Aesthetic Translation of Post-Industrial Landscape Ruins under the Intervention of Public Art

Changjiang Jin*, Sheng Zhang

Luxun Academy of Fine Arts, Shenyang, 110003, Liaoning, China
*Corresponding author

Abstract: *In the process of post-industrial transformation and urbanization, a large number of industrial sites have partially or completely declined at the material level, but the spiritual and cultural values accumulated over time in these sites are relatively stable. These 'post-industrial landscapes' face a complex dilemma of spatial functional failure and cultural identity rupture. Public art creation, with its intervention and translation function, it has become a key path to activate such landscapes. This article focuses on the mechanism of the emergence and transformation of ruins aesthetics in the industrial landscape after the intervention of public art. Based on this, by anchoring local memory, constructing community identity, and updating urban image, it promotes the transformation of cultural identity from "rupture" to "reconstruction". The study reveals the unique value of public art in connecting history and contemporary, individual and collective, local and global, providing theoretical reference for cultural inheritance and spatial revitalization in post -industrial urban renewal.*

Keywords: *Post-Industrial Landscape, Public Art, Ruins Aesthetics, Cultural Translation*

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of global industrial chain reconstruction and the promotion of new urbanization, traditional industrial spaces have undergone multiple structural transformations. The transfer of manufacturing industry and the upgrading of urban functions have transformed a large number of industrial sites that were once the pillars of regional economy into "post-industrial landscapes" due to overcapacity, technological iteration, and spatial displacement. Abandoned factories, idle mining areas, old railways, and docks are not only engraved with the technological development trajectory and social production relations since the Industrial Revolution, but also embody the collective labor memory and local industrial spirit of generations.

Post-industrial landscapes face problems such as building aging, facility failure, and ecological degradation at the material level, as well as challenges such as historical narrative fragmentation, symbolic meaning dissolution, and blurred identity in the spiritual dimension, becoming a "gray area" of urban landscapes [1]. Public art creation, with its spatial intervention, social interaction, and cultural publicness, has become an important path to solving this urban dilemma. The intervention of public art can integrate the aesthetic values of the times into the physically dilapidated industrial "ruins", and can also reconstruct spatial narrative and community participation mechanisms, promoting the re cognition, construction, and dissemination of local cultural identity.

This article follows the framework of "problem posing theoretical construction path analysis mechanism interpretation conclusion outlook", focusing on the aesthetic translation function of public art, exploring how it can reshape the aesthetics of post-industrial ruins through material transformation, and how this reshaping promotes the modernization of local cultural identity. The research will combine case studies to explain relevant paths and mechanisms, providing reference for the renewal of post-industrial cities.

2. Theoretical Basis and Conceptual Definition

2.1 Connotation and Characteristics of Post-industrial Landscape

Post-industrial landscape is a product of the transformation period of industrial civilization, which is a collection of abandoned or transformed industrial spaces formed after the decline of traditional

industrial systems [2]. It belongs to a complex of material and non-material forms intertwined. The physical elements such as factories, equipment, and tracks carry the technology and spatial logic of industrial production. At the same time, the spiritual and cultural elements formed by the activities of specific groups in the post industrial space, such as industrial memory, labor ethics, and community relations, are the implicit spiritual bonds of local society. This dual attribute sets it apart from natural landscapes and general urban built environments, serving as a spatial witness to the transition from industrial civilization to ecological civilization and information civilization.

There are various types of post-industrial landscapes, which vary depending on the industry and region. The most representative is the abandoned industrial zone, such as the Essen coal mine industrial zone in the Ruhr area of Germany, which is a spatial collection after the decline of heavy industry; Mining sites formed due to resource depletion, such as the coal mining areas in southern Wales, often retain spatial elements related to mining; Due to the iteration of transportation, old railways and port facilities that have been abandoned, such as the former railway freight dedicated line of the New York High Line Park in the United States and some idle ports in Europe, often exhibit linear spatial requirements due to functional needs; There are also abandoned textile factories and other light industry sites, such as cotton spinning factories in northeastern China, which have significant differences in production space from heavy industry but also contain specific industrial cultural genes.

