

# Revitalization Design of Public Spaces in Ancient Towns of Western Hunan under Cultural and Tourism Integration

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**Abstract:** Under the background of cultural and tourism integration, public spaces in ancient towns in Western Hunan serve as carriers of ethnic cultural genes and core venues for community life. Their revitalization and renewal are key issues in achieving cultural inheritance, rural revitalization, and spatial value reconstruction. This study focuses on ancient towns in Western Hunan, examining their mountain settlement characteristics and diverse cultural genes. It analyzes core problems such as the imbalance between spatial features and original texture, superficial cultural expression and narrative systems, singular spatial functions and business structures, and rigid spatial experiences and interactive scenarios. The study explores pathways for revitalizing public spaces under the guidance of cultural and tourism integration. It proposes systematic revitalization strategies from four dimensions: mountain-adaptive micro-renewal, narrative of ethnic cultural genes, host-guest shared functional integration, and multi-sensory interactive experiences, aiming to provide theoretical references for the sustainable development of similar ancient towns.

**Keywords:** spatial revitalization; ancient towns in Western Hunan; public spaces; cultural and tourism integration; cultural genes

## 1. Introduction

With the in-depth implementation of the national strategy for cultural and tourism integration, the tourism industry is transitioning from simple sightseeing to in-depth cultural experiences [1]. As important carriers of historical and cultural heritage, the protection and development of ancient towns have become a key focus in academic circles. The Western Hunan region,

with its unique mountainous terrain, rich ethnic minority customs, and well-preserved ancient town clusters, has emerged as a hotspot for cultural and tourism integration.

Public spaces serve as containers for social life in ancient towns and core venues for cultural tourism experiences. In the context of cultural and tourism integration, public spaces must not only meet the daily needs of local residents but also support cultural experiences for tourists [1]. However, current development models often overlook the cultural connotations and living attributes of public spaces, leading to a decline in spatial vitality. Therefore, this study focuses on the practical challenges faced by public spaces in ancient towns in Western Hunan. It begins by examining spatial characteristics and cultural genes, conducts an in-depth analysis of existing problems and their underlying causes, and proposes systematic revitalization design strategies. The aim is to provide a theoretical basis and practical pathways for the sustainable development of ancient towns in Western Hunan.

## 2. Spatial Characteristics and Cultural Genes of Public Spaces in Ancient Towns in Western Hunan

The ancient towns in Western Hunan are located in the northwestern part of Hunan Province, at the junction of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, and Guizhou, in the central hinterland of the Wuling Mountain Range [2]. Distributed along the Yuan River, You River, and other water systems as well as ancient post roads, this area is a typical mixed settlement region of Tujia, Miao, and Han ethnic groups. It is home to the world cultural heritage site Laosicheng, the national historical and cultural city Fenghuang Ancient Town, and the national historical and cultural towns Liye Town, Furong Town, Pushi Town, and Biancheng Town. There are 13 national key cultural relics protection units, including Xizhou Bronze Pillar, Shen Congwen's Former Residence, and the former site of the Hubei-

Hunan-Sichuan-Guizhou Revolutionary Base, along with 1,517 historical and cultural sites [3]. Among these, Qianzhou, Pushi, Liye, and Chadong are known as the "Four Major Ancient Towns of Western Hunan." In the context of cultural and tourism integration, clarifying their spatial characteristics and cultural connotations is fundamental to achieving spatial revitalization and value reconstruction.

## 2.1 Spatial Morphological Characteristics of Public Spaces

The physical spatial form of ancient towns serves as the material carrier of culture and local life, the external representation of cultural connotations, and the foundation for renewal efforts [4]. The rugged terrain and well-developed water systems in Western Hunan give public spaces in ancient towns significant mountain adaptability and waterfront layering, forming a spatial texture distinct from that of ancient towns on plains.

