it means to inhabit the city.

The right to the city, another of Lefebvre's key ideas, challenges the commodification of urban life that results from such transformations. The right to the city is not the right to access urban amenities but the right to participate in the

production of urban space. It is a collective right grounded in use rather than exchange value. Rehabilitation in Barcelona, while often justified as a public good, undermines this right by converting shared spaces into privatized experiences. The rhetoric of inclusion masks a process of exclusion, where only those who can afford the new forms of consumption are entitled to participate in the renewed city. The right to inhabit is replaced by the right to buy. The everyday life of residents becomes subordinated to the aesthetic and economic imperatives of global urbanism.

2.3 Architecture as an Instrument of Power

Michel Foucault's analysis of power provides another dimension to understanding how rehabilitation functions as a mechanism of governance. Foucault conceptualizes power not as a possession held by institutions but as a network of relations that operates through practices, discourses, and spatial arrangements. Space is one of the primary technologies through which power is exercised. The design of space structures visibility, movement, and behavior, shaping how subjects relate to one another and to authority. In this perspective, the rehabilitation of urban environments is a form of disciplinary architecture. The ordering of streets, the control of public lighting, and the regulation of façades produce an environment where conduct is normalized. The restored districts of Barcelona exemplify this logic. The reorganization of space into clean, well-lit, pedestrian-friendly zones facilitates surveillance and consumption while marginalizing informal uses and populations that do not fit the image of civic order.

The aesthetic harmony of rehabilitated architecture conceals a moral code. Cleanliness, uniformity, and visual coherence become expressions of social virtue. The spatial order of the restored city promotes an ethos of civility aligned with middle-class sensibilities. Disorder, whether physical or social, is framed as pathology. This spatial morality legitimizes exclusion. The removal of street vendors, the regulation of public gathering, and the displacement of low-income residents are justified in the name of safety and beauty. Foucault's notion of biopower illuminates how such interventions govern not only bodies but also the conditions of life itself. Urban renewal manages populations by regulating the environments in which they exist. The rehabilitated city becomes a space where aesthetics function as governance, and architecture becomes a medium through which citizenship is redefined.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and distinction deepens this understanding by linking taste and social hierarchy. Taste is not an individual preference but a social marker that differentiates classes. The rehabilitation of urban space embodies a specific aesthetic regime that aligns with the preferences of the middle and upper classes. The emphasis on authenticity, heritage, and minimalism expresses a cultivated taste that excludes other forms of expression associated with poverty or migration. The rehabilitated city materializes this distinction. Its architectural style and controlled atmosphere communicate refinement and exclusivity. The working-class and immigrant populations of Ciutat Vella become out of place not because of their income alone but because their presence disrupts the aesthetic order. Space becomes a field of symbolic violence where exclusion operates through culture as much as through economics.

2.4 Aesthetics, Ideology, and the Neoliberal City

The relationship between aesthetics and power in urban renewal reveals the ideological dimension of rehabilitation. Architecture participates in the construction of ideology by transforming economic and political relations into forms of appearance. The restored façade, the polished stone, and the carefully curated public square communicate a narrative of continuity and care. They present the city as a unified organism recovering from decay. Yet this visual coherence masks the fragmentation of social life beneath it. The ideological function of architecture lies in its ability to naturalize inequality. The beautification of space makes exclusion appear as progress. The poor are not expelled, they are rendered invisible through design.

The neoliberal city depends on this aesthetic consensus to sustain legitimacy. Urban policy increasingly deploys architecture and design as instruments of soft power, promoting images of inclusivity, creativity, and sustainability that align with the interests of global capital. The architectural profession becomes a partner in this process, providing the visual language through which neoliberal governance communicates itself. The rhetoric of

participation and innovation substitutes for genuine redistribution. In Barcelona, the so-called "Barcelona Model" exemplifies this dynamic. Architectural rehabilitation and urban design were celebrated as expressions of democratic renewal after the Franco dictatorship. Yet the very techniques that produced civic pride also facilitated gentrification and privatization. The image of urban quality became the vehicle for economic restructuring. The success of the model depended on its capacity to present exclusion as improvement.

The production of heritage illustrates how ideology operates through selective memory. Heritage is not an objective inheritance but a social construction that privileges certain histories over others. In the Old City of Barcelona, the rehabilitation process has elevated narratives of artistic creativity and Mediterranean cosmopolitanism while erasing the histories of labor, migration, and political struggle that once defined the district. The past is curated to fit the aesthetic and economic requirements of the present. This selective remembrance transforms collective memory into a commodity. The act of preservation becomes an act of reinvention, where what is remembered is determined by what can be sold. Heritage thus becomes a site of ideological production that legitimizes new forms of ownership and belonging.

Urban renewal also operates at the level of subjectivity. The rehabilitated city invites individuals to experience themselves as consumers of space. The pleasure of walking through restored streets and visiting curated markets produces a sense of participation in civic life. Yet this participation is mediated by consumption. The citizen is redefined as a customer whose engagement with the city is measured through spending and lifestyle. The displacement of long-term residents is rationalized as part of the process of modernization. The moral economy of renewal rewards those who conform to the new urban ethos of cleanliness, order, and productivity. The city becomes a pedagogical space that teaches subjects to internalize neoliberal values through their spatial practices.

Theoretical engagement with urban renewal, space, and power thus reveals architectural rehabilitation as a dense field of ideological and material production. It is not a peripheral aspect of urban policy but a central mechanism through which the neoliberal city organizes itself. In the case of Barcelona, the rehabilitation of Ciutat Vella expresses the convergence of economic rationality, aesthetic discourse, and political strategy. The result is a city that presents itself as inclusive and democratic while reproducing deep social inequalities through its spatial form. Urban renewal emerges as both a material and symbolic process that reshapes not only buildings and streets but also the meanings of citizenship, community, and belonging.

3. Contextualizing the Old City of Barcelona

The Old City of Barcelona, known as Ciutat Vella, is one of the most densely layered urban fabrics in Europe. Its physical and social morphology reflects centuries of coexistence between accumulation and decay, wealth and deprivation, cultural display and marginalization. The district contains the Gothic Quarter, El Raval, El Born, and Barceloneta, each of which embodies distinct phases in the city's historical evolution. These areas together form not only the geographic but also the symbolic heart of Barcelona, the place where the tension between preservation and transformation becomes most visible. To contextualize the mechanisms of exclusion that accompany architectural rehabilitation, it is necessary to trace the trajectory of urban policy, economic restructuring, and cultural production that have reshaped Ciutat Vella over the last century.

3.1 From Industrial Decline to Urban Symbol

By the middle of the twentieth century, Ciutat Vella had become the residue of an industrial city that had long shifted its productive base. The expansion of the Eixample district in the nineteenth century had drained economic vitality from the medieval core, leaving behind a landscape of overcrowded housing, decaying infrastructure, and marginalized labor. The end of the Franco dictatorship in the 1970s opened a new chapter in Barcelona's urban life, characterized by democratic optimism and a commitment to civic renewal. The city's political leadership began to imagine the urban fabric not only as a site of habitation but as a vehicle for expressing collective identity. The Old City, once stigmatized as a space of decline, was reinterpreted as a cultural resource whose architectural heritage could symbolize the rebirth of democracy.

The introduction of the 1976 *Pla General*

Metropolità (PGM) marked the beginning of a comprehensive urban strategy that sought to regulate growth and introduce spatial equity. Within this framework, the 1980s witnessed the formulation of the *Pla Especial de Reforma Interior* (PERI) for Ciutat Vella. This plan represented a decisive moment in Barcelona's shift toward rehabilitation as a form of renewal. The PERI aimed to preserve the historical character of the area while improving housing conditions and infrastructure. It targeted the restoration of façades, the opening of public spaces, and the renewal of utilities. The language of the plan was humanitarian and aesthetic, promising to restore dignity to the city's oldest quarter. Yet this dignity was tied to a specific vision of urban life that favored visibility, consumption, and order. The plan positioned architecture as the mediator between social reform and economic modernization.

The PERI was implemented during a period of intense transformation in European urban policy. Across the continent, cities were moving away from state-led welfare planning toward entrepreneurial governance. Local governments began to compete for investment and prestige by promoting culture, design, and heritage. Barcelona's political leadership, under the influence of urban theorists and architects, embraced this strategy with remarkable success. The Old City became the focal point of an urban narrative that linked physical rehabilitation with cultural vitality. Streets were repaved, façades were cleaned, and new cultural institutions were inserted into the historic fabric. The restoration of the Gothic Quarter served as a symbol of civic pride, while the transformation of El Raval became a laboratory for social experimentation. These interventions were presented as acts of social integration, yet they also laid the foundation for a new spatial economy based on tourism and real estate speculation.

3.2 The 1992 Olympics and the Consolidation of the Barcelona Model

The 1992 Olympic Games marked the moment when Barcelona's urban transformation achieved global recognition. The event catalyzed massive investment in infrastructure, public space, and architecture, projecting the city as a model of design-led regeneration. While much of the Olympic development occurred outside Ciutat Vella, the event's symbolic impact redefined the city's identity. Barcelona emerged as a brand synonymous with creativity, culture, and modernity. The Old City, with its narrow alleys and historical density, became the picturesque counterpoint to the new waterfront and Olympic Village. This duality reinforced a powerful image of the city as both ancient and innovative. The cultural and visual capital generated by this image attracted global tourism and speculative capital. The Old City was recast as a space of consumption, where history itself could be purchased and experienced.

The success of the Barcelona Model rested on its capacity to align aesthetic renewal with political consensus. The city's leadership articulated urban design as a form of democratic expression, a means of restoring public life and civic identity. This rhetoric concealed the economic restructuring that accompanied renewal. The modernization of infrastructure and the beautification of public spaces raised property values and redefined the social composition of the center. Middle-class residents and cultural institutions replaced the working-class and migrant populations that had long occupied the area. The expansion of the service economy and the liberalization of real estate markets in the 1990s accelerated this process. The architecture of rehabilitation thus became an instrument of social differentiation. The same cobblestone streets that symbolized inclusivity and openness became the threshold of exclusion.

The transformation of El Raval epitomizes these contradictions. Once known for its dense tenements and marginal economies, El Raval was subjected to a comprehensive rehabilitation program that combined housing renewal with cultural investment. The construction of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA) in 1995 and the adjacent Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB) signaled a shift in the area's identity from working-class district to cultural enclave. The insertion of these institutions introduced a new spatial and social order. Streets were widened, buildings demolished, and public spaces redesigned to accommodate the anticipated influx of visitors. The presence of modern architecture within the historical fabric became a statement of progress. Yet the social effects were profound. Many long-term residents were displaced through rent increases, eviction, and the conversion of housing into tourist accommodation. The cultural regeneration of El Raval, celebrated internationally as a model of

integration, produced a geography of separation within the neighborhood itself.

3.3 Tourism, Heritage, and the Politics of Visibility

By the early twenty-first century, Ciutat Vella had become a stage for the global tourist economy. The restoration of the Gothic Quarter and the waterfront transformed these spaces into open-air museums. The aesthetic of authenticity that once served as a means of civic recovery became a marketing tool. Heritage was redefined as spectacle. The growth of tourism generated employment and revenue, yet it also deepened social polarization. Local shops gave way to souvenir stores, and housing stock was converted into short-term rentals. The experience of living in Ciutat Vella was replaced by the experience of visiting it. Architecture, once an instrument of habitation, became a medium of consumption.

The politics of visibility underlie this transformation. Rehabilitation produces a specific visual order that privileges what can be seen and celebrated while obscuring what must be hidden. The restored façades of the Gothic Quarter present an image of timeless continuity, while the social struggles of residents remain invisible behind them. The control of appearance becomes a form of control over reality. Public spaces are designed to facilitate circulation and spectacle rather than encounter and use. The aesthetic coherence of the city center corresponds to an economic coherence that privileges capital over community. The displacement of residents and the commodification of culture are naturalized through the visual language of order and beauty.

The city's governance structure has played a decisive role in sustaining this visual and economic regime. Municipal policies have continued to promote rehabilitation as a central strategy of development, often coupling heritage preservation with economic diversification. The emergence of creative industries and tourism as leading sectors has reinforced the dependency of Ciutat Vella on symbolic capital. The regulatory framework has supported this orientation by facilitating property renovation and liberalizing short-term rentals. The *Pla d'Usos* introduced to regulate commercial and tourist activities has repeatedly been revised under pressure from competing interests. While community organizations have mobilized against touristification and displacement, their capacity to influence policy remains limited. The spatial logic of the city continues to reflect the priorities of global visibility and investment.

