A Sense of Place: An Investigation of Modern Urban Space through Printmaking

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Abstract. This research project investigates the aesthetics of space and place through modern urban environment and cultural identity. With the continuous development of modernization, urban space has undergone significant changes, and many cities have lost their uniqueness and symbolism due to identical buildings. However, in Yangzhou, urban space can still maintain and develop a certain sense of place. This research project uses printmaking media to contextualize how an urban space development adapts elements of cultural identity in creating the values of belonging among the local community. Wen Zhongyan, Julie Mehretu and Wu Guanzhong are the main artists within the scope of the study, who have poured themselves into visual works that depict the sense of place through the deconstruction and reconstruction of urban architecture. The works in this project are metaphors for people's imaginations in the face of changes in modern urban space. These works interlock historical elements with landmarks, providing visual aesthetics and creating illusions. The layering of different images in a two-dimensional plane illustrates the connection between landmarks and culture in a contemporary setting. Therefore, it also provides a valuable reference for the construction and renewal of urban space through cultural identity.

Keywords: sense of place, urban space, cultural identity, printmaking.

1   Introduction

With the rapid development of cities in the context of modernization, new buildings, bridges, streets and other landscapes have begun to appear. In some cities, this has resulted in the creation of a group of identical buildings, and the lack of meaning in these spaces has led to the loss of a sense of belonging for those who live in them. When places lose their meaning, they inevitably become placeless. The dissolution of place as a result of rapid urbanization is precisely the result of the complicity of capital and power, which has led to the disintegration of local meanings and the crisis of identity in local societies, and the production of urban space has become the result of the joint action of capital, power and class[2].

The city of Yangzhou has a long history and a robust humanistic heritage. Chen(2013)explained that Yangzhou has a history of nearly 2,500 years since the historical King Wu Fu-chai built Gan Cheng on Shugang in the northwestern suburbs of Yangzhou in 486 B.C. The city was founded in the Han Dynasty, when King Wu vigorously developed the economy, pushing the economy of Yangzhou to prosperity for the first time[1]. In the Tang Dynasty, Yangzhou was not only a rich town but also the first metropolis in southeastern China. In the Qing Dynasty, Yangzhou was a major transportation hub, becoming the salt supply base for the central provinces of China and the throat of the south and north transport, and Yangzhou salt merchants became one of the largest commercial capital groups in the country.

Yangzhou's historical splendour could not be separated from its canals, which enabled the city's commerce to flourish through shipping. Jiang (2020) argued that Yangzhou is the only historical city in China that grew up with the Grand Canal. During the Western Han, Sui and Tang, Ming and Qing dynasties, Yangzhou became a famous cosmopolitan city[3]. The salt merchant culture, food culture, garden culture, craft culture, and leisure culture brought by the Grand Canal have given birth to Yangzhou's humanistic, ecological, and exquisite urban qualities.

Yangzhou is also experiencing modernization, but with the construction and renewal of the city, a number of visually distinctive modern buildings have been produced, which are influenced by traditional history and culture, presenting a unique style and helping to transform the city from space to place. At the same time, when people appreciate and experience these landscapes, they can also feel a unique sense of place, and some of them even develop place attachment[15].

The modern landmarks associated with canal culture have become sites of pride in the hearts of Yangzhou people, who often feel a sense of belonging when they are in them. These sites demonstrate the spiritual core of the city, a memory of the time when the city was developing. Zheng (2021) explained that the modern Grand Canal Museum is associated with boat shapes, traditional Yangzhou bridges and traditional pavilions[15]. The shape of the Canal Theater is associated with traditional Yangzhou bridges and the historical painting school - the Eight Monsters of Yangzhou. Zhou (2021) described the Yangzhou Canal Theater building as a living modern cultural heritage, a landmark of the city of Yangzhou, injecting new vitality into the ancient canal culture of Yangzhou[16]. The Wanfu Bridge is associated with the shape of Yangzhou's East Gate Ruins, the high-speed railway station building is associated with Yangzhou's stacked-stone culture, and the Cultural Center is related to the history and beliefs of Yangzhou Lotus. The paper-cut bridge is associated with intangible cultural heritage - Yangzhou Paper Cutting, Xu (2022) explained that the bridge is red in colour, and the whole bridge looks like a paper-cut artwork when viewed from the side[14]. This design expresses the art of pulling flowers in the art of paper-cutting in the form of hollowing out, forming a landscape where regional culture and modern architecture are intertwined.