First, vertical layering conforming to terrain. Building along mountain slopes is the primary characteristic of public spaces in ancient towns in Western Hunan. Affected by the elevation differences in mountainous terrain, public spaces exhibit significant layering and terracing in their vertical form. Core public spaces such as central squares and ancestral hall courtyards are often located on gentle slopes or terraces with relatively flat ground and no risk of flooding. Linear public spaces such as streets and pathways extend along contour lines or run perpendicular to slopes. Streets following contour lines maintain gentle passage, while secondary streets and alleys perpendicular to slopes use steps to connect different elevations, forming a hierarchical layout with flat main streets and stepped side alleys.

Second, linear waterfront forms extending along rivers. Growing alongside water is another important characteristic of public spaces in ancient towns in Western Hunan. Public spaces take on a linear, water-adapted morphological pattern. In spatial layout, public spaces are organized linearly with the river as the axis. Waterfront public spaces such as riverside paths, docks, and waterfront squares extend continuously along the shoreline, aligning closely with the river's course and connecting multiple core nodes. In formal expression, waterfront public spaces feature diverse water-adapted designs, often using gentle slopes, steps,

and water platforms as flexible approaches. Third, narrow strip forms flanked by mountains and rivers. Public spaces in ancient towns, constrained by both mountains and water systems, overall take on a narrow strip form. This restricted layout results in compact public space arrangements and high street density, creating a "small but dense" spatial characteristic. Due to the narrow form, core public spaces are mostly located in gently sloping areas near mountains and rivers. The vertical layering of the mountains and the linear extension of the water systems complement each other, with terraced spaces descending step by step from the mountains toward the water. Linear waterfront spaces connect mountain streams, serving as micro-carriers of mountain-water coexistence.

## 2.2 Cultural Genes of Public Spaces

The cultural genes of public spaces in ancient towns in Western Hunan represent the underlying logic of regional social structures, lifestyles, and spiritual beliefs in spatial use. They are primarily reflected in four dimensions: clan community, folk performance, commercial culture, and nature worship.

The clan community gene establishes an order centered on ancestral halls and a sense of centrality, endowing public spaces with social governance functions. The folk performance gene defines the openness and enclosure of squares through collective activities such as the Hand-waving Dance and Nuo opera. The commercial culture gene, relying on regular market customs, gives streets linear flow and node amplification functions, reflecting the compatibility of street and market integration. The nature worship gene transforms concepts of feng shui and totemic beliefs into spiritual attachments and protective taboos for elements such as ancient trees and wind-rain bridges. These cultural genes shape behavioral patterns and the spirit of place in public spaces, forming the unique cultural identity of ancient towns in Western Hunan.

## 3. Existing Problems of Public Spaces in Ancient Towns in Western Hunan

In the process of tourism development and modernization, public spaces in ancient towns in Western Hunan have gradually shown problems such as imbalanced spatial character, superficial cultural expression, singular functions, and lack of experience. The specifics are as follows.

### 3.1 Imbalance between Spatial Character and Original Texture

In terms of spatial character, serious homogenization and distortion have emerged. Indigenous architectural languages such as stilted houses, column-and-tie construction, and rubble stone retaining walls have been weakened. A large number of mismatched pseudo-ancient buildings and overly commercialized residential structures have disrupted the unity of the ancient towns. Traditional wooden structures have been replaced by brick and concrete, and local materials like black tiles and wooden planks have been replaced by modern materials such as ceramic tiles and glass curtain walls. The color and texture of buildings have lost the regional characteristics of Western Hunan, creating a visual sense of fragmentation between old and new [5].

In terms of spatial texture, the original hierarchical street pattern formed by following mountain contours and water systems has been disrupted. Some ancient towns have experienced land reclamation from rivers and square construction on leveled mountains. Main streets have been widened blindly, while original steps and narrow alleys have been removed, altering street scale. For example, in Liye Ancient Town, some newly built structures are excessively large, disrupting the harmony of the surrounding courtyard-style layout and causing a break in textural continuity [6].