3.4 Contradictions of the Contemporary Urban Condition

The case of the Old City of Barcelona illustrates the contradictions inherent in neoliberal urbanism. Rehabilitation projects framed as instruments of social inclusion produce exclusion through the mechanisms of marketization. The city's architectural beauty conceals its social fragility. The streets of Ciutat Vella embody both the triumph of design and the tragedy of displacement. The coexistence of restored monuments and precarious living conditions within the same urban fabric exposes the tension between aesthetic and social values. The logic of capital accumulation requires continuous reinvention of the city's image, and this reinvention depends on the appropriation of collective history. The production of heritage becomes inseparable from the production of inequality.

The symbolic power of Barcelona's urban transformation extends beyond its physical boundaries. The city has been widely studied and emulated as a model of sustainable and participatory renewal. Yet the experience of Ciutat Vella reveals the limitations of this model. The promise of participation has often been reduced to consultation without redistribution. Residents are invited to contribute to the image of inclusion while remaining excluded from decision-making. The success of the Barcelona Model lies in its ability to transform political conflict into aesthetic harmony. This harmony is maintained through the regulation of space and the depoliticization of urban life. The rehabilitated city presents itself as open and democratic, but its openness is conditioned by economic access.

The transformation of Ciutat Vella must therefore be understood not only as an architectural or economic phenomenon but as a cultural and ideological project. The narrative of rehabilitation constructs a moral geography where renewal is equated with virtue and resistance with backwardness. The displacement of residents is justified as a necessary step in the process of modernization. The global admiration for Barcelona's urban design conceals the local struggles that sustain it. The city becomes an

object of desire for outsiders while becoming increasingly inaccessible to its own inhabitants. This paradox captures the essence of the neoliberal urban condition, where the right to the city is transformed into the privilege of spectacle.

The contextualization of the Old City of Barcelona reveals that architectural rehabilitation is a profoundly ambivalent process. It preserves material heritage while erasing social memory. It creates spaces of beauty and visibility while displacing those who once gave these spaces life. The tension between these outcomes defines the contemporary urban condition. In the polished stone of restored façades, one can read both the promise of the democratic city and the persistence of inequality. Barcelona's experience demonstrates that the politics of urban renewal cannot be separated from the politics of power. The rehabilitation of Ciutat Vella stands as both a monument to the city's ingenuity and a mirror of its contradictions, a living archive of how the pursuit of urban beauty continues to reproduce social exclusion in the name of progress.

4. Mechanisms of Residential Exclusion in Architectural Rehabilitation

The rehabilitation of the Old City of Barcelona represents a form of urban renewal that articulates exclusion through spatial, economic, and cultural means. The mechanisms by which residents are displaced are not always explicit. They often operate within frameworks of legality and aesthetics that disguise the processes of dispossession as improvements in quality of life, heritage protection, or modernization. To understand how exclusion unfolds through rehabilitation, one must analyze its multiple dimensions. Economic mechanisms transform the housing market, regulatory frameworks shape who has access to space, and symbolic reconfigurations redefine belonging and identity. These mechanisms intertwine to produce a landscape of exclusion that is both material and perceptual, turning the Old City into a field of controlled transformation where displacement appears natural and inevitable.

4.1 Economic Mechanisms

The economic mechanisms of exclusion are rooted in the transformation of space into a financial asset. Rehabilitation raises the exchange value of property by converting age and decay into qualities of distinction and authenticity. Once a building or street undergoes restoration, its perceived value in the market increases dramatically. This revaluation often exceeds the capacity of long-term residents to remain in their homes. Rent inflation follows as landlords exploit new market conditions. The process is gradual yet relentless. As investment enters the area, the cost of living rises, services shift toward higher-income consumers, and local businesses are replaced by enterprises catering to tourists or new residents. The fabric of everyday life dissolves under the pressure of speculative interest.

Real estate speculation becomes the driving force behind this transformation. Investors purchase buildings not to inhabit them but to extract value through renovation and resale. The physical restoration of architecture becomes an instrument of financial accumulation. In Ciutat Vella, this speculative cycle has been facilitated by policies that prioritize property improvement without imposing restrictions on affordability. The gap between the market price of rehabilitated housing and the incomes of existing residents widens with each intervention. Eviction often takes the form of attrition. Tenants are pressured through rent hikes, legal ambiguities, or the physical degradation of their living conditions prior to renovation. The law allows property owners to terminate long-term leases when buildings undergo restoration, framing displacement as a technical requirement of improvement.

The rise of the short-term rental market has intensified these dynamics. Platforms such as Airbnb have redefined housing as a source of flexible profit rather than stable shelter. The architecture of the rehabilitated city lends itself perfectly to this transformation. Restored apartments with exposed brick walls, timber beams, and traditional balconies become highly desirable commodities for tourists seeking authentic experiences. The aesthetic of heritage is converted into a marketing device. Each restored façade, while contributing to the collective beauty of the city, also functions as a visual advertisement for temporary consumption. The economic logic of tourism thus integrates seamlessly with the logic of real estate speculation. What was once a neighborhood of residents becomes a landscape of transient occupation. The circulation of capital replaces the continuity of community.

This process exemplifies the broader shift toward platform capitalism, where digital infrastructures mediate access to space. The proliferation of tourist rentals accelerates the expulsion of permanent residents, as landlords find higher returns in short-term leases. Municipal efforts to regulate these practices have struggled against the scale of demand and the power of property lobbies. The outcome is a spatial economy oriented toward visitors rather than inhabitants. Housing ceases to function as a social right and becomes an investment vehicle. The economic exclusion generated by rehabilitation thus operates through the redefinition of the city's core function. The Old City, once the center of collective life, becomes the center of capital circulation.

4.2 Regulatory and Institutional Mechanisms

Regulatory frameworks play a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of rehabilitation. Urban policies often present themselves as neutral instruments of management, yet they embed ideological choices about who and what the city is for. In Barcelona, the *Pla Especial de Reforma Interior* and subsequent plans have combined conservation goals with market-oriented strategies. These plans define heritage protection as a technical objective, yet they frequently align with private investment interests. By facilitating permits for renovation and easing restrictions on property transactions, they create conditions for capital influx while neglecting social safeguards. The discourse of heritage preservation legitimizes intervention, but the absence of social protections translates preservation into exclusion. The right to remain is not protected by the same enthusiasm that protects the architectural form.

The relationship between policy and displacement is often mediated through the language of modernization. Regulations that impose higher standards for habitability and safety may seem progressive, but they can also function as instruments of exclusion. When compliance with new standards becomes a prerequisite for residence, those unable to afford the necessary upgrades are forced to leave. This process is evident in Ciutat Vella, where older rental buildings were subjected to renovation requirements that owners passed on to tenants through rent increases or eviction. The legal apparatus thus transforms social inequality into technical necessity. The state appears as a neutral arbiter of quality, but in practice, it enforces a regime of spatial purification that favors investment over continuity.

Institutional mechanisms also extend to the organization of public space. Rehabilitation projects often redefine streets, plazas, and courtyards to accommodate the flow of tourists and consumers. The design of these spaces privileges visibility, safety, and cleanliness, creating an environment conducive to commerce and spectacle. The public realm becomes an extension of the market, regulated through design and surveillance. In Ciutat Vella, the creation of new pedestrian zones and the redesign of squares such as Plaça dels Àngels have reshaped social behavior. Spaces that once served as meeting points for residents have become performance stages for the tourist economy. Informal uses are restricted or prohibited, and the presence of marginalized groups is policed. The city's regulatory framework enforces a spatial order that excludes those who do not conform to the aesthetic or economic norms of the rehabilitated environment.

This privatization of public space is not limited to ownership but extends to its very conception. The idea of publicness is redefined to mean accessibility under conditions of consumption. The visual harmony of urban design conceals the exclusionary practices that maintain it. Surveillance, both technological and architectural, ensures compliance with the norms of behavior expected in the new city. Benches are designed to discourage rest, lighting eliminates shadows, and signage guides movement. These subtle elements of design operate as mechanisms of social control. The rehabilitated city thus achieves order not through coercion but through the quiet regulation of possibility. Public space becomes a managed environment where freedom is permitted only within predefined limits.

4.3 Symbolic and Cultural Mechanisms

Exclusion in the rehabilitated city also unfolds through symbolic and cultural mechanisms that operate at the level of representation and meaning. Rehabilitation transforms not only the physical appearance of space but also its identity. The Old City has been rebranded as a site of creativity, authenticity, and cosmopolitan culture. This rebranding replaces older narratives of working-class solidarity and migrant presence with new stories of innovation

and artistic vitality. The process can be understood as cultural requalification, a form of symbolic cleansing that removes the traces of social struggle and replaces them with sanitized images of urban life. The city's heritage becomes a stage for curated diversity that excludes the messy realities of coexistence.

Sharon Zukin's idea of the aesthetic of authenticity captures this transformation. Authenticity, once associated with the lived experience of residents, becomes a manufactured quality that can be sold. Architectural rehabilitation plays a central role in producing this illusion. The restoration of façades, the revival of traditional materials, and the preservation of historical details create a sense of continuity that masks rupture. The image of the old city becomes a commodity in itself. Cultural events, art galleries, and boutique stores appropriate the symbolism of local tradition while erasing its social roots. Residents are displaced not only physically but also symbolically, as their histories and practices are reinterpreted within the logic of consumption.

This process culminates in what can be described as the museification of everyday life. The city becomes a museum where history is preserved as spectacle and lived experience is subordinated to visual pleasure. The restored streets of El Born and the Gothic Quarter are curated like exhibits, their authenticity carefully maintained through design and policy. The result is a paradox of vitality and emptiness. The physical form of the neighborhood is preserved, but the social life that once animated it is diminished. The everyday practices of residents are replaced by the rhythms of tourism. Walking, shopping, and photographing become the dominant activities. The city performs itself for an audience, and in doing so, it loses the spontaneity that once defined it.

The cultural mechanisms of exclusion thus operate through desire. They create an image of the city that people want to inhabit, visit, and consume, yet this desire depends on the removal of those who do not fit the image. The authenticity that attracts new users is built upon the erasure of the authentic life that preceded it. The Old City becomes an idealized version of itself, a place where history has been smoothed into narrative and difference into design. The inhabitants who remain are compelled to adapt their behavior, aesthetics, and social practices to align with the expectations of the rehabilitated environment. Exclusion here is not only a matter of displacement but of transformation. The right to belong becomes conditional upon conformity to the new cultural codes of urban life.

The mechanisms of residential exclusion in architectural rehabilitation thus reveal the multifaceted nature of urban transformation. Economic forces, regulatory frameworks, and cultural narratives converge to produce a city that is at once beautiful and exclusionary. The Old City of Barcelona illustrates how the promise of preservation can mask the practice of dispossession. Rehabilitation becomes a process of reclassifying space, redefining value, and remapping belonging. The result is a city that appears unified yet is deeply divided, a landscape of restored buildings and displaced lives that embodies the contradictions of contemporary urbanism.

5. The Aestheticization of Inequality: Architecture as Urban Ideology

The aestheticization of inequality describes a condition in which social hierarchies and exclusions are disguised beneath the language of beauty, heritage, and urban improvement. In the Old City of Barcelona, architectural rehabilitation embodies this phenomenon with striking clarity. The transformation of space is not merely an act of material renewal but a cultural and ideological operation. Architecture becomes the medium through which inequality is rendered visible as order, exclusion is reinterpreted as refinement, and displacement is narrated as progress. The city presents its own contradictions as achievements, turning the experience of urban inequality into a spectacle of design and preservation. This process reveals how architecture participates in the ideological production of urban reality, shaping both perception and experience.

The aesthetic project of rehabilitation constructs a visual coherence that masks the dissonance of social life. Restored façades, uniform paving stones, and regulated public lighting create an image of harmony and continuity. This image operates as a form of persuasion. It invites the observer to believe that the city has been healed, that the decay of the past has given way to a new era of civility and prosperity. Yet beneath the surface lies the fragmentation of the urban body. The aesthetic order of space conceals the disorder of displacement. Those who can no longer afford to live in the rehabilitated

neighborhoods are removed from sight, their absence incorporated into the visual calm of the new cityscape. Architecture thus functions as a visual ideology that transforms inequality into a landscape of beauty. The viewer perceives not exclusion but elegance, not loss but achievement.

This visual ideology operates through the power of representation. The city is reimagined as an image of itself, a carefully curated composition that aligns with the expectations of global spectatorship. Photography, film, and tourism reinforce this image by circulating the same scenes of restored streets and vibrant public life. The repetition of these images produces a collective perception of authenticity that obscures the structural violence of renewal. The aesthetic experience of the city becomes detached from the social conditions that sustain it. Visitors encounter the city as an object of appreciation rather than as a living habitat. The act of seeing replaces the act of inhabiting. In this transformation, architecture serves as both stage and actor, performing the narrative of the city's rebirth while concealing the costs of its performance.

