



# The Study on the Construction of Healing Spaces in Historic Districts During Urban Renewal

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**Abstract.** In the context of an information-driven society, urban historic districts face challenges such as the loss of regional characteristics, the homogenization of architectural styles, and the inability to meet citizens' emotional and spiritual needs, which leads to a decline in the quality of life in urban streets and alleys. To address these issues, this paper proposes integrating the concept of healing spaces into urban renewal design to renovate and enhance historic districts. This paper begins by outlining the theories related to healing spaces, as well as the challenges and value of historic districts in the context of urban renewal. It then explores how the concept of healing spaces can be incorporated into urban renewal strategies to promote the construction and development of historic districts with local characteristics and cultural appeal. By meeting the emotional and spiritual needs of citizens and improving the quality of life in streets and alleys, urban historic districts can be revitalized and contribute to the urban renewal process.

**Keywords:** Urban Renewal; Historic Districts; Healing Spaces;

## 1 Introduction

Urban renewal, as a strategy to address urban development issues, plays a significant role in China's urbanization process. However, problems that arise in practice, such as excessive demolition and reconstruction, resource waste, urban context fragmentation, and loss of regional culture, not only lead to urban spatial homogenization but also pose a severe threat to urban history and cultural heritage. Urban construction often neglects the life experiences and needs of citizens, lacking attention to their psychological well-being. Therefore, the concept of urban renewal should align with the ultimate goal of "creating a better living environment for humanity [1]." In practice, urban construction often strays from the everyday experiences and needs of ordinary citizens. This approach to urban renewal lacks focus on the lifestyle and psychological needs of residents. As it is often said, "The city should be an organ of love, and the best economic model for a city should be one that cares for people and cultivates them [2]." The theme of urban renewal should emphasize the human aspect, paying attention to people's experiences within architectural spaces and valuing the importance of everyday life.

In recent years, With the rapid development of urbanization, many traditional historical and cultural districts are at risk of being demolished, which has led to an

awareness of the importance of preserving historical and cultural districts in order to maintain the city's historical memory and cultural traditions. The "revitalization" concept, which integrates culture, art, and tourism, has gained significant attention[3]. This concept aims to make full use of street space to create areas with cultural significance and tourism value, supporting sustainable urban development. Historic districts are the memory and soul of a city, bearing witness to the passage of time and the accumulation of culture. However, with the rapid development of urbanization, these districts often face the dilemma of preservation versus development. Our challenge is to protect these valuable cultural heritages while creating a better living environment for citizens.

## **2 A Theoretical Interpretation of "Healing Places"**

### **2.1 Place is the basis for the Relationship Between People and Space**

Norwegian architectural theorist Norberg Schulz (1962–2000) believed that a "place" is a reflection of human space in the context of worldly activities[4]. Through human activities, the space acquires specific significance. Places form the foundation of human life by providing a sense of security and identity for individuals or groups within a given spatial context[5]. A place is defined by its concrete space and the functions and meanings it holds. Space is the physical medium for social life, while place is the spiritual medium for activities and imagination. It embodies people's perceptions, emotions, culture, and values. Through places, people can connect more closely with space, aligning it with their needs and emotions. A place carries the warmth of home, the liveliness of streets, the tranquility of parks, and the cultural atmosphere of cities. It has a profound impact on people's lives, culture, and social experiences.

### **2.2 Healing is the Feeling of a Person having a Positive Relationship with Space**

Healing refers to the process of promoting the body's natural recovery through physical and psychological means. Healing is not only aimed at treating physical ailments but also encompasses mental and emotional therapy and adjustment. When applied to spatial design, healing refers to a space with specific physical environments and design elements that can offer people a sense of healing, relaxation, and comfort[6]. It represents a healing experience derived from the psychological connection that arises through the interaction between people and spatial places. When people develop a positive relationship with a space, the resulting emotions and experiences can evoke a sense of healing.

### **2.3 Hierarchical Effects of Place on Individual Healing**

Italian organic architecture theorist Bruno Zevi (1918–2000), in his book "The Modern Language of Architecture," noted: "Even though we might ignore space, it affects us and controls our mental activities. [7]" Space is not just a physical environment but also

a mental space; it can influence and control an individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. The relationship between people and space is a two-way interactive process. When an individual quickly integrates into a suitable place, the space can evoke a certain emotion, facilitating emotional interaction between people and the space, and leading to a sense of belonging. From a psychological perspective, this can be referred to as an empathy effect (Fig. 1). Places that trigger interaction between individuals and space can be understood from three aspects: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional [8]. Individuals receive information from the environment through their senses and respond with behaviors and emotions based on their perceptions, which are driven by their needs and preferences.