### 3.2 Superficial Cultural Expression and Narrative System

Current cultural displays mostly remain at the stage of misuse and fragmentation of cultural symbols, lacking in-depth exploration of cultural connotations and the construction of narrative logic [7]. In cultural expression, public spaces are filled with rigid abstract totem poles, imitation Miao silver ornaments, and other ethnic symbols, while deeper cultural elements such as complex belief systems, taboos, and social structures are simplified or omitted. In terms of narrative systems, attractions lack a coherent storyline. Ancestral halls, stages, docks, and other spaces exist in isolation, making it difficult for visitors to grasp the historical context and cultural development of the ancient towns.

### 3.3 Singular Spatial Functions and Business

### Structures

The functional configuration and business layout of public spaces in Western Hunan ancient towns show a clear trend toward convergence. In terms of spatial functions, public spaces in core areas are heavily concentrated on tourism services, with dining, souvenir sales, and accommodation dominating, lacking diversity and integration. The docks along the Tuojiang River in Fenghuang Ancient Town, originally part of residents' daily life, are now fully occupied by bars and restaurants. In terms of business content, tourism products are highly homogenized. Products sold in shops in different ancient towns such as Fenghuang Ancient Town, Furong Town, and Dehang Miao Village overlap heavily, while products reflecting local characteristics are hard to find.

### 3.4 Scarce Spatial Experience and Interactive Scenes

Existing public spaces are primarily oriented toward static sightseeing, lacking multi-sensory experiences and interactive scenes. In spatial experience, design emphasizes visual appeal while neglecting auditory, tactile, and other sensory elements. Visitor experience remains shallow, making it difficult to form a deep connection with the space and culture. Basic facilities such as rest areas and accessible pathways are insufficient, leaving visitors with nowhere to sit when tired and making movement difficult for the elderly. In terms of interactive scenes, public spaces in ancient towns are particularly quiet at night. Apart from bar streets, most ancient towns lack activities that visitors can participate in after dark.

## 4. Analysis of the Causes of Existing Problems in Public Spaces

The problems in public spaces of ancient towns in Western Hunan are not caused by a single factor but result from the interaction of multiple forces. Beneath the surface of these problems lie deviations in spatial renewal models, the absence of cultural translation mechanisms, mismatches between functional planning and supply-demand, and insufficient support for interactive spaces.

### 4.1 Deviation in Spatial Renewal Models

The destruction of spatial character and texture in ancient towns stems from value biases and methodological errors in spatial renewal models over time. First, the commercial-oriented

renewal concept that prioritizes development over protection is the core driver of spatial texture damage. Most ancient towns take tourism revenue as the primary goal of spatial renewal, treating public spaces as carriers of tourism consumption rather than cultural places that embody regional history and community life. Second, standardized and homogenized renewal approaches overlook the regional diversity of Western Hunan. Copying renewal models and architectural forms from ancient towns in plain areas has led to issues such as the weakening of indigenous architectural languages. Third, fragmented renewal implementation mechanisms have exacerbated spatial disorder. Spatial renewal in ancient towns in Western Hunan generally lacks systematic and comprehensive spatial character control systems. There are no strict conservation guidelines for street scale, architectural form, materials, and techniques, nor is there a full-process renewal control mechanism.

#### **4.2 Absence of Cultural Translation Mechanisms**

The core issues of superficial cultural expression and fragmented narrative systems essentially stem from the complete absence of cultural translation mechanisms in the construction of public spaces in ancient towns. First, shallow understanding of regional cultural genes is the root cause of distorted cultural symbol expression. During development, design entities only grasp regional culture at the level of surface symbols, failing to understand the deep connections between cultural genes and the life and spatial forms of ancient towns [8]. Second, insufficient spatial translation capacity for living culture leads to a disconnect between cultural heritage and spatial carriers. Living cultures in Western Hunan, such as intangible cultural heritage skills, folk rituals, and folk arts, require not static display spaces but spaces for daily use. Currently, cultural construction in most ancient towns fails to reserve scenes and carriers for intangible cultural heritage transmission, folk practice, and cultural co-creation within daily public spaces such as streets and squares. Third, the lack of systematic spatial narrative planning has resulted in fragmented cultural narratives. Ancient towns in Western Hunan generally lack complete and distinctive narrative systems, primarily because their unique historical development contexts have not been sorted out,

storylines connecting cultural nodes have not been established, and cultural narratives have not been integrated into public spaces such as streets, squares, and waterfront areas.