The core feature of post-industrial landscape is the dialectical unity of material decline and cultural stratification. Materially, due to issues such as aging buildings, rusting equipment, and ecological degradation, these industrial sites have gradually become "negative spaces"; Culturally, these industrial heritages serve as physical archives for studying the process of industrialization, as well as carrying the lives and emotions of workers, and serving as anchor points for community identity. The contradiction between material decline and cultural enrichment provides an inexhaustible driving force for artistic creation.

2.2 The Evolution and Modern Turn of Ruins Aesthetics

The origin of ruins aesthetics can be traced back to the Renaissance period, when Western scholars reinterpreted the ruins of ancient Greece and Rome. Humanists excavate the eternal value of classical civilization from the ruins, and the temple ruins surpass the complete spatial image expression through the weathered texture eroded by time [3]. The aesthetics of ruins emphasizes "eternity in ruins", using weathered marble and collapsed columns as metaphors for historical vicissitudes, containing philosophical reflections on the fate of human civilization, with nostalgic and tragic colors. The application of 16th century ruins aesthetics extended to garden design. In the 18th century, the romantic trend in Europe further strengthened the natural characteristics of ruins aesthetics, making it a spiritual medium that connects ancient and modern times.

The aesthetic of post-industrial ruins breaks through the traditional paradigm in the transformation of industrial civilization, incorporating industrial ruins composed of steel and concrete into the aesthetic category, and viewing the material characteristics of corroded steel plates, damaged machine tools, etc. as intuitive traces of time passing. Its aesthetic value stems from the true recording of industrial production history. It endows space with three connotations: critical, commemorative, and regenerative, reflecting on industrial civilization, collective memory, and spatial rebirth. This shift reflects a reflection on industrial civilization and an emphasis on the continuation of urban texture, making ruins a potential carrier for the future and providing theoretical support for public art intervention.

2.3 Intervention and Translation Function of Public Art

Publicity "is the core attribute of public art, which transcends the elite creative path of traditional art, takes broad public participation as the value basis, and emphasizes the deep coupling between artistic practice and social structure, spatial context, and social networks [4]. This kind of publicness is not simply about physical space openness, but through dialogue mechanisms, co governance models, and meaning sharing, making art a medium for the public to express their demands and gather consensus. Its value realization directly depends on the public's intervention in the artistic process and recognition of artistic meaning.

The key to the impact of public art on post-industrial landscapes is its "intervention". It breaks the closure and symbolic rigidity of ruins, and activates the social connection and cultural vitality of the space through material transformation, narrative reconstruction, and activity organization. This intervention is not a one-way transformation, but a critical approach to intervening in spatial power

relations, reconstructing the interactive logic between ruins and surrounding communities and urban textures.

Public art also has a strong ability to translate symbols. It transforms visual elements of post - industrial ruins, such as the mechanical beauty of steel structures, the spatial rhythm of pipeline systems, and the temporal traces of corroded surfaces, into perceptible artistic language. At the same time, it condenses abstract meanings such as industrial history and labor memory carried by ruins into cultural symbols with public recognition. This translation not only preserves the historical genes of the ruins, but also endows them with contemporary cultural significance, achieving a symbolic dialogue between the past and present.

3. The Aesthetic Translation Path of Post-industrial Landscape Ruins under the Intervention of Public Art

3.1 Translation of Material Forms - Artistic Preservation and Reconstruction of Industrial Texture

Structure is the core element of material translation. The translation of structures often emphasizes using the original industrial facilities of ruins as the basic framework for artistic creation, and achieves the authenticity preservation of industrial features through the principle of minimal intervention. This type of practice is not a simple transformation of abandoned structures, but based on a deep decoding of the mechanical logic and historical context of industrial facilities, transforming spatial characteristics such as the vertical standing of blast furnaces, the grid order of plant skeletons, and the linear narrative of conveyor belts into constituent elements of artistic language. In the regeneration practice of the coal mining industrial zone in the German Dortmund Customs Union, creators empowered abandoned mine frames with art through lighting technology. This not only preserved the industrial coldness of the steel structure, but also strengthened its symbolism as a totem of mining civilization through the changes in light and shadow, elevating industrial facilities from production tools to cultural landmarks.