2   Project Outline

This project explores urban space in the context of modernization through the medium of printmaking. This research project investigates the impact of cultural identity on urban space, examining how modern urban space is endowed with meaning and how cultural identity influences urban construction and renewal. Sense of place implies one's feelings, experiences, beliefs and reactions to the environment[8].

The project pays special attention to the process of production and transformation of urban space. This is manifested in the following ways:

1. Interweaving and overlapping landmarks in modern Yangzhou urban space with the cultural elements they relate to constituting visual aesthetics.

2. Metaphorizing the process of experiencing cultural identity based on cultural identity in modern urban space through the creation of prints.

3. Exploring urban landscapes through the interplay between refining and generalizing urban elements, superimposing them, and how landscapes affect people's perceptions and bring about visual confusion.

Distillation, generalization and superimposition are the distinguishing features of these works that determine the composition of the images. This project explores landscapes and elements in different spaces with a studio-based research that produces unique two-dimensional superimpositions. The research establishes connections between different landscapes and cultural elements that are able to construct complex visual sensations that evoke a range of curiosities and a sense of place.

The project contributes to the field by expanding on the essence of modernization at a metaphorical level. By overlaying the representation of modern urban space with traditional cultural elements, it visually illustrates that preserving urban heritage is not static but should change with the times, show modern vitality, and reawaken a sense of belonging and a sense of place in modern spaces.

3   Related theoretical ideas

3.1   The Place Theory By Tuan, Relph and Norberg-Schulz

Place is different from space in that place is a space to which some special meaning is added. Tuan (1977) argued from the perspective of human geography that in urban space, due to the long-term contact between people and the environment, people will have emotional reflections on the city, such as place attachment[13]. A sense of place is both the inherent nature of a place and the emotional experience of love, identity and dependence, all of which reflect the state of the environment and human connection. A place is a perception of the world that emphasises the experience of subjective emotions rather than focusing solely on cold scientific data. Human feelings cannot be merely quantified and disassembled because expectations and memories of the past affect feelings, which bring about continuous changes in experience. So, as people grow older, they develop a more profound sense of the meaning of place.

Relph (1976) described that residents will identify with spaces that are full of meaning, and this is when spaces transform into places. Places contain emotions, values and symbolism[11]. A sense of place is the identification of the space in which people are located, the ability to respond to the characteristics of different locations, and the sense of identity that develops through people's interaction with the land over time. Meaning in place builds personal and cultural identity, which is an essential source of people's sense of security, our coordinates that help people find their place in space.

Meanwhile, Norberg-Schulz (1979) explained that place is the result of human activity in a space and that a place is distinguished from a space by the intervention of a human being, which makes the space full of meaning[9]. One can feel a sense of security and identity in such a place[10]. Buildings visualise the spirit of place and the meaning of sedentary life. Buildings help to turn space into place, and its spirit of place attaches itself to the inhabitants living in the area and exists in relation to their personal memories or life experiences.

Lynch often talked about places in visual terms, he was concerned with whether a place was imaginable or not. According to Lynch (1960), urban imagery can be recognized by five elements, which are path, edge, node, district and land mark[7]. They can help more clearly we observe and record urban imagery. The so-called path refer to the various ways of traveling to and from the same place, such as automobile roads, pedestrian roads, river roads, railroad tracks and so on. The edges are the border of different areas, which bring division and obstacles to the city. A node is a point of convergence and intersection of travelers. A district is a piece of space in a city where people can enter to observe and move around. Landmarks can usually be seen from a distance in a city, such as distinctive buildings, hills, etc.