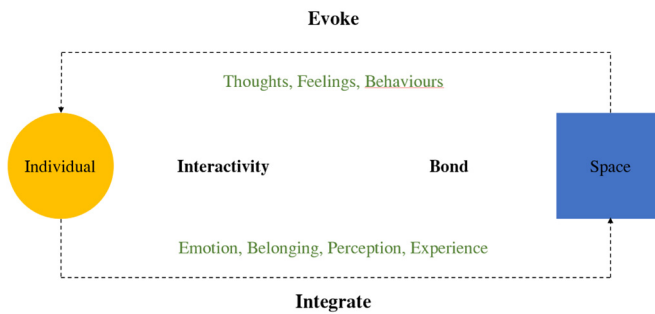


Fig. 1. The process of place-Individual interaction-empathy effect

### ***Cognitive Layer - Sensory Pleasure***

In the book "The Image of the City," American humanistic urban planning theorist Kevin Lynch (1918–1984) approached the sense of place refers to the notion that the spatial form should be easily sensed and recognized by residents [9]. It emphasizes the relationship between the physical characteristics of a place and individual perception, as well as the individual's understanding and recognition of space within that place. Sensory pleasure is an important aspect of the sense of place, focusing on the tangible experiences derived from sensory stimulation and perception, such as visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory sensations[10]. Urban places can enhance the sensory pleasure of individuals by stimulating the sensory system, leading to positive emotions and potentially inducing a healing effect.

### ***Behavioural Layer - Generating Interaction***

The behavioral layer refers to an aspect of urban design that aims to enhance the usability and attractiveness of urban spaces by encouraging interaction between people and their environment. It requires consideration of how people's behavioral activities impact urban space, providing sufficient space and infrastructure to support various activities and social interactions. This layer should guide people to integrate better into the spatial environment and effectively communicate the value of the space, thus increasing participation and satisfaction in urban spaces.

### ***Emotional Layer - Empathy Empathy Empathy***

Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1930–2022) believed that people often hold a "topophilia" or a strong emotional attachment to their familiar city or hometown. This emotional connection leads them to organize and preserve buildings or other significant structures in those meaningful places, thereby maintaining traces of historical memory [11]. The emotional layer originates from people's perception of spatial information and is also influenced by behavioral feedback, representing individual emotional responses influenced by a combination of social, cultural, and life factors [12]. By emphasizing the emotional layer, we can effectively encourage locals and visitors to integrate into the urban environment more quickly, fostering empathy and shared emotional experiences, which contributes to building a more harmonious and human-centered urban society.

## **3 Hierarchical Construction of Healing Place Theory Interventions in the Renewal of Historic Neighbourhoods**

To address the above issues, we can re-examine the renovation design of historic districts through the theory of healing spaces. This theory focuses on people's needs and feelings, emphasizing harmonious coexistence between humans and the environment. By engaging with the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional levels, this approach can enable the renovation design to achieve the sustainable development of historic districts.

### **3.1 Cognitive Layer: Pathways - Imagination and Memory**

Pathways are key to expressing cultural meaning in historic cultural districts. Through the buildings, landscapes, and cultural activities along the way, people can sense the district's history and culture, leaving a lasting impression. Pathways not only shape spatial order but also play a significant role as cultural carriers in historic cultural districts.

Pathways in historic districts mainly consist of point structures and linear structures. Linear structures are the primary routes for people to travel, considering factors like width, length, and curvature. Point structures are spaces for interaction, rest, and gathering, where size, shape, and location matter. By linking point and linear structures, complex and interesting pathway systems can be created, expanding public space, enriching people's experiences, and strengthening connections with the historic cultural district.

### **3.2 Behavioural Layer: Build - Comfort & Explore**

In historic districts, a grid-like system can be created by connecting various locations through a network of linear pathways. This concept of grid-based urban design was introduced by Kevin Lynch in the 1960s, where he suggested dividing the city into regions and linking them with pathways, forming a grid-like structure. This setup helps

increase the district's vitality and appeal, offering a better urban experience. Additionally, the grid-like structure encourages communication and interaction, allowing places to cross and overlap, creating a more flexible and diverse spatial form that enhances understanding and interest in the district.

### **3.3 Emotional Layer: Creating - Emotions and Empathy**

The renewal and development of historic districts must consider local urban characteristics, historical memory, cultural inheritance, and people's emotional needs. The city ultimately narrates its story through a structure composed of buildings and emotions[13]. This can be seen as a theory of emotional resonance: the buildings and spaces within the urban context are not just about form and construction; they deeply carry people's emotions, memories, and lives, serving as key components of a city's vitality.

