

Environmental Design in the Context of Chinese Regional Culture

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Abstract: Environmental design plays a critical role in shaping human habitats. In the context of increasing homogenization of environmental aesthetics, the pervasive influence of the information age, and challenges in industry growth, the question arises: where does environmental design stand? This article delves into the development of the environmental design industry in view of China's diverse regional cultural contexts. It analyzes the concepts and interconnections between China's regional cultures and environmental design, identifies current issues, and proposes strategies for integrating China's regional cultures into environmental design practices. This exploration provides valuable insights into the evolution of environmental design within the framework of China's distinct regional cultural characteristics in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Environmental design; Problem highlighting; Regional culture; Chinese characteristics; Application strategy

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1. Introduction

In the "14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development" issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council in 2022, it was proposed to deeply study the origin and characteristics of Chinese civilization and culture and to build an ideological system based on the cultural genes of China. This plan also aims to promote the construction of national cultural parks. Furthermore, the "Opinions on Implementing the Project for Inheriting and Developing Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture" in 2017 outlined goals to establish a comprehensive system for inheriting and developing excellent traditional Chinese culture by 2025. It emphasized enriching cultural products with Chinese characteristics and styles, significantly enhancing cultural awareness and confidence, and strengthening the foundation of China's cultural soft power. This effort has visibly increased the international influence of Chinese culture. These initiatives underscore the significant importance of environmental construction rooted in China's distinctive regional cultures.

2. Concept and relationship between regional culture with Chinese characteristics and environmental design

Regional culture with Chinese characteristics refers to a unique cultural form shaped by geographical environment, historical evolution, and human activities. It includes not only lifestyles that are compatible with the natural environment but also covers local traditions, customs, and characteristics. China is a huge country with 56 ethnicities, making its regional cultures diverse and colorful. Each ethnicity comes with its own dialect, traditional arts, literature, and festivals. However, in the context of the ever-changing modern society, the future of regional culture remains ambiguous. Urbanization, new media, migration, and other factors have significantly impacted regional culture. Cities now function as platforms for cultural integration, new media have facilitated the widespread dissemination of regional cultures, and Chinese immigrants are actively spreading their cultural heritage globally. This shift presents both opportunities and challenges.

Preserving and transmitting regional culture amidst these changes is crucial, ensuring it remains relevant to contemporary society while safeguarding its distinctive qualities. Environmental design plays a pivotal role in shaping human habitats, encompassing fields such as architectural engineering technology, humanities, art, science, and urban landscape. It involves constructing indoor and outdoor environments that enhance human living spaces. Broadly speaking, environmental design spans across various art and design disciplines, synthesizing these elements into cohesive spatial and form designs centered around architecture and the surrounding environment. In China, environmental design is categorized into indoor and outdoor domains, with numerous subdivisions including urban design, architectural design, interior design, architectural vignettes, murals, and more—all falling under the umbrella of environmental design.

In today's highly integrated art and culture, science and technology, environmental design, and regional culture complement each other ^[1]. Environmental design carries the mission of inheriting and promoting regional culture and also leads the development direction of regional culture in the future. Only environmental design from the perspective of regional culture can better integrate the Chinese characteristics of culture and humanism into people's lives. Therefore, the development of environmental design with Chinese characteristics of regional culture is imperative.

3. Current situation of environmental design development in the context of regional culture of Chinese characteristics

3.1. Homogenization of environmental style

Under the influence of the international design trend and the pursuit of commercial interests, too much emphasis has been placed on speed rather than regional characteristics in environmental design. Uniform modern high-rise buildings have led to the gradual loss of their original regional characteristics in the process of urbanization and regional heterogeneity. When designers incorporate regional cultural elements, it is essential for them to thoroughly understand local customs and historical development, optimizing their use accordingly. Unfortunately, many environmental design projects either underutilize these symbolic elements, rigidly copy them without adaptation, or diverge too far from their original forms. This failure to refine the symbolic elements and consider their origins and meanings results in a diluted representation that weakens the inheritance of regional culture and leads to a homogenization of regional environmental landscapes ^[2].