The ideological function of architecture lies in its ability to naturalize the outcomes of political and economic decisions. When urban renewal produces inequality, architecture offers a language of justification. The restored building symbolizes care for heritage, the new plaza stands for openness, and the clean streets signify safety. Each of these qualities carries moral connotations that validate the underlying processes of exclusion. The aesthetics of order become the ethics of progress. The city that looks good must also be good. In this way, architecture participates in what Antonio Gramsci described as hegemony, the process through which power maintains consent by shaping cultural and moral values. The aestheticization of space becomes a form of consensus-building that makes the unequal city appear legitimate and desirable.

This transformation of inequality into aesthetic pleasure can be observed in the spatial practices of everyday life in Ciutat Vella. Public spaces that once served as sites of interaction among diverse populations are now choreographed for visual consumption. The behavior of bodies in these spaces conforms to the logic of display. Cafés spill onto pedestrian streets with uniform furniture and controlled lighting, transforming daily life into an urban tableau. The visual coherence of the space demands social coherence. Activities that disrupt the aesthetic order, such as informal commerce, street art, or public assembly, are marginalized or prohibited. The experience of beauty thus entails the regulation of difference. The aestheticization of inequality functions not only through images but through embodied practices that discipline how people move, gather, and relate.

The connection between architecture and ideology also operates at the level of memory. Rehabilitation claims to preserve history, but what it preserves is a selective version of the past. The restored Gothic arches and Baroque façades of Barcelona's Old City evoke a narrative of timeless identity, yet they omit the histories of labor, migration, and resistance that once defined these spaces. The visual coherence of heritage depends on the erasure of conflict. Architecture becomes a medium of historical editing, producing a purified past that supports the city's contemporary self-image. This selective memory aligns with the requirements of the tourist economy, which seeks a past that is picturesque but not political. The aestheticization of history thus transforms memory into commodity. Visitors consume the illusion of continuity, unaware that the act of preservation has already altered what is being preserved.

The ideological nature of architecture becomes most evident when beauty is mobilized as a defense against critique. The claim that a space is beautiful disarms discussion about its social consequences. A rehabilitated street or building is presented as evidence of collective success, rendering questions of displacement or inequality inappropriate or even ungrateful. The aesthetic value of the city becomes a moral value that overrides concerns about justice. This dynamic exemplifies what Walter Benjamin identified as the aestheticization of politics, in which the visual experience of progress substitutes for its material realization. The city is transformed into a work of art, admired for its form rather than interrogated for its function. The citizen becomes a spectator, and the act of seeing replaces the act of participating.

The aestheticization of inequality is not an accidental byproduct of urban renewal but a structural feature of neoliberal urbanism. The contemporary city depends on its capacity to produce images of quality, sustainability, and

inclusivity that attract investment and tourism. Architecture provides the language for these images. The material improvements associated with rehabilitation, new pavements, restored façades, green spaces, serve as visible indicators of success in global competition. Yet these same improvements often coincide with the displacement of vulnerable populations and the privatization of public life. The contradiction between social loss and aesthetic gain is resolved through the narrative of beauty. The polished surfaces of the rehabilitated city function as a screen upon which the ideals of progress are projected. Behind this screen, the city reorganizes itself around the imperatives of profit and prestige.

The ideological power of architecture is reinforced by its sensory immediacy. Unlike policy or law, architecture communicates through perception. It appeals directly to sight, touch, and movement, producing emotions that shape understanding. The pleasure of walking through a well-designed street can obscure the awareness of exclusion. The body experiences comfort, harmony, and safety, translating these sensations into judgments of moral and social order. The beauty of the rehabilitated city thus becomes an affective justification for inequality. The experience of aesthetic satisfaction produces consent without the need for argument. The city governs through atmosphere. This sensory dimension of ideology is one of architecture's most powerful yet least visible capacities.

In the Old City of Barcelona, the aestheticization of inequality reaches a paradoxical climax. The same architectural forms that attract admiration from around the world also mark the boundaries of belonging. The restored squares and streets that appear as symbols of collective achievement are, for many former residents, monuments to loss. The architectural language of inclusion, expressed through open spaces and transparent façades, conceals a social reality of exclusion. The beauty of the city becomes inseparable from its injustice. The gaze of the visitor replaces the voice of the inhabitant. The aesthetic project of renewal transforms the city into a mirror in which it admires itself, unable to see the absences that make its reflection possible.

The aestheticization of inequality thus represents the culmination of the ideological function of architecture within urban rehabilitation. By translating economic and political processes into visual and sensory experiences, architecture transforms conflict into composition and displacement into design. The rehabilitated city does not deny inequality, it aestheticizes it, rendering it visible as part of the city's charm. The tension between poverty and prosperity becomes a spectacle for contemplation rather than a problem for resolution. In this way, architecture sustains the neoliberal city's most enduring illusion: that beauty and justice can coexist without contradiction.

6. Raval as a Case of Urban Contradiction

El Raval occupies a central position in the contemporary urban narrative of Barcelona. It has long stood as both a physical and symbolic core of the city's complexity, a space where diverse social worlds coexist within a dense historical fabric. Its proximity to the Rambla and the Gothic Quarter has always made it both integral and marginal to the city's identity. The district has been a place of labor, migration, and cultural exchange, but also of poverty, stigmatization, and neglect. The process of architectural rehabilitation that began in the late twentieth century turned Raval into the primary testing ground for Barcelona's model of urban renewal. It is here that the contradictions of regeneration, between inclusion and exclusion, democratization and displacement, become most visible. The transformation of Raval into a space of culture and consumption has produced a layered urban condition in which aesthetic and social forces coexist uneasily.

The Raval that existed before the implementation of major rehabilitation programs was a district defined by density and informality. Its narrow streets and decaying housing stock accommodated successive waves of migrants from other parts of Spain and, later, from across the world. The neighborhood's physical deterioration reflected decades of neglect under industrial decline and authoritarian urban policy. Yet Raval also sustained a vibrant social ecology built on networks of solidarity, mutual aid, and cultural diversity. Its marginality was productive as much as it was stigmatized. When the democratic city government in the 1980s began to envision a new identity for Barcelona, Raval was identified as both a problem to be solved and an opportunity to demonstrate civic progress. Rehabilitation promised to erase the stigma of degradation and to reintegrate the

district into the urban imaginary of the city. The goal, articulated in planning documents and public discourse, was to transform Raval from a space of exclusion into a space of participation.

The implementation of the *Pla Especial de Reforma Interior del Raval* was central to this transformation. It introduced an extensive program of physical renewal: the demolition of derelict structures, the widening of streets, and the creation of new public spaces. The rhetoric of the plan emphasized social improvement and quality of life, yet the economic logic behind it aligned with the city's broader strategy of positioning itself within global networks of tourism and cultural capital. Architecture played a pivotal role in this strategy. The construction of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA), designed by Richard Meier and inaugurated in 1995, marked a turning point. Its gleaming white surfaces and open plaza introduced a new spatial order into the dense medieval fabric. The museum, together with the adjacent Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB), established a cultural axis intended to rebrand Raval as a hub of creativity and cosmopolitanism. These institutions were meant to symbolize inclusion through access to art and public space, yet their insertion into the neighborhood initiated a process of profound socio-spatial reclassification.

The introduction of the MACBA and CCCB redefined the neighborhood's visual and symbolic identity. The contrast between Meier's modernist architecture and the surrounding historical buildings was striking. The museum's openness and luminosity were presented as metaphors for transparency and renewal, embodying the democratic values of post-Franco Spain. Yet this architectural language also imposed a new hierarchy of visibility. The plaza that extends before the museum, designed as a public gathering space, became a field of negotiation between different urban constituencies. Tourists, art students, skateboarders, and local residents inhabited it in divergent ways. The museum projected cultural sophistication, but the everyday life of the plaza revealed the tensions between global image-making and local survival. The visual clarity of the architecture concealed the complexity of the social fabric it displaced. The museum's clean geometry stood in contrast to the informal networks of exchange and support that characterized the pre-rehabilitation Raval.

The presence of these institutions catalyzed economic change. Property values in the surrounding area began to rise, attracting investors and middle-class newcomers. Cafés, galleries, and boutique shops followed, creating a new urban aesthetic aligned with global trends in creative cities. The transformation of Raval thus mirrored broader processes of gentrification observed in cities such as London, Berlin, and New York. Yet in Barcelona, this process acquired a specific cultural legitimacy. The city's leadership presented the renewal of Raval as evidence of its commitment to cultural democratization. The museum and cultural center were portrayed as spaces of accessibility and public engagement. Art and design were mobilized as instruments of social integration. This narrative masked the displacement that accompanied the transformation. As rents increased and housing stock was converted to tourist accommodation, long-term residents, many of whom were immigrants or elderly working-class tenants, found themselves excluded from the neighborhood that had once provided them refuge.

The contradiction between architecture as democratization and architecture as exclusion lies at the heart of Raval's transformation. The same spaces that symbolize openness and inclusion also enact subtle forms of segregation. The plaza before the MACBA, often filled with young skateboarders, photographers, and tourists, embodies this ambivalence. It is a space of vitality and exchange, yet its accessibility is uneven. Local residents often experience it as a site of intrusion, a place where their neighborhood is appropriated by outsiders. The cultural capital generated by the museum and CCCB circulates globally, while the social capital of the original community diminishes locally. The aesthetics of modernity and creativity operate as mechanisms of displacement, producing a new form of inequality grounded in culture rather than income alone. Architecture, by shaping visibility and access, mediates these inequalities in tangible form.

The process of transformation extends beyond the economic and architectural to the realm of meaning. The symbolic requalification of Raval has replaced its identity as a working-class and migrant neighborhood with a narrative of cosmopolitan creativity. The district is now promoted as diverse and multicultural, but this diversity is curated. It exists as spectacle rather

than as lived condition. Local festivals, street art, and culinary traditions are reinterpreted through the lens of tourism and consumption. The representation of diversity serves to legitimize the new urban order, presenting the neighborhood as inclusive even as it becomes socially homogenized. The lived experience of cultural exchange gives way to a commodified multiculturalism that celebrates difference while neutralizing its political potential. The rhetoric of inclusion thus operates as an aesthetic of control.

The transformation of housing conditions in Raval illustrates how this symbolic redefinition translates into material displacement. The introduction of rehabilitation subsidies and tax incentives for restoration encouraged property owners to renovate buildings, but these measures rarely benefited tenants. Instead, they facilitated rent increases and speculative sales. The neighborhood's physical improvement became inseparable from its social cleansing. Many of the former residents relocated to peripheral districts, while the remaining population adapted to the pressures of an increasingly commodified housing market. The result is a hybrid landscape where luxury apartments coexist with deteriorating tenements, and where poverty persists in the shadows of architectural success. This juxtaposition reinforces the visual narrative of contrast that defines Raval's appeal. The coexistence of old and new, poor and rich, is not accidental, it is part of the aesthetic of urban contradiction that the city markets as authenticity.

Raval thus functions as a microcosm of the neoliberal city, where architecture mediates between cultural aspiration and economic exclusion. The rehabilitation of the district achieved undeniable improvements in infrastructure and visibility, yet these achievements came at the cost of social displacement and erasure. The neighborhood's transformation reveals how the rhetoric of cultural democratization can coexist with practices of exclusion. The museum that invites public participation also establishes new boundaries of belonging. The plaza that appears open to all regulates behavior through subtle codes of aesthetics and conduct. The discourse of diversity conceals the uniformity of economic interest. Raval's contradictions are not anomalies but expressions of the logic of urban renewal itself. They show how architecture operates simultaneously as a tool of emancipation and domination, capable of producing both access and alienation.

In the present moment, Raval remains a contested space. Activist groups, community organizations, and cultural collectives continue to challenge the displacement that rehabilitation has produced. Their resistance manifests in local art projects, housing cooperatives, and neighborhood assemblies that reclaim public spaces for community use. These efforts testify to the resilience of social life in the face of structural transformation. They also expose the limits of architecture as an instrument of justice. The physical renewal of the city cannot substitute for the social renewal that inclusion demands. Raval's ongoing tension between its global image and local reality encapsulates the broader dilemma of urban modernization in Barcelona: how to reconcile beauty with equity, progress with memory, and visibility with belonging.

The contradictions embodied in Raval reveal the double nature of architectural rehabilitation. It is both an aesthetic project that produces spaces of cultural prestige and a political project that reorganizes the social geography of the city. The district stands as a living document of how architecture can articulate the promises and failures of urban democracy. In its streets and plazas, the ideals of openness and creativity coexist with the realities of exclusion and displacement. The transformation of Raval is not only a local event but a paradigm for understanding the global city's struggle between spectacle and substance. Its contradictions endure because they are structural, not incidental, to the way contemporary urbanism operates. Raval's story is therefore not one of simple loss or gain but of the continuous negotiation between power and community, image and experience, architecture and life.