4   Related Art Practice

4.1   Wen Zhongyan

Fig. 1. Wen Zhongyan, Corner Tower of the Forbidden City, 2013, silkscreen print, 154x94cm

The artwork in Figure 1. interprets the changes in China's capital city, Beijing, over the decades as it underwent modernization. The Forbidden City Corner Tower is an ancient landmark of Beijing and a relic of history. The work creates multiple layers through silkscreen prints, a bottom layer of ancient buildings and an upper layer of

circuit board image lines that represent the modernization of the table. Sui (2019) stated that through the large amount of information in the overlapping text, symbols, maps, and images (circuit boards), we can see the problems of history and reality as well as the cultural imagination of the future in the mirror image of the city[12].

4.2   Julie Mehretu

Fig. 2. Julie Mehretu, Stadia II, 2004, 274.32x365.76 cm

Julie Mehretu's work in Figure 2. reflects the new environment of urban sprawl that has emerged from the urbanization of the United States. This process is keenly perceived by the artist and interpreted through painting. Mehretu superimposes a variety of materials to form colour blocks and geometric intersecting lines and uses the richness of the layers they form to express the abstract imagery of urban architecture. Lu (2020) argued that Mehretu works with the aid of software such as Photoshop, using rubbing and spraying to superimpose images to form blurred, subtle effects[6]. She records life and creates paintings sincerely in two-dimensional planes to communicate her perceptions and feelings. Lewis (2010) stated that Mehretu tends to expose and explain everything[4]. In such a state, people in the city get lost in the indoctrinated culture and end up in a mental state of total ignorance.

4.3   Wu Guanzhong

Fig. 3. Wu Guanzhong, Zhouzhuang, 1997, oil on canvas, 148x297cm

This work in Figure 3. presents the architectural style of Jiangnan Water Town; the building presents the local characteristics of white walls and black tiles. This is a reflection of Chinese ink culture thought. There is a strong contrast between white and black, which creates a connection with traditional Chinese culture, such as the black and white patterns of Tai Chi. Li (2008) argued that Wu Guanzhong's images reflect the combination of historical landscape architecture and culture, producing a unique sense of place[5].

5   The Studio Investigation

This phase aims to explore the connection between landmarks and culture in urban space. Landmarks are a major influence in creating an urban atmosphere. Yangzhou's modern landmarks in Figure 4.are unique in that they have been shaped by culture and are a continuation. I integrate the landmarks with historical buildings and cultural carriers through printmaking.

Fig. 4. Modern Yangzhou landmarks with distinctive shapes

Architecture is a silent art that accompanies the development of a city in the passage of time. A city's landmark building is not only a unique symbol of the city's memory but also one of the synonyms of the city.

This series of artworks consists of six modern landmarks in Yangzhou that are visually unique in their architecture. Viewers unfamiliar with the local culture of Yangzhou may feel nothing when they see these works. However, for people with cultural identity in Yangzhou, these modern landmarks can move them and create a sense of familiarity, a unique sense of place. This feeling is based on the cultural identity of the locals.

In the experiment, first, I used Photoshop to help crop and adjust the transparency of the photographic stock photos and created hand-drawn manuscripts in Figure 5., which helped me determine the work's composition and overlay form.
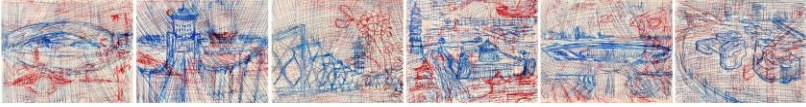

Fig. 5. Hand-drawn manuscripts of the prints

Yangzhou's modern city landmark, the Grand Canal Museum, has a modern design that shows the new face of Yangzhou. I divided the image into different layers in Figure 6. The top layer is the Grand Canal Museum and the surrounding environment, and the bottom layer is the image of the historical elements corresponding to the ship's shape. I generalize them and use different directions to engrave different layers, increasing the area to be engraved and creating more white space on the printed paper surface, which is conducive to providing viewers with more space for imagination and reminiscence. The audience is able to create a sense of familiarity and contrast through the simultaneous appearance of modern landmarks and historical and cultural elements.