Material recycling focuses on the symbolic transformation of ruins and material remains, highlighting the "traces of time" engraved on the material carrier through creative recombination of discarded steel, broken glass, weathered bricks and stones, and other materials. This type of creation refuses to homogenize the materials, but deliberately preserves physical imprints such as rust stains, broken sections, and worn edges, making it a micro narrative carrier of industrial history. A typical example is the use of corroded steel plates as building skins in urban landscapes in recent years. The oxide layer on the surface of the steel plate not only constitutes the visual texture, but also metaphorically represents the erosion of time on the site, making the material itself a medium connecting the past and present in time and space.

Spatial narrative often reshapes the spatial structure of ruins through the dialectical application of "addition" and "subtraction". Addition "is reflected in the implantation of elements such as device art and path identification, forming new visual anchors; Subtraction "manifests as removing redundant components, revealing the original structure, and restoring the industrial authenticity of the space. The two jointly construct a guided tour sequence, allowing the audience to perceive the logical chain of industrial processes through spatial movement - from raw material transportation channels to functional zones in production workshops, from power systems to finished product warehousing, ultimately achieving immersive cognition of the industrial historical context.

3.2 Time Dimension Translation - Visualization and Contemporary Expression of Historical Memory

Archival presentation transforms industrial historical texts through artistic media, transforming fragmented memory materials such as production archives and worker oral histories into perceptible public cultural narratives. It breaks through the traditional museum model by using wall projections, interactive screens, etc., allowing the audience to access specific industrial scenes and stories from a particular era, revitalizing historical documents, and making industrial sites a "living museum" that connects collective memory and contemporary cognition. Process art focuses on the temporal flow of ruins, responding to their natural evolution through temporary intervention. By means of plant installations, image recording, and other methods, the evolution of ruins with seasons and climate is presented, such as the metaphor of the rise and fall of industrial civilization through the withering and flourishing of vines in factories, or the long-term recording of natural processes such as wall peeling. With time as the core medium, the dynamic vitality of post-industrial landscapes in the interweaving of nature and culture is highlighted. Interactive experiences activate public participatory creation and build

a dialogue between individual and collective history. The memory symbols left by individuals, such as graffiti or collages, enable the collision and integration of personal time experience and collective history, giving the public the subjectivity to reconstruct history, making ruins a diverse time aggregation field, and generating new cultural significance.

3.3 Translation of Spiritual Connotation: From "Decline Narrative" to "Rebirth Metaphor"

Critical reflection deconstructs the modernity paradox of industrial civilization through artistic language, transforming ruins into a field for social criticism and ecological education [5]. Artists use media such as installations and images to concretely present the historical legacy of environmental alienation and resource exploitation caused by industrial expansion, forcing the public to face the cost of development models and promoting a dialectical understanding of industrial civilization.

Poetic reconstruction endows ruins with a spiritual dimension beyond materiality through symbolic systems. By transforming the symbols of decay into cultural totems with redemption significance through imagery transformation, we implant poetic imagination of rebirth into the broken texture, achieving a paradigm shift from "ruins tragedy" to "regenerative aesthetics".

The translation of spiritual connotations often requires activating collective memory bonds, breaking through the visual form of ruins aesthetics and delving into the emotional texture of the community. Art practice can focus on the labor narrative and community life memory of the working class, gather individual experiences into regional cultural identity, make ruins a spiritual landmark that carries collective emotions, and complete the transformation from "physical space" to "emotional community".

4. Cultural Identity Reshaping Mechanism of Post-industrial Landscape under the Intervention of Public Art

4.1 Anchoring and Activating Local Memory

The reconstruction of memory carriers is the fundamental path for public art to anchor local memory, transforming post-industrial landscapes into visual texts of local history through selective preservation and artistic processing of industrial symbols. This type of practice focuses on iconic industrial relics, such as factory logos engraved with the imprint of the times, tools carrying production skills, and worker sculptures that embody the spirit of labor. Through the narrative logic of spatial display, abstract historical memories are transformed into tangible and perceptible material symbols. This transformation not only prevents the loss of collective memory due to the disappearance of physical space, but also strengthens the public's cognitive anchor of industrial history through the visual impact of symbols, making ruins the "material storage" of local memory.