7. The Limits and Paradoxes of "Socially Conscious" Rehabilitation

The concept of social inclusion has become one of the most recurrent and celebrated principles in contemporary urban discourse. It is invoked by planners, architects, and policymakers as a moral justification for renewal projects and as a safeguard against the excesses of neoliberal development. In the context of Barcelona, social inclusion has been central to the rhetoric

surrounding urban rehabilitation since the 1980s. The city's global reputation as a laboratory of participatory and socially conscious planning has rested on the promise that architectural and spatial interventions can reconcile economic growth with social justice. Yet this promise conceals a profound contradiction. Inclusion is often invoked not as a transformative political objective but as an instrument of governance that stabilizes the existing urban order. The mechanisms of participation and social housing, while presented as correctives to inequality, frequently operate within the very structures that perpetuate exclusion. The result is an urban condition where inclusion functions as ideology rather than practice, and where architecture, even when designed with social intent, risks reproducing the inequalities it claims to resolve.

7.1 The Contradictions of Participatory Urbanism

Participatory urbanism in Barcelona emerged as part of the city's democratic renewal after the fall of the Franco regime. It was envisioned as an antidote to the authoritarian and technocratic planning traditions of the past. Neighborhood associations gained political influence, and citizens were encouraged to take part in shaping local development agendas. This participatory ethos was institutionalized through mechanisms such as local councils, community consultations, and public workshops. In principle, these initiatives aimed to empower residents, especially in historically marginalized districts like Ciutat Vella. In practice, participation often served as a procedural tool to legitimize decisions that had already been made within broader political and economic frameworks. Meetings and consultations became rituals of consent rather than spaces of deliberation. Citizens were asked to contribute opinions about pre-defined plans rather than to participate in defining the goals themselves.

This form of participation, which urban anthropologist Manuel Delgado characterizes as participatory neoliberalism, translates democratic aspiration into administrative performance. It converts social dialogue into an instrument of urban management. The appearance of inclusion masks the asymmetry of power between decision-makers and residents. Participation becomes a language of civility that obscures the structural conditions of inequality. In the rehabilitation of Raval and other parts of Ciutat Vella, community involvement often consisted of endorsing projects that prioritized tourism, culture, and heritage preservation over the social needs of existing residents. The legitimacy of rehabilitation was built on the discourse of democratic consensus, yet the outcomes frequently reinforced spatial segregation and economic displacement. The contradictions of participatory urbanism reveal that inclusion without redistribution serves to reinforce the moral authority of planning while leaving its material hierarchies untouched.

The aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of participation compound this paradox. Community engagement is often represented visually through workshops, exhibitions, and participatory installations that showcase inclusion as spectacle. These images circulate widely in municipal communications and international media, portraying Barcelona as a model of civic harmony. The act of participation becomes performative rather than substantive. It demonstrates the appearance of democracy without altering its underlying structure. The architectural projects that result from such processes may incorporate public spaces or cultural facilities labeled as "for the community," yet these spaces often cater to new user groups whose social profiles align with the goals of urban branding. Participation thus becomes a form of design language, a style of governance that domesticates dissent by framing it as contribution.

7.2 Social Housing as a Contained Alternative

The proliferation of social housing and cooperative initiatives in Barcelona appears at first to challenge the commodification of urban space. Projects such as La Borda or Can Batlló have been celebrated for promoting collective ownership, environmental sustainability, and democratic management. They represent attempts to create forms of habitation that resist the speculative logic of the real estate market. Yet these initiatives exist within a broader urban regime that defines the limits of their autonomy. Their small scale and dependence on municipal support render them marginal in relation to the magnitude of housing need. They function as islands of ethical practice within an ocean of speculative development. The city tolerates and even promotes such projects because they contribute to its image as socially progressive while posing no systemic threat to the dominant economic model.

The incorporation of alternative housing models into municipal policy transforms radical experiments into instruments of governance. What begins as a grassroots challenge to property-based urbanism becomes absorbed into the bureaucratic machinery of the state. Cooperative housing is celebrated as innovation, its radical potential neutralized by regulation and symbolism. It becomes evidence of inclusion rather than a vehicle for redistribution. In this sense, social housing functions as a contained alternative, a managed expression of dissent that reinforces rather than disrupts the status quo. The contradiction lies in the coexistence of genuine community empowerment and the structural subordination of such empowerment to the logic of the market. Housing policies that promote diversity and participation are enacted within a city whose economy depends on tourism, real estate speculation, and cultural consumption. The result is a landscape where social experiments coexist with systemic dispossession.

This containment also manifests in the architectural language of social housing. Many projects adopt minimalist aesthetics and environmentally conscious materials that align with the city's global image of design excellence. These buildings, while socially progressive in intention, often serve dual functions: they provide affordable housing and contribute to the city's brand as a site of architectural innovation. Their visual clarity and ethical rhetoric mask the structural limitations of their impact. The architecture of social responsibility becomes a form of urban ornamentation, symbolizing care without addressing the systemic causes of exclusion. The paradox of socially conscious design is that it achieves visibility through the same mechanisms of image production that sustain inequality.

7.3 Architecture Between Complicity and Resistance

Architecture's position within this system is inherently ambivalent. It operates within the tension between complicity and resistance. Architects who seek to address social inequality through design are constrained by the economic and institutional frameworks that commission their work. The production of architecture depends on resources that are often generated through the very processes of commodification and displacement that social design aims to mitigate. The ethical challenge for architects is therefore not only to design inclusive spaces but to confront the political conditions of their practice. Pier Vittorio Aureli's notion of the project of autonomy articulates this challenge by calling for architecture to reveal its dependence on power rather than to conceal it behind formal or moral justifications. Autonomy, in this sense, is not isolation from politics but critical engagement with it.

In Barcelona, the figure of the socially engaged architect has gained prominence, yet this role often operates within institutional boundaries that limit critical agency. Architectural competitions, public commissions, and regulatory frameworks shape the scope of what can be imagined. The desire to create socially responsible architecture risks becoming part of the city's ideological apparatus. Projects designed to foster community or cultural participation may inadvertently contribute to gentrification by enhancing the symbolic value of their surroundings. Architecture's contribution to exclusion is not always intentional but structural. The contradiction lies in its dual capacity to humanize and to commodify, to empower and to discipline. The challenge is not simply to design better buildings but to question the systems of value that determine what "better" means.

Architecture's complicity is not total, however. Within the constraints of neoliberal urbanism, moments of resistance emerge through small-scale interventions, temporary uses, and collaborative processes that challenge the norms of production. These practices may not overturn the system, but they reveal its fragility. They demonstrate that alternative ways of inhabiting and producing space are possible. The political significance of such practices lies in their ability to expose the contradictions of inclusion, to make visible the gap between rhetoric and reality. The ethical task of architecture is to inhabit this gap critically, acknowledging its limitations while refusing to become a mere instrument of consensus.

7.4 Reclaiming the Political Dimension of Space

The re-politicization of spatial practice is essential if rehabilitation is to transcend its role as an instrument of neoliberal governance. The language of inclusion, participation, and sustainability must be reexamined as part of the ideological apparatus that neutralizes conflict. Genuine inclusion requires acknowledging conflict as constitutive of urban life. The right to

the city, as articulated by Lefebvre and later by David Harvey, is not the right to participate in preordained processes but the right to redefine the processes themselves. In Barcelona, this re-politicization has been carried forward by movements such as the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) and neighborhood associations resisting eviction and touristification. These movements reclaim space not through design but through occupation, protest, and solidarity. Their actions transform the city from an object of governance into a terrain of struggle.

The challenge for architecture is to align itself with these forms of collective action without subsuming them into aesthetics. Architectural practice must move beyond the language of inclusion toward a language of contestation. This requires redefining the role of the architect from designer of objects to participant in social processes. It means understanding space as a political medium shaped by power relations rather than as a neutral field for intervention. In the context of Barcelona, this entails questioning the very foundations of the Barcelona Model—the assumption that design excellence and participatory governance are sufficient to produce social justice. The re-politicization of space demands an acknowledgment that justice cannot be designed, it must be fought for.

The paradox of socially conscious rehabilitation lies in its capacity to reproduce the conditions it seeks to overcome. Inclusion without redistribution, participation without power, and design without politics perpetuate inequality under the guise of progress. To move beyond this paradox requires a redefinition of what architecture can do. It must cease to operate as a language of consensus and become a tool of critique. The city must be understood not as a harmonious organism but as a field of conflicts that cannot be resolved through aesthetics alone. The ethical task of socially conscious architecture is to make these conflicts visible, to give them form, and to refuse the illusion that beauty and justice are equivalent. Only through such critical engagement can the rehabilitation of the city become a process of emancipation rather than exclusion.

8. Conclusion

The rehabilitation of the Old City of Barcelona reveals the intricate relationship between architecture, power, and social transformation. What began as a project of urban recovery grounded in ideals of preservation and democratic renewal evolved into a mechanism of exclusion embedded within the logic of neoliberal governance. Architectural rehabilitation, while improving material conditions and restoring aesthetic continuity, restructured the city's social composition by displacing the very communities whose existence had given meaning to its spaces. The process demonstrates that the renewal of buildings and streets cannot be separated from the renewal of social life, and that when architecture becomes the instrument of economic rationality, the physical restoration of the city often coincides with the erosion of its collective identity.

The case of Barcelona exemplifies how the language of beauty and heritage can disguise processes of dispossession. Rehabilitation operates through an alliance of aesthetics and economics that converts space into commodity and history into capital. The restored façades and reimagined public spaces of Ciutat Vella project an image of harmony and progress, yet this image is sustained by the displacement of residents, the commodification of housing, and the regulation of public life. The city's architectural transformation embodies a paradox in which the celebration of cultural continuity coincides with the erasure of lived memory. What is preserved is not the everyday life of the city but its visual and symbolic form, an appearance of authenticity detached from the social realities that produced it.

This contradiction is not unique to Barcelona but speaks to a global condition of urban modernity. Across the world, historic districts are being reconstituted as stages of cultural consumption where the value of space derives from its capacity to attract capital and attention. The aestheticization of inequality transforms cities into spectacles of progress while concealing the violence of displacement beneath the surface of design. In such a context, architecture becomes a medium through which power organizes perception. The beauty of urban space becomes inseparable from its moral and political justification. When exclusion is rendered as elegance, the city's capacity for self-critique diminishes. The challenge for architecture and urbanism lies in reclaiming the political dimension of space from this aesthetic consensus.

The success of rehabilitation should not be measured by the clarity of its forms or the intensity of its tourism but by its ability to sustain diverse forms of life within a shared territory. A truly democratic city preserves the right to remain as carefully as it preserves stone and façade. The measure of progress lies not in the visual coherence of the built environment but in the social continuity of its communities. Architecture must therefore move beyond its role as a vehicle for market representation and recover its ethical responsibility as a medium of coexistence. The task of the architect is not only to design structures but to defend the conditions that allow people to inhabit them with dignity.

The rehabilitation of the Old City offers both a warning and an invitation. It warns of the ease with which ideals of preservation can be appropriated by the forces of speculation and spectacle. It invites reflection on how cities might reinvent rehabilitation as an act of care rather than control, as a practice that restores social bonds instead of fragmenting them. Such a transformation requires an urban politics that recognizes space as a common good rather than a commodity. It demands an ethics of responsibility that places the rights of inhabitants above the desires of investors and visitors. Only through this reorientation can rehabilitation recover its emancipatory potential and contribute to an urban future grounded in justice, memory, and belonging.

The story of Barcelona's Old City is therefore not merely a local narrative but a mirror in which contemporary urbanism sees both its triumphs and its failures. It reveals that the preservation of form without the preservation of life leads to a hollow city, beautiful yet uninhabited in its spirit. To move beyond this condition, the city must embrace an urbanism that values permanence of community over permanence of image. Architectural rehabilitation, when freed from its complicity with capital, holds the possibility of becoming a form of resistance, a means of building not only structures but solidarities. Only when the renewal of space coincides with the renewal of social justice can the city truly be said to have healed itself.

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How Material Surfaces Communicate Meaning in Contemporary Chinese Mixed-Media Art

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Abstract

This paper examines how material surfaces communicate meaning in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art. Rather than treating surfaces as secondary or decorative elements, the study approaches them as active sites of expression shaped by material choice, process, and sensory engagement. Through a conceptual analysis of recurring surface conditions, including roughness, layering, and wear, the paper demonstrates that meaning is produced through physical traces, perceptual resistance, and embodied experience rather than through explicit imagery or symbolic representation. The discussion further considers how everyday and discarded materials, as well as process-based surface formation, embed time, use, and material history directly into surface structures. By focusing on surface as a non-linguistic mode of communication, the paper offers an alternative framework for understanding how contemporary Chinese mixed-media art conveys experience, memory, and tension through material presence and sensory perception.

Keywords: material surface, mixed-media art, contemporary Chinese art, sensory engagement, material process, non-linguistic communication

1. Introduction

In recent years, mixed-media practices in contemporary Chinese art have shown a growing emphasis on material surfaces. Instead of placing visual imagery or narrative themes at the center of artistic expression, many works draw attention to the physical state of materials themselves. Surfaces shaped by layering, abrasion, accumulation, or visible intervention often become the most immediate element encountered by viewers. These material conditions influence how a work is perceived before any symbolic or thematic interpretation takes place.