Fig. 6. Color and monochrome versions of the Grand Canal Museum prints

The Yangzhou Canal Theater is also one of the modern landmarks. In Figure 7, I arranged the historic bridge in the lower part of the composition, and I placed the modern Canal Theater in the upper part in a refined and generalized way. In the layer of the Grand Theater, I used lines expanding outward. The overall direction is unified, but the direction of each area is slightly different, which can give the picture a sense of dynamics and produce the feeling of modern spotlights. The individual layers are interlaced, overlaid and blended.
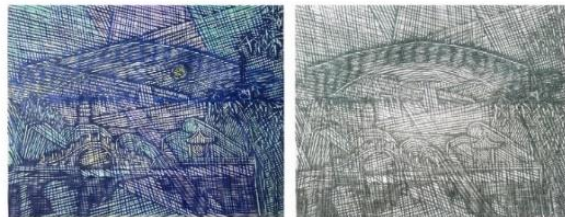

Fig. 7. Color and monochrome versions of the Canal Theater prints

The shape of the modern landmark Wanfu Bridge is similar to the ancient city gates and attics, which are given more regional characteristics of Yangzhou culture. In Figure 8, I composed them on the left and right side of the picture and extended their extension lines to the edges of the picture. The modern buildings are on the top, and the traditional buildings are on the bottom. The superimposition of the top on the bottom visually indicates the chronological order. Upon closer inspection, it is possible to find landscapes of different clarity simultaneously, creating visual confusion for the viewer.
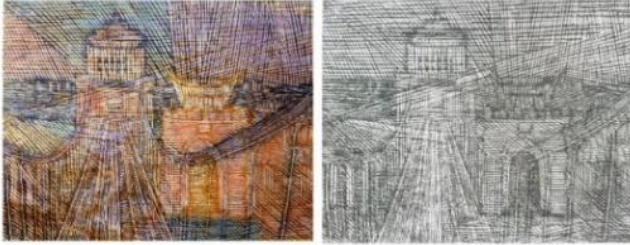
Fig. 8. Color and monochrome versions of the Wanfu Bridge prints

The Yangzhou Cultural Centre is also one of the modern landmarks of the city, with its unique architectural shape and curved building appearance abstractly interpreting the water culture of Yangzhou.

In the work Figure 9, I placed the modern building at the top of the picture, the bottom of the Yangzhou ruins of the gatehouse modelling. I divided it into two parts and disassembled the modelling of the gatehouse, which not only maintains the characteristics of the historical gatehouse modelling but also makes it more dynamic, symbolic of the history of the gatehouse and the lotus connected to the modern Yangzhou Cultural Centre of the building.
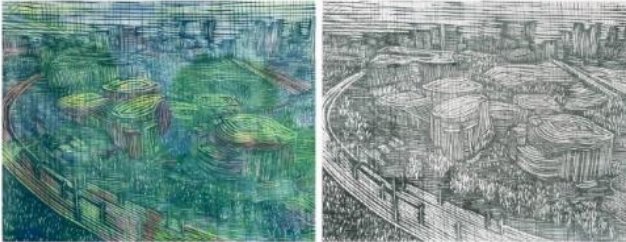

Fig. 9. Color and monochrome versions of the Yangzhou Cultural Center prints

The idea of the Yangzhou paper-cut bridge shape comes from the intangible cultural heritage of Yangzhou paper-cutting. The shape comes from Qionghua, which is the flower of Yangzhou in history. Qionghua represents purity and fortitude.