#### **4.3 Mismatch between Functional Planning and Supply-Demand**

The problems of imbalanced spatial functions and singular business structures essentially stem from misjudgment and mismatch of supply-demand relationships, failing to achieve localized and diversified adaptation of functions and business formats. First, homogenized business planning thinking has led to a lack of localized specialty business formats [9]. Currently, business planning in most ancient towns in Western Hunan falls into the habitual thinking of replication and pasting, introducing formats that yield quick returns while lacking cultivation and support for intangible cultural heritage workshops, folk experience halls, local craft shops, and local lifestyle service formats that reflect the characteristics of Western Hunan. Second, the rigid thinking in spatial design limits the composite use of public spaces. Public spaces in ancient towns in Western Hunan generally suffer from single and fixed functional positioning. Street spaces lack flexible spaces for staying, resting, and socializing.

#### **4.4 Insufficient Support for Interactive Spaces**

Current spatial construction models remain oriented toward static landscapes, lacking systematic construction of interactivity and participation, resulting in public spaces that cannot support high-quality interactive experiences. First, design logic remains trapped in visual sightseeing paths rather than shifting toward experience creation. The design of public spaces in ancient towns in Western Hunan fundamentally prioritizes the creation of visual focal points and social media hotspots, rather than centering on human experience, participation, and interaction. It neglects the need to reserve spaces for multi-sensory immersive experiences, cultural participation behaviors, and community interaction scenes. Second, the absence of comprehensive scene creation leads to a systematic lack of interactive experiences. Full consideration of all-age and multi-dimensional needs is lacking, and rest facilities, accessible systems, and interactive recreational facilities are not improved according

to the behavioral characteristics of different groups. Moreover, insufficient investment in the functional configuration of nighttime public spaces results in severely limited spatial vitality and experience continuity in ancient towns after dark.

## 5. Revitalization Design of Public Spaces in Ancient Towns in Western Hunan

### 5.1 Mountain-Adaptive Micro-Renewal

With minimal intervention and maximum preservation as core principles, micro-renewal design methods [10] are used to restore and continue the original spatial texture and regional character of ancient towns in Western Hunan, avoiding irreversible damage caused by large-scale demolition and construction.

#### (1) Texture Restoration: Graded Control and Gradual Repair

A graded protection system for street texture is established based on historical value and current integrity [11]. Ancient town streets are divided into three types: core historical streets, secondary living streets, and newly developed streets. The original texture of core historical streets is protected, with damaged steps and narrow alleys repaired through small-scale interventions that activate surrounding spaces. Secondary living streets allow moderate renewal, but new construction must engage in dialogue with the surrounding texture to avoid breaks. Newly developed streets can introduce modern functions, but their overall character should harmonize with the ancient town, continuing the visual continuity of the mountain settlement.

#### (2) Spatial Character Control: Localized Translation of Regional Language

Guidelines for the use of traditional materials and techniques are established, clarifying application standards for indigenous architectural languages and restricting the misuse of modern materials. Existing buildings that clash with the character are corrected through facade renovation, volume reduction, material replacement, and other methods to eliminate visual fragmentation. Contemporary translation methods for regional architectural language are refined. New public buildings can draw from local architectural forms such as stilted houses, transforming traditional architectural frameworks into modern tectonic expressions.

### 5.2 Narrative Translation of Ethnic Cultural Genes

With cultural gene decoding and spatial narrative translation as core pathways, the diverse cultural essence of Western Hunan is systematically transformed into a perceptible, understandable, and participatory spatial narrative system, addressing the core challenges of superficial cultural expression and fragmented narrative chains.