Within existing discussions of contemporary Chinese art, analysis has frequently focused on subject matter, symbolism, or broader social references. Material surfaces are often mentioned only briefly, usually as technical features or stylistic choices that support an underlying concept. Such approaches tend to separate meaning from material presence, treating surfaces as secondary rather than integral to artistic communication. This separation becomes particularly limiting in mixed-media art, where the interaction between different materials and processes plays a central role in shaping visual and sensory experience.

This study approaches material surfaces as an

active component of meaning rather than a neutral background for representation. The physical qualities of a surface—such as roughness, thickness, or signs of wear—affect how viewers engage with a work. These qualities can slow down visual perception, encourage tactile imagination, and draw attention to processes of making and transformation. Meaning, in this sense, does not rely on clear images or explicit messages but develops through the viewer's encounter with material conditions that resist smoothness and immediate comprehension.

The discussion that follows examines how material surfaces function within contemporary Chinese mixed-media art by identifying several recurring modes of surface formation. Instead of concentrating on individual artists or specific works, the paper focuses on shared surface characteristics and considers how they contribute to meaning-making across different practices. By doing so, it aims to show that material surfaces are not merely formal elements but play a significant role in how contemporary mixed-media artworks communicate experience and significance.

2. Material Surface and Meaning

This section clarifies how the term *material surface* is understood in this study. Rather than using the concept in a purely descriptive or technical sense, the discussion treats material surface as an analytical category that links material properties, processes of making, and the production of meaning. By establishing this framework, the paper moves beyond everyday usage and situates material surface within a broader interpretive context relevant to contemporary mixed-media art.

2.1 Material Surface as More Than Appearance

In common usage, surface is often understood as the outer layer of an object, associated primarily with visual appearance. Within the context of contemporary mixed-media art, however, material surface cannot be reduced to what is immediately seen. Surfaces are shaped through specific choices of materials, methods of manipulation, and sequences of production. As a result, they carry traces of process and duration rather than functioning as neutral visual finishes.

Material surfaces frequently reveal signs of intervention such as layering, abrasion, accumulation, or partial destruction. These visible traces point to actions that have taken place over time, drawing attention to how a work has been made rather than presenting a polished or resolved image. In this sense, surface operates as a record of material interaction, where making, altering, and reworking become perceptible to the viewer.

Understanding surface in this way shifts the focus from appearance to formation. Instead of asking what a surface represents, attention is directed toward how it has come into being and what kinds of experiences it evokes. Layered or worn surfaces, for example, may suggest repetition, duration, or use without relying on explicit narrative or symbolic references. Meaning emerges through the viewer's awareness of material transformation, rather than through recognizable imagery or iconography.

By treating material surface as the outcome of material choice, process, and time, this study frames surface as an active component of artistic communication. It is not simply a visual attribute added at the final stage of production, but a site where physical action, temporal accumulation, and perceptual engagement intersect. This understanding provides a conceptual basis for analyzing how material surfaces contribute to meaning-making in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art.

2.2 Surface as a Site of Meaning

Meaning in contemporary art is often discussed in relation to images, symbols, or representational content. Such approaches assume that interpretation primarily depends on what is depicted or referenced. In mixed-media practices, however, meaning is not always generated through recognizable imagery or symbolic forms. Instead, it frequently emerges through the viewer's encounter with material surfaces that shape perception in less direct ways.

Material surfaces contribute to meaning by altering how a work is visually and sensorially accessed. Rough, layered, or uneven surfaces can interrupt smooth visual scanning, slowing down perception and preventing immediate comprehension. This visual resistance shifts attention away from image recognition and toward the physical presence of the work. As a result, meaning develops through engagement with material conditions rather than through decoding visual signs.

In addition to visual effects, material surfaces also activate tactile imagination. Even when physical touch is not possible, surfaces marked by thickness, abrasion, or irregularity invite viewers to imagine how they might feel if touched. This imagined tactility introduces the body into the act of interpretation, extending meaning-making beyond purely optical experience. The surface thus becomes a point where sensory perception and cognitive interpretation intersect.

Through these sensory responses, material surfaces communicate experience rather than explicit messages. They evoke duration, effort, resistance, or transformation without relying on narrative explanation. Meaning is produced through the way surfaces condition perception and bodily awareness, rather than through clearly articulated themes or symbols. In this sense, the surface functions as a site where meaning is formed through sensory engagement and material presence, offering an alternative mode of communication within contemporary mixed-media art.

3. Modes of Surface Communication in Mixed-Media Art

3.1 Rough and Irregular Surfaces: Expressing Instability and Tension

Rough and irregular surfaces appear frequently in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art and often function as an immediate point of engagement. In contrast to smooth or carefully polished finishes, these surfaces emphasize unevenness, friction, and resistance at the level of material itself. They tend to look unfinished, unsettled, or deliberately unresolved, disrupting conventional expectations of refinement, balance, and visual harmony. Rather than offering a surface that invites effortless consumption, roughness introduces a sense of interruption, positioning tension as a central feature of the viewing experience.

One important effect of rough and irregular surfaces is their capacity to undermine the impression of completion. Polished surfaces often signal resolution and control, suggesting that a work has reached a final and stable state. Rough textures, by contrast, interrupt this visual logic. Scratches, cracks, exposed layers, and uneven accumulations draw attention to processes of making that would otherwise remain hidden. The surface no longer conceals labor and intervention but makes them visible, allowing traces of action to remain present. In doing so, roughness challenges ideals of perfection and mastery by presenting the artwork as provisional and open-ended rather than finished and contained.

The visibility of these processes also affects how time is perceived within the work. Rough surfaces often suggest repetition, revision, or sustained engagement with materials, even when no specific sequence is shown. Marks appear accumulated rather than singular, implying that the surface has been shaped through ongoing interaction rather than a single decisive gesture. This sense of temporal extension contributes to the instability of the surface, as it resists being read as a fixed outcome. Instead, the surface appears as a moment within a longer process, reinforcing a sense of incompleteness and tension.

Rough and irregular surfaces further shape meaning by producing visual discomfort. Their uneven structure slows down perception and prevents smooth visual scanning, making it difficult for the viewer to take in the work at a glance. This resistance creates a form of friction between the viewer and the artwork, in which looking becomes a negotiated activity rather than a passive act. Importantly, this discomfort does not depend on recognizable imagery or explicit narrative content. It emerges directly from the material condition of the surface, allowing tension to be experienced rather than interpreted.

Through this material resistance, the surface generates an awareness of instability that extends beyond formal concerns. The viewer's inability to fully settle into the image mirrors broader experiences of uncertainty and strain. However, these associations are not conveyed through representation or symbolism. Instead, they arise through embodied perception, where tension is sensed through disrupted visual flow and material roughness. The surface thus communicates affective conditions without translating them into explicit visual signs.

Rough and irregular textures can also be understood in relation to the broader dominance of smoothness in contemporary visual culture. Polished surfaces are commonly associated with efficiency, mass production, and standardized aesthetic norms, particularly within commercial and digital environments. Against this backdrop, rough surfaces interrupt expectations

of visual ease and consumption. By foregrounding imperfection, resistance, and material irregularity, they challenge the logic of smooth visual pleasure.

Within contemporary Chinese mixed-media art, rough surfaces offer an alternative visual language that prioritizes friction, material presence, and experiential realism over refinement and coherence. Their refusal of smoothness is not simply an aesthetic preference but a communicative strategy. Through uneven and resistant surfaces, artists articulate a sense of reality marked by instability, strain, and unresolved tension. In this way, roughness functions as a material mode of expression, allowing tension to be conveyed through surface conditions rather than through explicit narrative or symbolic means.

3.2 Layered and Accumulated Surfaces: Visualizing Concealment and Memory

Layered and accumulated surfaces constitute another important mode through which material surfaces communicate meaning in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art. Unlike single-layer surfaces that present a unified and immediately legible visual field, layered surfaces are produced through repeated acts of addition, covering, and overlap. As materials accumulate, earlier layers become partially or fully obscured, resulting in surfaces that appear dense, uneven, and visually complex. This structural complexity shifts attention away from surface appearance alone and toward the conditions of concealment and depth that shape perception.

The act of concealment plays a central role in the communicative function of layered surfaces. By covering underlying materials, these surfaces resist transparency and deny full visual access. Viewers encounter a surface that implies depth without permitting complete visual penetration, prompting speculation about what lies beneath. Meaning does not emerge from clear representation or identifiable imagery, but from an awareness of obstruction and absence. What is hidden or only partially revealed becomes an active component of interpretation rather than a lack to be resolved.

This tension between visibility and invisibility fundamentally alters the viewing process. Instead of offering a surface that can be fully grasped at once, layered structures require viewers to negotiate uncertainty. The surface appears to withhold information, slowing perception and preventing immediate comprehension. In this way, layered surfaces generate meaning not through direct communication, but through delayed access and incomplete disclosure. Interpretation becomes a process shaped by speculation and inference rather than recognition.

Layered accumulation also introduces a strong temporal dimension that closely parallels the workings of memory. Each added layer implies a prior moment of action, while the final surface records the result of multiple interventions over time. Rather than presenting time as a linear progression, the surface suggests temporal sedimentation, where earlier moments are preserved but obscured by subsequent layers. This structure mirrors the way memory often operates through accumulation, interruption, and partial erasure.

Instead of functioning as a coherent narrative, layered surfaces evoke fragmented recollection. Traces of earlier layers remain embedded within the surface, yet they are no longer fully accessible. Memory, in this sense, is not presented as a stable archive but as a shifting field shaped by repetition, covering, and loss. The surface becomes a material analogue for memory that is constantly rewritten, where the past persists as residue rather than as a complete or transparent record.

Through these characteristics, layered and accumulated surfaces communicate meaning by staging a persistent tension between presence and invisibility. The surface does not deliver a fixed or unified message; instead, it demands that viewers engage with what is only partially available. Meaning emerges through this process of negotiation, where concealment itself becomes expressive. In contemporary Chinese mixed-media art, layered surfaces thus function as material structures that visualize memory not as clarity or continuity, but as an accumulation of traces shaped by coverage, interruption, and the limits of visibility.

3.3 Worn and Aged Surfaces: Communicating Time and Use

Worn and aged surfaces constitute a distinct mode of surface communication in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art. Unlike rough or layered surfaces, which emphasize tension or concealment, worn surfaces foreground the effects of use, exposure, and gradual transformation. Visual marks such as

fading, erosion, cracking, thinning, or discoloration suggest that the surface has undergone prolonged contact with time and repeated action. These traces immediately signal duration, allowing time to be perceived through material condition rather than through narrative reference.

The communicative force of worn surfaces lies in their capacity to register time as physical change. Instead of depicting historical events or representing specific temporal moments, these surfaces make time visible through deterioration and loss. Wear functions as evidence of repetition, endurance, and sustained interaction, indicating that the surface has been acted upon continuously rather than produced in a single, decisive moment. In this sense, time is not symbolized or narrated but embedded directly within the material itself.

Through wear, surfaces also shift attention away from intention and toward experience. Aged surfaces often appear altered beyond the artist's immediate control, shaped by processes that extend beyond initial design. Signs of use imply handling, exposure, or environmental contact, suggesting participation in conditions larger than the moment of creation. This implication weakens the emphasis on authorship and mastery, directing interpretation toward accumulated experience and material vulnerability. Meaning emerges not from deliberate form-making alone, but from the recognition of gradual consumption and transformation.

Worn surfaces further complicate the relationship between presence and absence. As materials thin, erode, or fade, loss becomes visible. However, this loss does not signal failure or deficiency. Instead, absence functions as an expressive element, indicating what has been worn away through time and use. The surface thus communicates through what remains and what has disappeared, allowing thinning and erosion to carry meaning rather than detract from it.

By foregrounding wear and aging, these surfaces transform time into a perceptible dimension of the artwork. The surface operates as a material record of endurance, enabling viewers to sense duration through physical traces rather than through storytelling or imagery. Time is experienced as residue and alteration rather than as a coherent sequence. In this way, worn and aged surfaces function as a visual form of temporal experience, communicating history not as a complete or stable narrative, but as an accumulation of material changes shaped by use, exposure, and gradual loss.

4. The Role of Material Choice and Process

4.1 Everyday and Discarded Materials

Everyday and discarded materials play a significant role in shaping meaning within contemporary Chinese mixed-media art. Materials drawn from daily life, such as packaging, fabric, paper, or industrial remnants, carry associations that precede their incorporation into an artwork. Their familiarity situates the work within an ordinary material world, creating an immediate connection to lived experience rather than to specialized artistic media.