3.2. Impact of the information age

In today's information age, the rapid pace of information updating and integration impacts both the natural environment and the social fabric, influencing people's values and thoughts. However, this accelerated

development has also intensified a cultural crisis in environmental landscape construction. Environmental design is not just about transforming and expressing environmental aesthetics; it also serves as a carrier of regional culture. With the increasing types of communication methods and the ease of information transmission, traditional regional cultures are gradually disappearing and becoming more similar in the information age. Unified and standardized cultures are replacing regional and ethnic cultures. As traditional cultures continue to erode and face destruction, technological innovations also challenge traditional design methods. The primary issue to consider in the integration and development of regional culture and environmental design is how to adapt to current social development trends in environmental art design while preserving original traditional cultures to the greatest extent.

3.3. Industrial development bottleneck

The “Environmental Art and Design” major was officially approved and added to Chinese university programs in 1988. Over the past nearly 30 years, with the advancement of reform and opening up, the speed and scale of urbanization construction in China have accelerated unprecedentedly, leading to a rapid expansion of professionals in the field of environmental design. Given the uniqueness of environmental design, which encompasses architecture, urban and rural spaces, materials, and conceptualization, planners, architects, and designers play crucial roles ^[3]. However, some environmental projects may not receive adequate attention or effective execution due to either insufficient recognition of the designer’s role or disparities in designers’ capabilities. As the environmental construction industry continues to evolve along with rapid advancements in materials and technologies, both designers and builders must adapt to regional and contemporary developments.

4. Strategy of applying Chinese regional cultural characteristics in environmental design

Today, environmental design is evolving towards a more systematic and diversified development direction. It no longer solely relies on regional culture; instead, it integrates interdisciplinary approaches and adapts to the development of the times. Environmental design should not be detached from local realities but rather incorporate them. Environmental design must focus on both inheriting and innovating upon local regional cultures. This approach ensures that environmental design not only meets contemporary needs but also preserves and enriches the unique cultural heritage of each region.

4.1. Aligning regional cultural elements with the needs of modern times

In the “14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development,” there is a call to deeply study the origins and characteristics of Chinese civilization and culture, which provides favorable conditions for the development of China’s distinctive regional cultures. Policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the development of national central cities, the internationalization of major cities, and comprehensive innovation and reform pilot zones all support urban and rural construction. According to the results of the “Most Beautiful Places in China” selection by the Chinese National Geographic magazine, a total of 100 scenic spots across the country were selected. These places, characterized by diverse geographical locations and climate conditions, have formed unique cultural landscapes. Both the era and the splendid landscapes have laid the foundation for the application of China’s distinctive regional cultures in environmental design.

Since its establishment, the environmental design profession has flourished with projects proliferating, serving the public, and significantly contributing to socio-economic development. Therefore, to better leverage the application of China’s distinctive regional cultures in environmental design, several approaches are essential.

On one hand, government involvement is crucial in providing strategic guidance for urban construction and actively participating in local urban development. On the other hand, efforts should support rural revitalization, promoting improved living environments in poverty-stricken areas. Additionally, various tourism initiatives can be utilized to stimulate economic development. Furthermore, it is essential to create local distinctive identities, such as Chongqing's "8D City" and Xi'an's designation as a "World Historical City" in Shaanxi Province, both serving as excellent examples and landmarks.

4.2. Integration of environmental elements and regional culture

Environmental elements, also known as environmental substrates, refer to the various independent and distinct elements that constitute the overall human environment, each with different characteristics yet conforming to the overall evolutionary laws. These elements include both natural environmental elements and artificial environmental elements. Natural environmental elements typically include water, organisms, rocks, soil, and so on. Artificial environmental elements encompass productivity, technology, artificial products, political systems, religious beliefs, social behaviors, and more. Environmental design involves not only the design of natural environmental elements but also the integration of artificial environmental elements, particularly cultural and historical aspects. There are numerous exemplary cases, such as the design of the new Suzhou Museum, which extracts elements from Suzhou gardens and incorporates the regional culture of the Jiangnan water towns. This design achieves an organic blend of tradition and modernity, becoming a globally recognized landmark. The new Suzhou Museum adopts the layout of traditional Chinese gardens, connecting the Zhong Wang Mansion and the Humble Administrator's Garden through water landscapes, creating a picturesque setting. The museum's architecture is characterized by gray-white tones, continuing the architectural style of Huizhou architecture with lively charm. Inside the museum, the design technique of changing views with every step is employed, cleverly using renewable materials like bamboo for decoration, which contrasts sharply with the building's strong lines yet harmoniously complements them, showcasing a harmonious scene. The stone landscape sculptures integrate the characteristics of Suzhou's regional culture with the building, embodying the characteristics of "Chinese but new, Suzhou but new," while meeting the functional requirements of a modern museum.

