

Research on the Realization of Educational Functions of Urban Public Art Based on the Theory of "Situated Learning"

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Abstract

Public art has emerged as a significant pathway for shaping urban cultural identity and enhancing citizens' spiritual and cultural. Unlike traditional art education, urban public art, characterized by its pervasive presence, provides the public with an open, authentic, and sustained learning environment. Framed within the "situated learning" theory and drawing on public art practices in Changchun, Jilin Province, China, as a case study, this paper examines how urban public art transforms abstract urban culture and historical contexts into tangible, experiential, and interactive scenarios through the construction of "cultural memory situations," "everyday life situations," and "interactive participation situations." Such art immersion rooted in authentic contexts effectively fosters citizens' awareness, identification with, and transmission of urban culture, thereby fulfilling the subtle yet profound functions of public aesthetic education and social cultivation. This approach serves as a crucial pathway for advancing urban spiritual civilization development and preserving historical and cultural heritage.

Keywords

Situated Learning; Public Art; Educational Function; Urban Culture.

1. Introduction: From Static Display to Situational Creation – The Paradigm Shift in the Educational Function of Public Art

Urban public art has long transcended the mere scope of decoration and beautification, becoming a spiritual landmark and emotional bond of urban culture [2]. For example, during urban construction, Changchun City in Jilin Province explicitly stated that public art is a "unique cultural name card of the city," aiming to shape the brand image of urban civilization. However, how can these artworks standing on streets and in transportation hubs truly "come alive," allowing their cultural connotations and educational significance to penetrate deeply into people's hearts rather than becoming neglected backgrounds? This requires in-depth reflection on the mechanisms of art reception and learning.

Traditional art education is often a "decontextualized" transmission of knowledge, where learners are separated from the knowledge and the objects depicted. The "situated learning" theory, on the other hand, posits that learning is essentially a social and practical process, knowledge exists within activities, situations, and culture, and effective learning needs to occur in real situations where knowledge is actually applied. This theory emphasizes "legitimate peripheral participation," meaning learners construct knowledge, master skills, and internalize culture gradually, from the periphery to the center, by participating in a community of practice within authentic tasks and situations.

Introducing this theoretical perspective into the field of urban public art provides a new framework for understanding its educational function. Urban public art essentially creates a series of "cultural learning situations" for all citizens (learners) within the enormous "community of practice" that is the city. It is no longer an object that requires deliberate

contemplation in museums but becomes an integral part of the real environment integrated into citizens' daily commutes, leisure, and lives. This paper aims to systematically explain, by integrating public art practices across multiple dimensions in Changchun, such as transportation hubs, historical districts, and subway spaces, how through carefully designed situations, it transforms abstract concepts like automotive culture, film culture, ice-snow culture, and local life culture into immersive, dialogical, and memorable concrete experiences, thereby realizing its deeper social education and cultural inheritance functions [6].

2. Theoretical Foundation: Situated Learning Theory and the Educational Potential of Public Art

The "situated learning" theory was primarily proposed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger [1], with core viewpoints including:

Situatedness of Knowledge: Knowledge is not an abstract, independent entity but arises from activities, situations, and culture. Understanding specific knowledge requires understanding the activity, situation, and cultural background in which it is situated.

Community of Practice: Learning is a process of participating in social practice, occurring within a "community of practice" composed of members who share beliefs, knowledge, and practices.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation: Learners start as novices at the periphery of the community, participating in simple, peripheral practical activities. As their skills and understanding deepen, they gradually move towards the center of the community, taking on more core roles, and eventually fully internalizing the culture and practices of the community.

Urban public art perfectly aligns with these elements of situated learning. First, the city itself is the grandest "community of practice," with citizens as its natural members, sharing the city's history, space, and cultural life. Second, the cultural content carried by public art (such as Changchun's industrial memory and local life) is precisely the shared knowledge and beliefs of this community. Most crucially, excellent public art does not simply state knowledge but excels at creating a "situation" – a "field" where history, stories, emotions, physical space, and everyday life are tightly interwoven.