The use of such materials introduces a sense of reality that differs from traditional art materials. Because everyday and discarded objects are often marked by prior use or circulation, they retain traces of handling, wear, or exposure. These traces are not neutral; they signal social contexts of production, consumption, and disposal. As a result, the material itself contributes to meaning before any formal arrangement or surface treatment takes place.

Material origin functions as an implicit layer of communication. Discarded materials, in particular, carry connotations of obsolescence, excess, or abandonment. When integrated into mixed-media surfaces, these materials do not simply serve as raw components but bring with them a history of use and displacement. This history remains embedded in the surface, shaping how the work is perceived and interpreted.

By incorporating everyday and discarded materials, artists foreground material reality as a source of meaning. The surface becomes a site where prior functions and contexts are neither fully erased nor directly narrated. Instead, meaning develops through the recognition of familiar materials recontextualized within an artistic framework. In this way, material choice itself becomes a formative element in the communication of experience, grounding abstract expression in tangible, everyday conditions.

4.2 Process-Based Surface Formation

In contemporary Chinese mixed-media art, surface formation is often closely tied to process rather than predetermined design. Handmade marks, repeated actions, and partially uncontrollable procedures contribute directly to how surfaces take shape. Instead of aiming for precise replication or uniform outcomes, these processes allow variation, irregularity, and material response to emerge over time. As a result, the final surface reflects not only material choice but also the conditions under which it was produced.

Process-based surface formation makes the act of making visible. Repetition leaves accumulative traces, while manual intervention introduces inconsistency and deviation. Unpredictable factors—such as drying, erosion, pressure, or material interaction—further shape the surface in ways that cannot be fully anticipated. These elements inscribe the process itself into the surface structure, transforming it into a record of action rather than a neutral support for imagery.

Through this emphasis on process, meaning develops alongside material transformation. The surface does not function as a finished stage onto which significance is later projected. Instead, significance emerges from the gradual interaction between intention, material resistance, and repeated intervention. The visible marks of labor and contingency direct attention to how the work has come into being, inviting viewers to consider duration, effort, and uncertainty as integral components of interpretation.

By foregrounding process-based surface formation, contemporary mixed-media practices challenge the separation between making and meaning. The surface communicates experience precisely because it bears the marks of its own formation. Meaning is thus embedded in material action and temporal development, rather than constructed solely through conceptual explanation or symbolic reference. In this sense, the surface operates as both the outcome of process and the medium through which that process continues to be communicated.

5. Surface, Viewer, and Sensory Engagement

Material surfaces play a decisive role in shaping how viewers engage with contemporary Chinese mixed-media art. Rather than guiding interpretation through recognizable symbols or narrative cues, surfaces influence understanding by conditioning sensory experience. The viewer's response begins not with decoding meaning, but with perceptual and bodily reactions to material presence.

In many mixed-media works, surface irregularity disrupts smooth visual scanning. Roughness, layering, and wear introduce visual resistance that slows perception and interrupts habitual modes of looking. This obstruction prevents immediate comprehension and encourages prolonged attention. As vision is delayed or unsettled, the viewer becomes more aware of the surface itself as an active component of the artwork, rather than as a transparent carrier of content.

Such visual resistance often activates tactile imagination. Even in the absence of physical contact, textured surfaces suggest weight, pressure, or friction, prompting viewers to imagine how the material might feel. This imagined tactility brings the body into the interpretive process, shifting understanding away from purely optical interpretation toward embodied experience. Meaning develops through sensory engagement, where perception is shaped by the interaction between sight, imagined touch, and awareness of material process.

Through this shift, material surfaces alter the conventional relationship between artwork and viewer. Interpretation is no longer based primarily on linguistic explanation or symbolic reference, but on experiential encounter. The surface becomes a mediating interface that guides how the work is approached, sensed, and understood. By redirecting attention from representation to sensation, material surfaces establish an alternative pathway of meaning-making, one grounded in bodily perception and sensory response rather than in language alone.

6. Discussion

The preceding analysis demonstrates that material surfaces in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art function as more than visual finishes or technical effects. Across different modes—roughness, layering, wear, material choice, and process-based formation—surfaces consistently operate as mechanisms through which meaning is produced and communicated. Rather than serving a decorative role, surface becomes an active site where artistic expression

takes place.

One key implication of this discussion is that surfaces assume communicative responsibilities traditionally associated with narrative or representation. In many mixed-media practices, surfaces convey experiences of instability, concealment, duration, or use without relying on figurative imagery or explicit storytelling. Meaning is articulated through material conditions that guide perception and sensation, allowing surfaces to perform narrative and emotional functions in indirect but effective ways. This mode of communication does not replace narrative entirely, but it shifts emphasis toward experiential and material registers.

The analysis also highlights how surface-based communication operates through non-linguistic means. Instead of addressing the viewer through symbols or textual references, material surfaces engage the senses by shaping how a work is encountered. Visual resistance, tactile imagination, and awareness of material process contribute to understanding in ways that cannot be easily translated into language. Meaning emerges through bodily engagement and perceptual negotiation, positioning the surface as a mediator between material action and viewer experience.

Within the context of contemporary Chinese mixed-media art, this non-linguistic mode of communication holds particular significance. It provides a means of expression that does not depend on direct representation or discursive clarity, allowing artists to address experience, memory, and tension through material presence. By operating at the level of surface, mixed-media works establish a form of communication that is grounded in sensation and process rather than in explicit explanation. This understanding reframes material surfaces as central components of artistic meaning, rather than as secondary or purely formal elements.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined how material surfaces communicate meaning in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art by focusing on surface conditions, material choice, and sensory engagement. Rather than treating surfaces as secondary or decorative elements, the analysis has shown that material surfaces possess an independent expressive capacity. Through their physical structure and visible traces of formation, surfaces participate directly in the production of meaning.

The discussion has demonstrated that meaning in mixed-media art emerges through the interaction of surface structure, material origin, and perceptual experience. Roughness, layering, and wear shape how works are encountered, while everyday materials and process-based formation embed prior use and action into the surface itself. These elements guide interpretation by conditioning sensory response rather than by transmitting explicit messages or symbolic content.

Approaching contemporary Chinese mixed-media art from the perspective of material surfaces offers a way to address forms of expression that resist clear articulation. Surface-based communication allows experience, tension, and memory to be conveyed through material presence and bodily engagement, providing insight into artistic practices that operate beyond linguistic explanation. By foregrounding surface as a site of meaning, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how contemporary art communicates through material and sensory means, and it suggests the potential for further research that explores artistic meaning through material processes and perceptual experience.

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Theoretical Dilemmas of Artistic Originality in the Age of Digital Technology

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Abstract

This paper explores the theoretical dilemmas of artistic originality in the age of digital technology. It examines how traditional concepts of authorship, authenticity, and creativity have been reshaped by digital reproduction, algorithmic systems, and networked forms of artmaking. The discussion begins with the modernist inheritance of originality, tracing how the Romantic idea of the artist as a singular genius evolved into a central value of modern art. It then considers how digital reproduction has destabilized the very notion of the "original," as perfect copies can now circulate endlessly without loss or decay. The analysis extends to algorithmic creativity and the posthuman author, showing how artificial intelligence has turned creation into a shared process between human and machine. The paper also discusses the paradox of digital authenticity, focusing on how blockchain technology and NFTs attempt to restore the "aura" of originality described by Walter Benjamin. Finally, it argues for a relational theory of originality, where creative value lies not in isolation or ownership but in connection, collaboration, and circulation within digital culture. The study concludes that originality today is not lost but transformed, it now exists through relations, systems, and the continuous movement of meaning across human and technological networks.

Keywords: originality, authorship, digital art, authenticity, blockchain, reproduction

1. Introduction

The idea of artistic originality has always played a central role in Western theories of art. In the digital age, this idea faces new challenges. What used to describe the personal vision of an individual artist is now linked to computer programs, data systems, and network platforms. Digital tools such as artificial intelligence, algorithmic image generation, and online archives have changed how artworks are created and understood. The line between creation and reproduction becomes difficult to define. The digital image or sound does not exist as a single material object but as information that can be copied endlessly. When the same file can be reproduced without loss, the idea of an "original" work begins to lose its meaning.

In earlier centuries, originality was often seen as proof of human imagination and individuality. Thinkers like Immanuel Kant and Samuel Taylor Coleridge described the artist as a genius who could bring something new into the world. This view shaped modern ideas about authorship and creative ownership. It also supported the economic system of art by connecting originality with value. The belief that an artist's work is

unique helped define both aesthetic judgment and copyright law. Yet this belief depends on a clear idea of authorship. It assumes that a work begins with a single creator and moves outward into the world as a finished object. Digital technologies question this order. When an image is generated by an algorithm trained on thousands of other images, authorship becomes collective and diffuse.

The modern concept of originality also relied on material presence. Walter Benjamin described how the aura of a traditional artwork came from its physical existence in a specific place and time. The photograph or film, in his view, weakened this aura by allowing unlimited reproduction. In digital culture, the loss of aura becomes complete. The digital work exists only as data. Its meaning depends on circulation rather than presence. The value of an image or video is often measured by how many times it is viewed, shared, or remixed. Visibility replaces authenticity as the main sign of creative success.

Online environments also reshape the social life of art. Artists present their work through digital platforms that sort and display content using algorithms. What appears to be original often results from patterns of recommendation and repetition. Audiences encounter art as part of an ongoing stream of information. Within this flow, originality becomes a matter of recognition rather than invention. The artist must create difference inside a system built on similarity.

The question of artistic originality in the digital age is not about whether art can still be new. It is about how the conditions of newness are formed when technology organizes every stage of creation, display, and reception. The artist, the software, and the audience are now part of the same creative network. Understanding this change requires a different kind of theory, one that studies originality as a relation rather than a possession, and creativity as an open process rather than an act of individual genius.

2. The Modernist Inheritance: Originality and Authorship

The idea of originality in modern art came from the Romantic period. At that time, people began to see the artist as a special kind of person. The artist was not only someone with skill but someone with imagination and deep feeling. The artist's value came from the ability to make something that had never existed before. Art became a sign of individuality. It was no longer only about beauty or imitation of nature. It became a way of showing personal vision. The painter, the writer, or the composer was expected to express inner truth. The work of art showed who the artist was.

Immanuel Kant helped shape this idea. In *Critique of Judgment* (1790), he said that genius is a talent that gives the rule to art. Genius cannot be learned or copied. It comes from nature and works through imagination. The artist with genius produces ideas that cannot be explained by reason alone. This view placed the artist above craft. Making art was not only a skill; it was a creative act that revealed the freedom of the human mind. For Kant, the highest kind of originality was not imitation but invention (Kant, 2000). The genius made art that became a model for others, not by following rules but by creating them.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge also described imagination as a divine power. In *Biographia Literaria* (1817), he said that the creative mind reflects God's creative act. The imagination does not copy the world but shapes it. The artist's work is an act of renewal. Coleridge's idea joined spiritual and artistic creation. It made art a mirror of divine energy. This belief gave originality moral weight. To be original was not only to be creative but also to be true to one's inner nature (Coleridge, 1817).

This new way of thinking changed how society saw artists. In earlier times, artists were often seen as craftsmen. They worked for patrons, churches, or kings. Their task was to serve others. In the Romantic and modern periods, this changed. The artist became a symbol of freedom and independence. The idea of the artist as an outsider, living apart from common life, became powerful. Artists like Beethoven and Byron were admired for their individuality and struggle. Their originality was proof of their authenticity. To imitate others was to lose one's soul.

This idea of originality also shaped how art was owned and traded. As art gained personal meaning, it also gained market value. The artist's name became a mark of worth. Copyright law was created to protect this link between creator and work. It gave artists and writers legal control over what they made. Martha Woodmansee and Mark Rose have shown that modern authorship was built on this system of ownership. It turned imagination into property

(Rose, 1993). A poem, a painting, or a song could be sold like an object. Originality became both an artistic ideal and an economic resource.

The belief in originality also supported the idea of progress. In the nineteenth century, modern life was defined by change. Industry, science, and technology grew quickly. Artists saw themselves as part of this movement. They believed art should renew itself in every generation. Each new style was a reaction to the one before it. To be original meant to break with tradition. Artists such as Cézanne, Joyce, and Stravinsky became famous for their courage to experiment. Critics praised them for creating new languages of form and sound. The story of modern art was told as a line of innovations.

Modernism gave this search for originality a deeper meaning. Artists began to ask what art itself was. They wanted to find the essence of their medium. Painters like Kandinsky and Mondrian tried to express pure feeling or universal order through abstraction. Writers like T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf experimented with time and consciousness. In each case, originality meant exploring the limits of form. The modernist artist was not only a creator but also a thinker.

At the same time, new technology made reproduction easier. Photography, film, and printing changed how images and texts were made and shared. The same work could now exist in many copies. This raised questions about originality. Walter Benjamin wrote about this in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). He said that when art can be copied, it loses its "aura." The aura is the special presence that comes from being in one place at one time. A painting in a church or museum has this aura. A photograph or print does not. For Benjamin, reproduction changed how people experienced art. It made art more accessible but also less sacred (Benjamin, 2008).