In Figure 10, I added the Qionghua flower created by the Yangzhou paper-cutting master in the upper right of the image and the modern Yangzhou paper-cut bridge in the lower part of the image, which are placed on two separate layers, which are interlaced and superimposed on each other to visualize the connection between them.
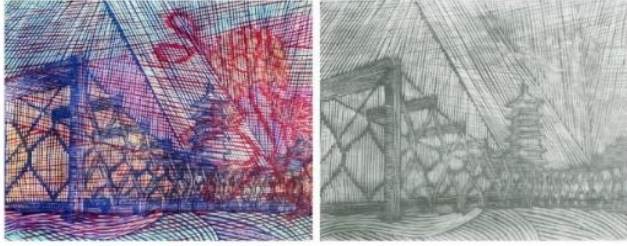
Fig. 10. Color and monochrome versions of the Yangzhou paper-cut bridge prints

In Figure 11, I put the stacked stones from the traditional garden of Yangzhou on the right side of the picture. Its shape is directional and echoes the modern high-speed railway station on the left side, symbolizing its visual connection. The modern elevation of the high-speed railway station summarizes the characteristic stacked stones, and the irregular curves of the internal window panes symbolize the stone holes in the stacked stones, which makes a better interpretation of the imagery of "elegant stones create a realm" in Yangzhou's stacked stones.

Fig. 11. Color and monochrome versions of the modern high-speed railway station prints

I decided to arrange these works horizontally in the series work Figure 12. During the exhibition, the viewer can walk and look at them; this way of viewing can produce a "step-by-step" feeling. As the viewer's body moves, the landscape also changes so that the paintings and the viewer can interact with each other.

Fig. 12. Series: Landmarks Between Verticals and Horizontals, hand-printed woodcut, 60*350cm (each group)

The artwork represents the modern urban landmarks of Yangzhou in a way that gives visual cues to the viewer, helping them to actively recall them through abstracting and

simplifying imagery and connecting them to their surroundings through association, where these landmarks have a vital symbolic and iconic role in the city. The exploration of juxtaposition and superimposing images of cultural and architectural heritage in different layers visually creates a temporal coexistence. This landscape of different eras visually recreates the course and direction of Yangzhou's development, helping the viewer to feel the combination of history and modernity instantly and helping them to form a connection between the cityscape, its cultural characteristics and spiritual connotations.

The series combines and contrasts colour and monochrome versions. The coloured version is aesthetically attractive, attracting viewers to quickly focus on the image, where the colours of different areas carry information about the urban environment and the corresponding symbols of Yangzhou's history and culture, where the viewers are guided by the colours and shapes of the landscape to generate memories and associations through their experience a sense of familiarity and a sense of belonging in the paintings. Meanwhile, the monochrome version superimposes different levels of space with different brightness colours, creating visual confusion for the viewers due to the intersection and overlapping of similar colours in the picture, causing them to have certain illusions, thus creating a strong sense of imagination and experiences.

The prints visually interpret the transformation of the city of Yangzhou from a space to a meaningful place, affecting the viewers through the works, making them feel both familiarity and illusion about the environment, which provides them with images based on everyday experience but different from those produced by everyday vision, all of which help them to develop a sense of belonging and a sense of place based on the city.

6   Conclusion

This project investigates strategies for representing changes in urban space in the form of printmaking. It employs an aesthetic and artistic practice that explains how cultural identity influences modern urban space and the processes of constructing a sense of place and belonging. The study also explores the possibility of superimposing different scenes and how it traps them in visual confusion. The simultaneous mental superimposition of modern landscapes and imagined cultural symbols through experience becomes an important source of a sense of place that establishes a sense of familiarity and belonging to their surroundings in the midst of modernization. By visually interpreting the sources of the sense of place, the project also provides a valuable reference for the construction and renewal of modern urban spaces.

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