In this field, citizens' participation is legitimate and peripheral. They do not need to specifically purchase tickets or make appointments but unintentionally step into the situation set by the art while passing by, waiting, or relaxing. They might initially be attracted by the interesting form of a realistic sculpture (peripheral participation), then observe details, connect it to personal experiences, read explanatory texts, discuss with companions, or even share via social media, thereby gradually deepening their understanding of the cultural stories behind the work (moving towards the center). This process is exactly the knowledge construction and cultural internalization described by situated learning. The educational function of public art is efficiently realized precisely in this informal, immersive, and social situational interaction.

3. Situation Construction and Educational Realization: Triple Practical Pathways of Changchun's Public Art

The public art planning of Changchun City, from the macro-level shaping of the city's cultural name card to the micro-level reproduction of local life, demonstrates multi-level and multi-type wisdom in situation construction, providing citizens with rich learning interfaces.

(1) Constructing "Cultural Memory Situations": Inscribing Urban Epics in Transportation Arteries

Transportation nodes and subway spaces are key locations for gathering crowds and forming impressions [3]. Changchun City systematically integrates public art into the "Two Horizontal, Three Vertical" expressways, entrance/exit points of the ring expressway, and subway lines,

essentially transforming the city's transportation network into "flowing corridors of cultural memory" [4]. This creates a moving, traversing learning situation.

Taking the "Changchun Memory" theme of Changchun Metro Line 1 as an example, it is no longer simple station decoration but constructs a coherent, immersive historical narrative situation. Each station is a carefully designed "memory capsule":

Beihuanlu Station "Life Memory": The cultural wall reproduces the local scenery and landmark buildings along both banks of the Yitong River from the Changchun Office period to the present in a long scroll format. While waiting for trains, passengers' eyes glance over images like the horse market in the late Qing Dynasty, the old railway station, and Changchun Film Studio, as if traveling through time. This situation connects scattered historical knowledge points into a vivid visual epic, allowing citizens to "legitimately" participate in the review and cognition of urban history during their commute.

Qingfenglu Station "Automotive Memory" and Yikuangjie Station "Industrial Memory": Construct situations using abstracted wheel tracks and mechanical gear elements, respectively. They do not directly display cars or factories but extract the most symbolic industrial "vocabulary" to create a visual atmosphere of power, motion, and order. Passengers within them can intuitively feel the pulsating industrial pulse of the city and understand the profound accumulation behind the title "Automobile City." This is a form of situational learning based on symbols and atmosphere, making abstract culture sensible and knowable.

Renmin Square Station and Municipal Government Station: The former creates a situation where personal memories blend with the grand history of the city through the "Smiling Tile Wall" and "History Book Wall"; the latter's "Carving Changchun" uses the solidification of artistic event moments to let citizens perceive the global community of practice behind the "City of Sculpture" brand. These situations invite citizens to transform from passive viewers into active interpreters and emotional resonators, greatly enhancing urban identity and sense of pride.

This systematic construction of cultural memory situations at transportation nodes seamlessly integrates learning behavior with daily travel. Citizens complete repeated cognition and internalization of the city's cultural DNA through constant passing and traversing.

(2) Constructing "Everyday Life Situations": Activating Emotional Resonance in the Vibrancy of Local Life

If the art at transportation nodes focuses on grand historical narratives, then the public art planning of Chongqing Road in Changchun perfectly illustrates how to construct micro, emotional everyday life situations in the most lively local spaces. Local life culture is flesh-and-blood, vibrant, and vigorous culture; it is the soil of urban culture. The renovation of Chongqing Road aims to express the city's local temperament and contemporary spirit. Its design essence is an artistic representation and enhancement of the citizens' community of life practice.

In the "Boutique Street" area, designers created scenes such as "Queueing for Steamed Buns," "Riding the Trolleybus," and "Haircut on the Street," which are highly evocative of specific eras and life's pleasures. These realistic sculpture groups are not isolated works but closely integrated with Chongqing Road's original commercial spaces and historical buildings (e.g., Changchun Hotel, Peace Theatre), collectively restoring a bygone, warm local life situation. When citizens (especially middle-aged and older groups) see these scenes, they instantly activate personal or family memory banks, generating strong emotional resonance. The younger generation can intuitively understand their parents' lifestyle and urban changes through these "situation fossils." This process is precisely what Lave and Wenger describe as "transmitting the culture of a community through stories and narratives."