The reconstruction of community narrative by creators requires breaking down intergenerational barriers in memory inheritance through community participatory art projects, and constructing a historical narrative written jointly by multiple subjects. Some artists choose to organize workshops, interview records, and other forms to invite old workers to share their production history and transform it into installation art, while guiding young people to respond to historical memory from a contemporary perspective, forming a complete chain of "oral history art transformation intergenerational dialogue". This co creation model not only ensures the authenticity of historical narratives, but also injects contemporary interpretive dimensions, allowing different intergenerational groups to deepen their emotional identification with local history through joint participation and reconstruct the community's memory community.

Sometimes creators also choose to heal traumatic memories of social and psychological rifts caused by industrial decline, using the "commemorative" expression of public art to achieve collective emotional repair. Faced with traumatic memories such as unemployment and community disintegration, artistic practice will elevate individual suffering into a part of collective memory through carriers such as labor monuments and community story walls, providing the public with an outlet for emotional release. This kind of healing is not simply a cover up for trauma, but rather a transformation of meaning from "traumatic memory" to "transformative power" through facing the pains of history in artistic narrative, promoting the community to move from the rupture of memory to emotional resonance.

4.2 Construction and Strengthening of Community Identity

The reconstruction of public space is the material basis for rebuilding community connections. Systematically transforming abandoned industrial sites into multifunctional public activity carriers such as art squares and community theaters can provide residents with normalized gathering spaces. This type of renovation is not simply a functional replacement, but rather the implantation of art facilities that meet the needs of the community while preserving the original scale and texture of the industrial space. Through sustained cultural activities such as music festivals and themed exhibitions, the vitality of the space is activated, attracting residents to move from dispersed private areas to public communication, and rebuilding the broken community network through shared experiences.

The empowerment of participatory creation should strengthen the sense of community belonging in the dimension of subjectivity. Artists guide residents to deeply participate in practice by building open creative platforms, transforming individuals from "spectators" of artistic achievements to "creators" of cultural production. This identity transformation not only grants residents the right to dominate and speak in space, but also reshapes the cohesion and centripetal force of the community through collaborative interaction in collective creation. The intergenerational transmission of cultural identity focuses on the continuity of local culture, and through targeted projects, transforms cultural cores such as industrial history and labor spirit into perceptible artistic language for young people. Through manual practice and situational experience, the younger generation is able to understand the development trajectory of local industries, form emotional identification with local culture, and achieve stable intergenerational transmission of cultural identity, injecting lasting vitality into community identity.

4.3 Renewal and Enhancement of Urban Cultural Image

One of the core values of industrial landscape after the intervention of public art is to promote the paradigm shift of urban spatial narrative from "industrial rust belt" to "cultural showcase belt". Creators carry out artistic transformation of abandoned factory areas, transforming declining industrial symbols into cultural landmarks with contemporary aesthetics. Typical examples include the reconstruction of state-owned electronic factory buildings into gallery clusters in Beijing's 798 Art District, and the creation of a composite art community in Shanghai's West Bund Art District based on waterfront industrial sites. This transformation is not only a functional replacement of physical space, but also a systematic reshaping of urban cultural labels.

The highlighting of local characteristics is a key path for public art to enhance the recognition of urban culture. Artists extract exclusive cultural symbols through deep exploration of the uniqueness of regional industrial heritage, such as the aesthetic of specific industrial technologies and the value core of regional industrial spirit, and transform them into the core imagery of public art works. This creative logic rejects standardized artistic expression and emphasizes the deep integration of works with local historical contexts, making public art a visual carrier of regional cultural genes.