Benjamin's idea of the aura described a central problem of modernity. People wanted art to be both original and available. The loss of aura was also a gain. More people could see art than ever before. Art entered daily life. Yet, the idea of originality survived. Even copies were judged by how they related to an unseen original. The modern world lived with both desires: to share art widely and to keep its uniqueness.

In the early twentieth century, avant-garde movements tried to redefine originality. The surrealists looked for truth in dreams and chance. The abstract artists looked for purity in line and color. Each group said it was finding a new beginning. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) questioned whether originality could exist at all. By presenting a common urinal as art, he suggested that originality lies in the act of choice, not in the object itself. The artist became a thinker who created meaning through context. This idea changed art forever.

Even as artists questioned originality, the art world continued to depend on it. Museums, galleries, and critics built careers around identifying original works and new styles. Art history was told as a story of progress, from one "genius" to another. The image of the artist as a unique individual remained strong. It fit modern values of freedom, individuality, and success. The myth of originality served both culture and commerce.

In the mid-twentieth century, new theories challenged this myth. Roland Barthes wrote "The Death of the Author" (1967), where he argued that meaning comes from the reader, not from the writer (Barthes, 1977). The author, he said, is only one voice among many in a text. Michel Foucault also questioned authorship. In *What Is an Author?*, he said that the author is a function created by society. The name of the author helps control meaning and value (Foucault, 1979). These ideas showed that originality is not natural but constructed. It depends on cultural systems that decide who counts as a creator.

Even with these critiques, the art world continued to use the idea of the author. A painting signed by a famous name is still worth more than an unsigned one. Authorship remains a way to give value and identity to art. The figure of the artist as genius still organizes how we think about creativity. This shows the strength of the modernist inheritance. It continues to shape ideas about art even in the digital age.

This inheritance connects three main ideas: genius, ownership, and progress. Genius defines the artist as a special kind of person. Ownership links creativity to property and value. Progress ties originality to innovation and change. Together, they form a structure that made sense in the modern world. It gave art social meaning and economic value. It told people what kind of work was important and who had the right to

make it.

Before digital technology, this system seemed stable. The original work could be found and owned. A painting existed in one place. A book had one author. But now, with digital tools, perfect copies can be made endlessly. The old signs of originality no longer work. A digital file has no single version or place. The line between copy and original disappears. Yet the language of originality still remains. People still look for authors and authenticity even when the medium makes such things uncertain.

The modernist idea of originality cannot explain the creative world of today, but it continues to influence it. Artists still sign their works, and markets still prize uniqueness. These habits show that the myth of originality still carries emotional and cultural power. The modernist inheritance has not vanished; it has become part of the background of how people understand creativity. It remains a structure we live within, even as new forms of art and technology challenge its meaning.

3. Digital Reproduction and the Collapse of the Original

Digital technology has changed how people understand art, creativity, and originality. In the past, an artwork was a single object that existed in one place and one moment. It could be touched, it could age, and it carried the signs of time. The painting on a wall or the sculpture in a museum had a sense of presence that could not be copied. People called this the "original." It was more valuable and meaningful than any copy because it carried the trace of the artist's hand and the memory of its making. The digital age has changed this completely. Digital reproduction makes it possible to create perfect copies that look and sound the same as the original. The idea of the unique work begins to lose its meaning.

When an artwork becomes digital, it turns into data. A photograph, a song, or a film is stored as code made of numbers. The data can be copied endlessly without any loss in quality. Each copy is exactly the same as the first one. It does not matter where the file is or who owns it. Every version is identical. In this new condition, the difference between original and copy no longer makes sense. The work exists everywhere at once. The original is no longer a physical object but a set of information.

Walter Benjamin was one of the first to describe this kind of change. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), he said that when technology allows art to be reproduced many times, the work loses its "aura." The aura is the special feeling that comes from being in the presence of something unique. A painting has an aura because it stands in a certain place and time. It carries the history of its creation and the marks of its material life. When a photograph or a film makes that image available everywhere, the aura weakens. The artwork becomes a product that can move freely through space and time (Benjamin, 2008).

Benjamin's idea of the loss of aura explains what happens in the digital world. A digital artwork has no single location. It does not age or change with time. The file remains the same no matter how many times it is seen or moved. Its meaning no longer depends on its presence but on its circulation. The power of the image comes not from where it is but from how widely it spreads. The digital world turns aura into visibility. The more people see something, the more important it becomes.

Jean Baudrillard described this change in another way. He said that modern culture lives in a state of "simulation." Images no longer represent real things but other images. Reality itself becomes a network of signs. He called this the age of the "simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1994). A simulacrum is not a fake copy of something real; it is a copy that replaces reality. In the digital age, an image does not need an original at all. A digital painting, a video, or an AI-generated picture can exist without ever referring to a physical object. What people see on screens becomes real for them, even if it has no original version.

This creates what Baudrillard called "hyperreality." In hyperreality, images and experiences merge. People do not see a clear line between what is real and what is simulated. When someone looks at a digital image, it feels real because it looks perfect. It has color, light, and form, but it has no physical substance. This illusion is powerful because it feels complete. The digital image becomes more attractive than reality itself. It gives pleasure, attention, and meaning to those who look at it. The collapse of the original begins when people start to value the copy more than the thing it imitates.

Digital reproduction also changes how artists make and share work. The artist used to create

objects that would last. The painting or the book was something to be preserved. Today, artists often work with temporary materials such as pixels, code, or sound files. Their work is meant to be shared, remixed, and transformed. Sampling, repetition, and collage are common methods. Artists take pieces of existing material and rearrange them in new ways. The result is not a new object but a new connection between many objects.

Lev Manovich describes this as the culture of the "database" (Manovich, 2001). In this culture, everything can be stored, copied, and reused. The artist becomes a curator who selects and organizes. The creative act is not to invent from nothing but to choose and combine. The originality of a digital artwork lies in the way it connects things that already exist. This makes digital art both deeply creative and deeply dependent on what came before. Every new work is made from the traces of old ones.

The change also affects how people view art. In the past, going to see art was a physical experience. People traveled to museums, galleries, or theaters. The work had a clear boundary between itself and the viewer. It was something separate that asked for attention. Digital art appears on screens that people use every day. It shares space with social media, messages, and news. It mixes with the flow of daily life. A digital image can be seen on a phone, shared in a second, and forgotten just as fast. The context becomes part of the artwork itself.

The internet also changes how value works in art. When anything can be copied, scarcity disappears. Scarcity used to create value in art markets. A unique painting or sculpture could be sold for high prices because there was only one of it. Digital art challenges this system. A file can be copied infinitely, so it cannot be owned in the old way. Some artists and collectors now use blockchain technology to make ownership visible. The blockchain records every transaction, creating a kind of certificate called a non-fungible token (NFT). The NFT marks one version of a file as special. It does not make the file unique in itself, but it gives it symbolic ownership. This system tries to restore a kind of digital aura through verification rather than presence (Cooke, 2024).

This situation creates a paradox. Digital reproduction destroys the old sense of originality but also creates new ways of defining it. An artist can claim authorship not through the material object but through the record of creation. The "original" becomes an event or a process instead of a thing. Viewers see art not as a fixed object but as something that moves, changes, and connects with other works.

The digital environment also transforms memory. A painting or sculpture carries traces of its own age. It shows the marks of time. Digital art does not. The file stays new. It can be copied forever without changing. It does not show its past. This creates a new kind of history. The memory of the artwork exists in networks rather than in the object. When people share or alter a file, each version becomes part of its history. The life of the work is made of all its appearances, not a single origin.

Digital reproduction changes how authorship is understood. When an image or song is shared online, it can be changed by anyone. A meme or a remix often has no clear author. It moves through many hands, and each person adds something. The line between creator and audience becomes unclear. The artwork is made by collective effort. This makes the idea of the single author seem outdated. It shows that creation can be social and open rather than individual and private.

The law, however, still follows older ideas. Copyright assumes there is one original creator. It protects the work as property that belongs to that person. But in the digital world, this rule is difficult to apply. When thousands of users remix the same material, ownership becomes unclear. Some say this freedom creates a richer culture. Others fear it takes away recognition from those who make the first version. The debate about authorship is really a debate about value. It asks whether originality can survive when everyone can create and copy.

The digital age also changes the role of the viewer. In a museum, people stand before a painting and observe. They are outside the work. In digital media, the viewer often becomes a participant. They can click, scroll, change, or share. The act of viewing becomes an act of creation. The artwork depends on this interaction to exist. The meaning of the work is not fixed but produced each time it is seen.

Digital reproduction also affects how art is preserved. Keeping a digital artwork alive means keeping its format readable. Technology

changes fast, and old software becomes obsolete. The artwork may disappear not because it breaks but because people can no longer open the file. This creates a new kind of fragility. A painting can last hundreds of years if protected, but a digital file can vanish in a decade if its format is lost. Preservation now means constant renewal.

Digital media also change how time works in art. A painting captures one moment and holds it forever. A video or an interactive work unfolds over time. A digital artwork can change every second. It can be updated or rewritten. It can evolve like a living thing. This flexibility gives new life to creativity but also removes the finality that older art forms had. There is no clear moment when the work is finished. It is always becoming something else.

The digital world also changes how people see themselves. On social media, people produce endless images of their own lives. These images are edited, filtered, and shared. Each picture is both real and artificial. The self becomes another form of digital reproduction. The idea of an original self fades into a series of copies. People present themselves through endless versions, each shaped by technology and audience. This shows how the collapse of the original extends beyond art to daily life.

Digital reproduction has turned originality into a question rather than a fact. The original no longer stands alone. Every work exists within a field of versions, copies, and relations. The artist's task is to find meaning within this field, not to escape it. The power of art today lies in its ability to reveal how connection and repetition shape meaning. What was once a limit, the copy, has become the condition of creation itself.

4. Algorithmic Creativity and the Posthuman Author

Algorithmic systems have changed how people think about creativity, authorship, and art. The artist is not seen as one person working alone anymore. Making art now happens through a network that joins humans, machines, and data. Computers can now make images, music, and text that look creative. This makes people ask new questions about what an author is and whether originality still depends on human imagination.

An algorithm is a list of steps that a computer follows to reach a result. In art, these steps can make pictures, sounds, or words. The artist gives the system instructions or data to use. The computer then creates results that can be simple or unexpected. The artist's job is to make the process, not each small part. This kind of art is called generative art. It uses both rules and chance. The system can make many results that all follow the same plan but look different.

Early computer artists helped people see how machines could be creative. They wrote simple programs that drew lines, shapes, and colors. The artist made the logic that guided the system. The machine then carried out the work. This showed that creativity could exist inside a system, even without the artist touching the work directly. The act of making art became a way to think about the relation between control and freedom.

Machine learning has made this kind of creation more complex. Modern systems can learn by looking at huge amounts of data. They find patterns and create new examples that look like the data they studied. When a program makes a new image or piece of writing, it does not copy one single thing. It mixes many examples into something that feels new. It seems creative, but it does not think like a person. The computer cannot feel or judge. It works through numbers, learning from difference and repetition.

This way of making art changes the artist's role. The artist becomes a guide who sets up the process. They build systems that can make choices on their own. The artwork becomes a result of both human design and machine activity. The artist and the system form a partnership. The computer cannot act without a person, but the person cannot control the computer's choices completely. The final work comes from the mix between them.

When people talk about posthuman creativity, they mean that humans and machines work together in a shared way. The human body and mind are not separate from the tools they use. The machine becomes a part of how the human thinks and creates. In algorithmic art, this connection becomes easy to see. The artwork is not only the result of human effort. It is also a trace of how the system works. Creativity becomes a meeting point between people and machines.

Artists who use algorithms often say that working with these systems feels like having a conversation. The artist gives the computer data and rules. The system answers by creating

pictures or sounds. The artist then reacts and makes changes. The process repeats again and again. The art grows out of this back-and-forth. The meaning of the work comes from the exchange. It is never fully planned.

This type of art also changes what originality means. In the past, originality meant creating something completely new. It was a sign of individual imagination. In algorithmic art, the idea of originality moves away from the single artist. The creative act is building a system that can make many new things. The artist's originality is in designing possibilities. Each time the system runs, it makes something new. The artwork is not one object but the process that produces objects.

This change also makes people question who owns the work. If a computer creates a picture, who should be called the author? The person who built the program? The person who gave the computer data? The person who asked it to create? It becomes hard to say. The creative act now includes many steps and many people. The idea that art belongs to one person no longer fits. Art becomes a shared process.

Algorithmic art also changes the meaning of authenticity. Before, an artwork was authentic because the artist made it by hand. The painting showed the touch of the maker. In digital and algorithmic art, this link does not exist. The artist's hand never touches the work. But the system and the data carry the artist's mark in another way. The way the program is written and the data it uses show the artist's choices. The result is not fake, but its authenticity comes from the process, not the object.