#### (1) Gene Decoding: Building a Layered Cultural Narrative Framework

Gene decoding serves as the foundation for spatial narrative and requires systematic organization and layered construction. First, a regional cultural gene bank is established, categorizing and documenting four dimensions: beliefs and worship, festivals and rituals, daily life, and historical memory. Second, key narrative nodes are identified, incorporating material carriers such as ancestral halls, stages, and ancient docks into the system and clarifying their functional roles within the narrative [12]. Third, a layered narrative framework is constructed, with the ancient town as a unified text defining core cultural themes, narrative chapters focusing on different cultural dimensions along the route, and specific narrative nodes within each chapter, creating a progressive narrative experience.

#### (2) Spatial Translation: Node Connection and Scene Creation

Based on the layered narrative framework, cultural elements are grounded in space using cultural nodes as cores and streets as connectors [13]. Historical spaces such as ancestral halls, stages, and ancient docks are developed as core narrative nodes, with their cultural connotations and historical stories deeply explored. Scattered nodes are connected into coherent tour routes through signage systems, pavement patterns, landscape features, lighting cues, and other media, guiding visitors to perceive the ancient town's cultural context. Meanwhile, immersive cultural scenes such as folk life and commercial activities are embedded in public spaces such as streets, squares, and waterfront areas, transforming abstract cultural genes into tangible, experiential spatial forms and avoiding isolated scenes.

### 5.3 Host-Guest Shared Functional Integration

#### (1) Business Cultivation: Localized Characteristics and Differentiated Development

A diversified business system with local characteristics is established based on the cultural attributes of each ancient town [14]. First, an access and support mechanism for specialty businesses is established, encouraging businesses with local characteristics, prohibiting those that damage spatial character and culture, and providing supportive policies for specialty businesses. Second, a differentiated business pattern is formed, with different business mixes in different sections according to their spatial attributes and functional positioning. Third, composite business models such as front-shop-back-workshop and lower-shop-upper-residence are encouraged to maintain continuity in residents' daily lives.

#### (2) Functional Restructuring: Layered Integration and Priority on Livelihood

The core of functional restructuring is rebalancing tourist needs and resident needs. First, a layered functional supply system is established, identifying common needs and differing needs of the two groups. Common needs such as rest, social interaction, and dining are met through shared spaces, while differing needs are coordinated through functional zoning or time separation. Second, livelihood takes priority as a bottom-line guarantee, ensuring that residents' basic living needs are not squeezed out through layered functional design.

### 5.4 Multi-Sensory Experience and Interaction

#### (1) Multi-Sensory Creation: Comprehensive Experience beyond Vision

The richness of spatial experience depends on the multi-dimensional nature of sensory participation. First, soundscapes are restored and designed, with sound elements matching the cultural attributes of spaces introduced at key nodes. Second, tactile experiences are introduced, with touchable material samples set up in traditional buildings such as stilted houses. Third, olfactory and gustatory experiences are awakened through green configuration and business guidance to create olfactory landscapes.

#### (2) Interactive Scenes: Full-Time and All-Age Coverage

The design of interactive scenes considers the needs of different groups and the maintenance of vitality across different time periods, establishing a full-time, all-age interactive experience system. First, participatory interactive scenes are designed, creating spatial scenarios that support visitor participation and

host-guest interaction. Second, full-time vitality is maintained, addressing the imbalance between daytime focus and nighttime neglect, establishing a vitality system that connects day and night. Third, all-age adaptive design is implemented, improving rest facilities, accessible pathways, slow-traffic trails, and other health activity areas and social spaces suitable for the elderly. Interactive play facilities are added for families with children, and educational and entertaining cultural experience programs are designed.

### 6. Conclusion

The revitalization of public spaces in ancient towns in Western Hunan is essentially a process of seeking dynamic balance between tradition and modernity, protection and development, and residents and visitors. It requires both gradual restoration of physical space and narrative reconstruction of cultural memory, both composite configuration of functions and business formats and diversified creation of experience scenes. Only by integrating mountain wisdom, cultural genes, livelihood needs, and experiential logic can the public spaces of ancient towns gain new vitality in the wave of cultural and tourism integration, becoming living carriers of ethnic cultural heritage and shared places for residents and visitors.

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