The post-industrial art landscape, as a strategic carrier of cultural exchange, significantly enhances the cultural soft power of cities. Through activities such as the International Art Biennial and the Industrial Heritage Protection Forum, these spaces have become important windows for showcasing local cultural identity. On the one hand, by introducing global artistic resources and academic wisdom, they promote dialogue between local industrial heritage discourse and international theoretical systems; On the other hand, by leveraging cultural output to strengthen the external radiation of local culture, cities can form a unique identity in international cultural exchanges. This cultural interaction mediated by art not only enhances the international visibility of the city, but also provides a clearer positioning and broader recognition of local cultural identity in the global context through continuous cross-cultural dialogue.

4.4 The Possibility of Cross-cultural Dialogue

When public art intervenes in post-industrial landscapes, it constructs a unique channel for cross-cultural dialogue through the translation of local industrial ruins aesthetics and the integration of contemporary art universal language. This practice is not about dissolving local characteristics, but based on locality, creatively coupling the material texture of industrial ruins with universal artistic language. If a creator needs to create art for a steel industry site, they are likely to preserve the industrial landmark attribute of the blast furnace to anchor local memories, and through the new media language of light and shadow installations, transform the rise and fall of heavy industry into a universal reflection on human

production civilization, making it possible for local narratives to be interpreted across cultural boundaries.

This path of balancing "locality" and "globality" effectively solves the "aphasia dilemma" in cultural dissemination. On the one hand, the deep exploration of local industrial symbols such as technology and brand in public art can ensure the uniqueness and authenticity of cultural expression, and avoid becoming featureless replicas in globalization; On the other hand, the use of contemporary art language such as digital interaction can build a common perceptual framework, enabling audiences from different cultural backgrounds to understand the spiritual core of industrial heritage in heterogeneous cultures through familiar art forms. The dialectical unity of "particularity" and "universality" enables local cultural identities to maintain their own identification while being widely understood and recognized in a global context, ultimately achieving the sharing of meaning and mutual learning of value in cross-cultural interactions, providing a practical paradigm for cultural exchange in the post-industrial era.

5. Conclusion

The transformation of post-industrial landscape is not simply a matter of material spatial renewal, but a profound cultural reconstruction. Public art has successfully transformed the "negativity" of industrial ruins into a "positivity" that combines aesthetic value and social significance through creative translation of the aesthetics of ruins - from the preservation and reconstruction of material forms, historical narratives in the temporal dimension to the metaphor of spiritual regeneration - providing a core carrier and practical path for the modernization of cultural identity.

The reshaping mechanism of public art on the post-industrial landscape presents a multidimensional collaborative effect: at the local memory level, cultural fragmentation is prevented through symbol anchoring and narrative activation; At the community level, strengthening identity cohesion through participatory creation and spatial reconstruction; At the urban level, leveraging cultural landmarks and international dialogue to enhance soft power. This progressive transformation ultimately leads to a symbolic transition of the post-industrial landscape from a "symbol of decline" to a "symbol of regeneration". This process not only provides actionable cultural strategies for the renewal of post-industrial cities, but also reveals the unique value of public art as a "time-space connector". With the assistance of public art, the people can build a bridge of historical continuity between the past and the future, establish emotional resonance between individuals and collectives, and open up channels for cultural exchange between local and global communities.

References

[1] Zhao Z H. The Spatial Turn and Field Construction of Art: From the Perspective of Urban Public Art Landscape [J]. Hundred Schools In Arts, 2019, (5): 30-37.
[2] Long M, Su L, Zhang L, Nie J. The Interactive Exploration of the Landscape Installation Art in the Urban Public Environment Design [J]. SHOES TECHNOLOGY AND DESIGN, 2025, (11): 90-92.
[3] Zheng F, Li M C. Research on the Outdoor Spatial Landscape Design of Regional Cultural Tourism Buildings from the Perspective of Public Art [J]. Science & Technology Information, 2024, (9): 142-144.
[4] Yang X, Wu Y. Exploring the Spatio-Temporal Language of Historical and Cultural Landscapes from the Perspective of Subway Public Art: Taking Beijing as an Example [J]. Journal of Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture, 2024, (3): 31-38.
[5] Zeng F P. Research on Landscaping Ways of Integrating Installation Art into Contemporary Urban Public Space [J]. Journal of Beijing City University, 2024, (4): 46-52.