Many artists describe working with computers as a learning experience. They train the system, but the system also changes how they think. The process is like a circle where both sides affect each other. The artist must imagine how the system will act. The computer's reactions then lead the artist to make new decisions. The act of creation becomes a kind of shared thinking. The work exists between two forms of intelligence—human and machine.

This way of making art also changes how viewers experience it. A painting in a museum is still and complete. It does not change when people look at it. A digital artwork can move or respond to touch. It can look different each time it appears. The viewer becomes part of how it works. What the viewer does can change the outcome. The artwork becomes alive only when people interact with it. It depends on movement and reaction.

In this kind of art, the idea of the finished work loses meaning. The system can always make new versions. Each version is complete in its moment but not final. The art keeps changing as long as it exists. This way of thinking matches how people live with technology. Life online moves fast, and nothing stays the same for long. The artwork reflects this condition. It becomes a record of change.

This also brings new questions about ethics. The data that machines use often comes from work made by other people. Some artists worry that their creations are being reused without permission. Others say that learning from data is part of what art has always done. All artists take ideas from the world around them. The difference is that machines can use so much more material and do it very fast. This changes the balance between influence and copying.

Artists who work with algorithms must think carefully about their materials. They have to ask where their data comes from and what it shows. Machines can repeat patterns of bias found in data. They can spread unfair ideas or images. The artist must make choices that reduce this risk. Making art with machines also means taking responsibility for how those machines behave.

Algorithmic creativity shows that art is not just a personal act anymore. It is made through networks of people, tools, and systems. The artist is not replaced by the machine. The artist's role changes. They become a designer, a teacher, and a collaborator. Their originality comes from building relations and processes that create new things. The artwork is part of a larger world where creativity belongs to both humans and machines.

This kind of art reflects how people now live with technology. Phones, computers, and networks shape how people see and think. The line between human and machine becomes thin. Art made with algorithms shows this change in a clear way. It helps people see that creativity is not a single spark but a shared flow of ideas and actions. The posthuman author is not one person but a relation between many forces. Art becomes a sign of how humans and machines build the world together.

5. The Paradox of Digital Authenticity:

Blockchain and the Return of the Aura

Digital technology has created a world in which art can be copied without limit. Every image, sound, or text that exists in digital form can be reproduced perfectly. This condition has dissolved the material basis of authenticity. Walter Benjamin wrote in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* that the aura of an artwork comes from its presence in time and space, and that reproduction destroys this presence. The digital environment extends this logic until the distinction between original and copy almost disappears. Yet blockchain technology has emerged as a new system that attempts to restore authenticity.

Blockchain records transactions in a permanent and verifiable way. Each entry in the chain is linked to the one before it, creating an unbroken record that cannot be easily altered. In the world of art, this technology has been used to create non-fungible tokens, or NFTs. An NFT is a digital certificate that confirms ownership of a specific digital file. The file itself can still be copied, but the token marks one version as the "authentic" one. In this sense, NFTs create a form of scarcity within the infinite reproducibility of the digital world. They promise a new way to experience uniqueness and possession.

Hannah Cooke (2024) describes NFTs as a form of restricted presence, echoing Benjamin's concept of the aura. The token creates a symbolic space around the digital work, giving it a sense of authenticity that exists not in material form but in social recognition. The aura in this case does not arise from physical singularity but from verifiable ownership. The blockchain serves as a kind of ritual framework that establishes the origin and history of the artwork. Each transfer or sale becomes part of its digital biography. This process reintroduces a trace of historical continuity, which Benjamin saw as essential to the aura.

At the same time, this return of the aura is paradoxical. The blockchain does not make the digital file unique in substance. It makes it unique in record. The value of the NFT depends on belief in the authority of the system that verifies it. Zoran Poposki (2025) argues that NFTs represent the "apotheosis of commodification" in digital art. They turn the idea of authenticity into a form of market value. The aura that Benjamin described as a spiritual quality becomes a financial one. The NFT gives art a sense of originality by attaching it to a transaction. In this way, the token becomes both proof of ownership and a sign of economic speculation.

This process reveals a contradiction at the heart of digital authenticity. On one hand, blockchain offers a technical solution to the problem of reproducibility. It allows digital artists to claim ownership and receive compensation for their work. On the other hand, it reduces authenticity to an abstract form of property. The unique record replaces the unique object. As Jussi Sipilä (2020) notes, the blockchain redefines authorship and originality by linking them to verification rather than creation. The digital artist becomes a producer of traceable data instead of material forms.

The idea that blockchain restores authenticity can be seen as a response to anxiety about loss. In a culture where everything can be copied, people seek new ways to mark possession and difference. NFTs answer this need by giving digital art an identity that can be owned and traded. Yet this identity exists only within a system of code. Giancarlo Frosio and Anthony O'Dwyer (2024) describe this as the transformation of art into a digital asset. The artwork becomes part of a financial network where authenticity and ownership are measured in cryptographic terms. The aura returns, but in the form of data.

This shift also has social and philosophical implications. The aura in Benjamin's sense involved distance and reverence. It invited contemplation by placing the viewer before something unrepeatable. The blockchain aura, by contrast, depends on visibility and transaction. It is created by the act of buying, selling, and displaying proof of ownership. The experience of authenticity becomes public and performative. Displaying an NFT signals participation in a network of value. The uniqueness of the work lies not in what it is but in who owns it and how it circulates.

Some scholars see in this development a symptom of what Benjamin would have called fetishization. The NFT transforms the idea of originality into an object of desire detached from the artwork's content. The focus moves from the image or sound to the token itself. Pablo Somonte Ruano (2021) points out that NFTs turn artworks into "crypto-commodities," objects

whose main value lies in their exchangeability. In this sense, blockchain reintroduces the aura not by restoring authenticity but by reinventing its economic function. The aura becomes a brand that distinguishes one digital file from countless others.

Artists and critics remain divided on whether NFTs represent a true return of authenticity or a new form of illusion. Some digital artists use blockchain to secure their work and to build independent markets outside traditional institutions. Others view NFTs as an extension of speculative capitalism. The tension between these positions reflects the broader paradox of digital authenticity: the attempt to recover uniqueness through systems that depend on reproduction. The NFT market thrives precisely because the underlying images can be copied endlessly. The more visible and circulated the image, the more valuable its token becomes.

This paradox shows that authenticity in the digital era is not about material originality but about social trust. The blockchain functions as a symbolic institution that produces credibility. Ownership verified through code replaces authenticity grounded in presence. In this sense, blockchain art fulfills Benjamin's prediction that new technologies would change the function of art in society. The digital aura is not a return to the past but a transformation of what it means for an artwork to have value.

6. Toward a Relational Theory of Originality

The modern understanding of originality has long depended on the idea of separation. The artist was imagined as an independent subject whose creative act stood apart from the world. This view presented originality as a private property that belonged to a single mind. In digital culture, this idea has become unstable. Art today is made within systems of constant exchange and collaboration. Algorithms, archives, audiences, and networks all contribute to the creation of meaning. Originality cannot be explained as an individual act when every work arises from shared data and social context. To speak of originality now requires a new framework, one that treats creation as relational rather than isolated.

A relational theory of originality begins with the idea that no work exists in isolation. Every artwork depends on a set of conditions that make it possible. These conditions include technological tools, cultural histories, and patterns of interaction. The artist works within a field of relations rather than outside it. This does not mean that originality disappears. It means that originality happens through relationships instead of through separation. In this view, the creative act is a response to existing materials and systems. The work becomes original when it transforms these relations in new ways.

Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of difference helps describe this process. Deleuze argued that creativity does not come from nothing but from variation within what already exists (*Difference and Repetition*, 1994). Difference, for him, is productive. It is not the opposite of identity but the source of it. When applied to art, this means that originality arises from difference rather than invention. Every new work repeats the world in another form. The artist does not escape influence but uses it to generate new configurations. Originality becomes a matter of transformation within a network of differences.

This approach aligns with how digital art functions. A digital artwork often emerges from databases, archives, or code libraries. The artist selects, modifies, and rearranges existing information. The originality of the work lies in how these elements are connected. The value of the artwork comes from its capacity to create new relations among data, images, and viewers. The creative process becomes an act of composition within a living system. Each decision reorders the connections that define meaning. In this sense, originality is an event that happens between things, not inside them.

Relational originality also shifts the role of the artist. Instead of being the origin of meaning, the artist becomes a mediator of connections. The artist's work is to create conditions where something new can emerge. This approach reflects the idea of "assemblage" described by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). An assemblage is a network of interacting forces—human, material, and symbolic. An artwork is one kind of assemblage. It brings together elements that already exist and arranges them so that new meanings appear. The originality of the work lies in the pattern of its relations, not in the isolation of its author.

This view changes how originality is judged. In the traditional model, originality meant invention without precedent. In a relational model, it means discovery within relation. The

artist reveals new possibilities hidden in existing systems. A remix, a collage, or an algorithmic artwork can all be original if they reorganize relations in unexpected ways. This understanding also changes how value is assigned. Instead of focusing on ownership, it emphasizes participation and connection. The originality of a work can belong to the system that produces it as much as to the person who made it.

The relational perspective also affects how audiences engage with art. When art exists as a network of relations, the viewer becomes part of the creative process. Meaning arises through interaction rather than passive observation. Each encounter with a digital work creates a new version of it. The experience depends on context, on where, how, and by whom the work is seen. Originality thus continues to unfold as the work moves through different spaces. The artwork becomes a dynamic process rather than a fixed object.

This view of originality is not limited to digital media. It can describe creativity in any context where connection matters more than isolation. In performance, installation, or participatory art, originality often comes from the relationships formed between artist, audience, and environment. The artist's role is to shape these relations into forms that provoke reflection or emotion. The originality of the work is distributed across all who take part in it.

The relational model also responds to ethical and social questions raised by contemporary art. In a globalized culture, creation often involves using materials from many sources. Artists draw on shared images, languages, and technologies. A relational theory acknowledges this dependence without denying the possibility of originality. It replaces the idea of ownership with the idea of contribution. Each participant adds to a larger process. This approach supports a more collective and ecological view of art, where originality belongs to the interaction between individuals and systems.

Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of "relational aesthetics" describes art that takes human relations as its medium (*Relational Aesthetics*, 1998). For Bourriaud, the artwork creates spaces of encounter rather than objects for display. The value of the work lies in its capacity to build new social connections. A relational theory of originality extends this idea beyond human interaction to include technological and material relations. Digital systems, algorithms, and networks become part of the creative dialogue. The originality of digital art lies in its ability to reshape how these elements interact.

This relational understanding also changes the temporality of originality. In the modernist tradition, originality was tied to the moment of creation. The work was considered complete once the artist finished it. In a relational model, originality is continuous. It evolves as the work interacts with its environment. Each reproduction, remix, or reinterpretation adds to the work's life. The original becomes an open field of potential rather than a fixed point of origin. This approach fits the fluid nature of digital culture, where works circulate, mutate, and adapt over time.

In this framework, originality is not a static quality but a process of becoming. It depends on the ongoing negotiation between repetition and difference. Each act of creation redefines what originality means. The work's identity is not fixed but relational, shaped by its connections and transformations. This view invites a more inclusive understanding of creativity—one that values interaction over isolation and participation over possession.

A relational theory of originality does not deny the importance of the artist but redefines it. The artist remains central as the one who initiates relations, designs systems, and invites participation. But the originality of the work no longer depends solely on the artist's intention. It depends on how the work functions within a network of relations. This perspective opens new ways to think about creativity in a world defined by connection and exchange.

7. Conclusion

Digital technology has changed how originality is understood. In the past, an artwork was linked to the artist's hand and a single, material form. The artist was seen as a unique creator who gave meaning to the work. In digital art, this link is broken. A file can exist in many places at once. Each copy is the same as the first. The difference between original and copy no longer matters. The value of a work depends on how it connects things, not on its material form. Originality becomes a way of building new relations out of what already exists. The artist becomes a maker of systems, not only a producer of objects.

The role of the artist also changes. Creation now happens inside networks of code, data, and communication. Machines, algorithms, and viewers all take part in the process. The work grows from many actions and choices. A painting once carried the trace of one person's labor. A digital artwork carries the movement of many agents, both human and nonhuman. Authenticity no longer comes from the object itself but from its circulation and recognition. Systems like blockchain create digital records that give works an identity, but this identity lives in information, not in physical presence.

Originality now depends on relation instead of isolation. A work can be original because it connects known elements in a new way. Each digital artwork speaks to other works, tools, and contexts. The act of creation is shared among people, machines, and networks. The meaning of originality shifts from invention to connection. What makes a work valuable is not its distance from others but its ability to form new relations among them. Digital culture shows that creativity is not the property of one mind but the result of many forces meeting in the same space.

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