The regeneration of historic districts needs to fully consider the needs and feedback of the community and citizens, so that they can become participants in the creation, in order to build a common emotional layer, and even achieve a wider range of identity and empathy. In conclusion, the emotional layer is a very important dimension in the design of historic districts, which involves the connectivity between the architecture and the urban environment, the inheritance of culture and history, and the degree of people's sense of identity and emotional connection to the historic districts. In order to protect and develop historic districts, it is necessary to have a deeper understanding of their cultural and historical characteristics and the way they are integrated with the surrounding environment. In this way, the cultural and historical values of historic districts can be preserved and passed on, and they can truly move people's hearts.

## **4 The Realisation of Healing Placemaking in the Renewal of Historic Neighbourhoods**

### **4.1 Refinement of Functionality - Maintaining the Integrity of the Neighbourhood**

For historic districts, preserving and inheriting their historical and cultural value is a necessary condition for maintaining their uniqueness and appeal. At the same time, infusing new functional elements and vitality is an inevitable demand and a need aligned with the development of the times. To sustain the memory of the city and showcase its vibrancy, it is necessary to retain valuable old buildings while addressing the issue of outdated functions. In this context, we can inject new energy into historic districts and improve their functional quality through functional replacement, functional restructuring, or retaining original functions while optimizing operations.

## **4.2 Continuing the Architectural Texture - Maintaining the Authenticity of the Neighbourhood**

Without deep connections to the urban environment, individual places cannot truly possess vitality. Streets, as fundamental components of urban spatial forms and landscape environments, carry the city's culture and history, representing its cultural lineage. Streets not only physically link various functional areas but also serve as public spaces and social venues for interaction, communication, and socialization [14].

Properly preserving architectural texture ensures that people within a place can access a wealth of cultural information from different historical periods. It also maintains the original features and appearance of historic buildings, meeting the needs of those seeking continuity with history and cultural comfort. Such preservation measures allow historic buildings to continue serving cultural and social functions in modern society, providing more cultural experiences and emotional comfort to people.

## **4.3 Extracting Cultural Memory - Creating Humanity in the Neighbourhood**

French economist François Perroux (1903–1987) stated that "an attempt to separate shared economic goals from their cultural environment will ultimately end in failure. No economic concept can be thoroughly considered without its cultural foundation [15]. "Culture represents the deepest layer of meaning and quality in a city's historic old street and is a critical factor in maintaining the vitality of historic districts[16]. The unique architectural structures and layout forms in historic districts, combined with the context of the times and the resident communities, together shape a distinctive street culture and urban vibe. This culture and vibe, as a vibrant cultural heritage, carry countless histories and stories.

To truly protect and develop historic cultural districts, we need to carefully preserve their external characteristics and intrinsic historical and cultural values. At the same time, we should delve deeply into and refine cultural elements, ensuring they become the core and soul of the district. This involves not only protecting historic buildings and their layouts but also passing on traditional culture and historical values. As we advance protection and development, we should embrace cultural diversity and inclusivity, selecting representative cultural elements to bring new vitality to the district.

In the spatial reorganization of historic districts, an event-driven approach can better meet the diverse needs of the public. Thorough analysis of the types of businesses and activities in the district ensures spatial flow and coherence. However, building a networked system through behavioral factors alone is not enough to create a unique atmosphere in historic districts. Therefore, while focusing on behavior, we must also consider the emotional aspect, using people's emotional experiences as the key factor in shaping the district's uniqueness.

Specifically, we can create a unique district style by perfectly combining cultural elements, historical heritage, and space. This can be achieved through the following methods:

- Establishing a distinctive brand

- Building an infrastructure system that aligns with modern society
- Creating diverse activity venues

This approach enhances people's emotional connection to the district. By integrating the behavioral and emotional dimensions, a unique spatial memory can be established, resulting in a stronger sense of identity and belonging. This can encourage citizens to better experience and enjoy various activities and conveniences that the city has to offer in these historic districts.

## 5 Conclusion

A city's historic old street with healing attributes must not only reflect the psychological needs and local cultural characteristics but also focus on creating a conducive spatial atmosphere and emotional exchanges, resulting in an environment that feels comfortable, relaxed, and enjoyable. When renovating an old street, it's crucial to prioritize people, considering the public's needs and level of acceptance. This can be achieved through observation, combining residents' and tourists' behavior patterns, and narrative creation. The renovation must also fully reflect emotional care for users, ensuring it aligns with their needs and psychological expectations.

Additionally, the design must integrate with local culture to better resonate with both functional and emotional levels, encouraging people to immerse themselves in the space. The renovation must also harmonize with the surrounding environment, creating a public space that serves city residents' living, leisure, and entertainment needs. Furthermore, it's crucial to consider local humanistic, historical, and cultural features and values. Lastly, the design should emphasize the street's distinctiveness to highlight the city's local characteristics.

Given the varying nature and function of old streets in different regions, along with differing architectural styles, renovations should consider unique factors like local climate, topography, natural landscape, history, culture, and folklore to preserve the historic district's regional identity, fostering emotional resonance and enhancing the place's healing capacity.

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