The educational significance of this situational construction lies in: It transforms cultural inheritance from bookish preaching into touchable, dialogical on-site experiences. Citizens

naturally stop, talk, take photos, and even tell related stories to companions when encountering these scenes while shopping. Public art here becomes a medium for triggering intergenerational communication and community dialogue, enabling local life culture to continue and be reinterpreted within the current flow of life, realizing the living inheritance of culture within the community of practice.



Figure 1. Nanguan Station Metro Public Art "Prosperous Local Life"

(3) Constructing "Interactive Participation Situations": Empowering Citizen Subjectivity Through Artistic Intervention

Situated learning emphasizes the active participation of learners. The development trend of contemporary public art is precisely shifting from static, worship-worthy objects to dynamic, participatory "events" or "fields." Changchun's public art practice also reflects efforts to construct interactive participation situations [5].

In the Chongqing Road "Boutique Zone," designers adopted fashionable, pop, and exaggerated artistic languages, such as "Vitality Cat Family," "MICHAEL Couple," and "Giant Pillows." These works, departing from pure realism, invite citizens to interact, take photos, and even stimulate imagination and playfulness with their whimsical, open forms. They construct a relaxed, fashionable, and surprise-filled modern urban playground situation. Citizens are no longer bystanders to history but participants and co-creators of contemporary fashionable life.

Deeper participation is reflected in works like the "Citizen Smile Wall" at Renmin Square Station. The artist collected thousands of smiles from ordinary citizens to create the work, which in itself is a large-scale social participation act. When citizens see their own or strangers' smiles cast into an art wall representing the city's history, they develop a strong sense of "ownership" – I am part of this city, my emotions are valued and displayed by this city. This situation elevates citizens from art audience to co-creators and meaning-givers of the art, greatly enhancing their sense of belonging and identification with the urban community [7]. This is the highest level of "legitimate peripheral participation" – citizens transform from cultural consumers to cultural producers and owners.



Figure 2. Jianshe Square Station Metro Public Art "Movement of the Times"

4. Conclusion and Outlook: Urban Public Art as a Situated Aesthetic Education System

Through the interpretation of Changchun's multi-dimensional public art practice via the "situated learning" theory, we can clearly see that successful urban public art is by no means simple spatial embellishment but a carefully designed, open-ended situated aesthetic education system. By constructing triple situations of "cultural memory," "everyday life," and "interactive participation," it transforms the cultural connotations, historical context, and values of the city into a "living" classroom where citizens can be immersed, personally experience, and interact. The mechanism for realizing the educational function of this system lies in:

Authenticity and Seamless Embedding of Learning Situations: Learning occurs within citizens' real-life trajectories without extra cost or deliberate arrangement, realizing the integration of education into life.

Narrativization and Experientialization of Knowledge Presentation: Transforming abstract culture into stories, scenes, and atmospheres aligns with human cognitive and memory patterns, leading to more profound and lasting learning effects.

Sociality and Constructiveness of the Learning Process: Artistic situations stimulate social behaviors like viewing, discussing, and sharing. Knowledge is co-constructed and internalized through communication, strengthening community cohesion.

Subjectivity and Participatory Nature of Learner Identity: From observation to resonance, to interaction and even co-creation, the subjective status of citizens is continuously affirmed, enhancing cultural identity and sense of responsibility.

Looking ahead, the planning and design of urban public art should more consciously apply the concept of "situated learning." Designers need to transcend personal artistic expression, acting more like "situation architects" and "learning experience designers." They should deeply research the city's cultural fabric and citizens' life practices to create more diverse, deeper, and more interactive situational nodes. Simultaneously, digital technologies (such as Augmented Reality - AR) can be integrated to overlay digital information layers on top of physical situations, providing richer possibilities for interpretation and interaction, making urban public art a "social aesthetic education university" that never closes and continuously evolves.

Ultimately, as explored in this paper, when public art successfully transforms the city into a meaningful learning situation, it truly achieves its highest goal: not only decorating the city but also shaping its citizens; not only displaying culture but also inheriting civilization. This is

precisely the profound wisdom and educational ambition behind Changchun City, Jilin Province, China's commitment to building the brands of "Historical and Cultural City" and "City of Sculpture" through public art.

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