4.3. Utilizing interdisciplinary background to realize integrated development

Art creation in the modern era is shifting toward the direction of cross-media, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural development. In the context of globalization, different regional cultures and different national cultures intersect each other. Therefore, one crucial issue that designers should consider in artistic creation under interdisciplinary backgrounds is how to maintain the uniqueness of art. Coordinating the relationship between art and technology is a critical issue that cannot be overlooked in the construction of artistic disciplines. It can be said that Chinese art disciplines, through the construction of cross-cultural, cross-media, and interdisciplinary approaches, better align with the characteristics of contemporary disciplines and contemporary art. This represents one of the future directions for development. However, at the same time, we also need to continue deepening our understanding of contemporary art theory construction from multiple perspectives, levels, and angles.

In particular, the integration and development of various disciplines such as regional culture and artistic creation require comprehensive and in-depth thinking. This approach will ensure that artistic creations not only reflect local cultural identities but also resonate with global audiences in a meaningful and impactful way. Successful design must be rooted in contemporary societal trends, integrating digital technology and modern design concepts while deeply digesting and understanding China's traditional culture. Whether it's grand

projects like space exploration and the Winter Olympics, or smaller-scale endeavors like architectural spaces, Chinese-style homes, and tea sets, continuous engagement in design and art revitalizes China's traditional culture through creative transformation and innovative development. Taking a leap into ancient Shu civilization, the CCTV production *Fantastic Journey to Sanxingdui* utilizes extensive archaeological findings and cloud-based real-time rendering technology. It employs design techniques such as panoramic artifact reconstruction, interactive gaming scenes, and 3D character rendering to create China's first large-scale immersive digital interactive space. Audiences can traverse back to the mysterious ancient Shu kingdom through multiple terminals, embodying archaeologists exploring excavation sites. This shifts from past one-way passive information reception to two-way immersive entertainment experiences, breaking traditional TV boundaries and conventions. From multimedia interactions like the Palace Museum's painting *Thousand-Mile Rivers and Mountains* digital art exhibition to the wildly popular archaeological "blind boxes" from the Henan Museum, contemporary design broadens channels for multimedia exhibitions and museum cultural creations in the digital age ^[4]. Design and art illuminate our lives with beauty. Environmental design is never an isolated discipline; it requires interdisciplinary integration to build a better future for humanity.

4.4. Integration of sustainable development and historical heritage

The development of historical context relies on the ecological sustainability of the environment. Environmental design first needs to inherit and integrate the characteristics of the environment itself, respecting the natural environment. This involves respecting not only the geographical environment but also natural elements like animals and plants. In environmental design, it is essential to respect the terrain, adapt strategies according to local conditions, and utilize resources wisely ("living off the mountains and the waters"). It is crucial to fully consider local climates and utilize the growth patterns of local flora and fauna in landscaping. Only by fully utilizing local natural conditions and integrating them into the ecosystem can regional characteristics be highlighted effectively. This approach allows for the creation of environmental landscapes that embody the distinctive cultural characteristics of China's regions.

Chinese classical gardens not only symbolize cultural connotations but also emphasize the harmony between nature and humanity. The environmental design courses in colleges and universities should focus on exploring local ecological environments and historical cultures, and on inheriting and utilizing China's distinctive regional cultural heritage. Scholars in the field should adhere to human-centered design principles based on historical continuity and development. They should leverage emerging strengths to create design works that reflect regional cultural characteristics, thus contributing to the inheritance of environmental design and China's regional cultural heritage. Design professionals should fully utilize the ecological functions of the environment, basing their designs on nature and integrating innovative ideas. They should effectively connect mountains, springs, streams, lakes, and cities ^[5], optimizing human habitats with artistic forms that embody regional characteristics. This approach aims to create comfortable living spaces that enhance people's quality of life and highlight local features.

5. Conclusion

Regional culture is an essential part of Chinese culture and a vital driving force for national development. Actively integrating regional cultural elements into various fields of environmental design is crucial. This integration not only shows concern for local culture and people's lives but also facilitates the effective inheritance of China's excellent traditional culture. By incorporating Chinese regional cultural elements, environmental design works can comprehensively showcase the humanistic customs and cultural connotations

of a region, reflecting the collective will of its people. The process of integrating Chinese regional culture into environmental design involves extracting and re-creating local cultural elements, contributing to beneficial discussions on the development of China's regional culture within the context of the times.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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