

A New Paradigm for City Image from "Static Symbols" to "Enterable Narratives" under the Perspective of Cultural and Tourism Integration

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Abstract. Under the dual influence of the national cultural-tourism integration strategy and the emerging experience economy, traditional city branding paradigms reliant on landmark architecture and visual symbols are showing their limitations. From a design perspective, this paper proposes a new paradigm shift from "static symbols" to "enterable narratives." By analyzing the fundamental differences between the "viewing" and "entering" modes, we construct a design approach that restructures urban space through a "narrative grammar." This methodology translates urban environments into perceptible, participatory, and resonant three-dimensional storyfields through narrative design. The research aims to provide concrete design strategies and forward-looking insights to facilitate the transition in city image design from "visual communication" to "experience creation."

Keywords: Cultural and Tourism Integration; Enterable Narratives; City Image.

1. Introduction

Under the strategic guidance of "using culture to shape tourism and leveraging tourism to showcase culture," cities are expected to serve as dual carriers of cultural depth and tourism appeal. However, the current construction and dissemination of city images often fall into a state of "refined poverty": meticulously designed landmark buildings, refined slogans, and visual identifiers are ultimately reduced to monotonous "static symbols" through tourists' lenses. This outdated paradigm, centered on "viewing," leads to superficial experiences of "photo-and-leave" tourism and a widespread anxiety of "uniform cities with identical faces." This paper argues that the fundamental predicament stems from a lag in design paradigms—where cities are treated as objects to be beautified rather than subjects for dialogue. In response to this crisis, the paper proposes a paradigm shift at the design level: moving from creating "symbols to be viewed" to designing "enterable narratives." Cities should be envisioned as open, unfinished "story fields," where tourists transform from bystanders into "characters stepping into the story," and cultural memories are instantly activated and continuously reproduced through their embodied experiences.

2. The Predicament of City Image Design: When Cities Become "Exquisite Specimens"

2.1 The Aesthetic Fatigue of the "Static Symbols" Paradigm

In the traditional toolbox of city image design, nothing has been more effective than creating distinctive "static symbols." Whether it's the towering Oriental Pearl Tower or concise city slogans, their design logic essentially extends from visual communication design: pursuing uniqueness, recognizability, and communication efficiency of symbols. These function like exquisite logos printed on a city's business card, attempting to summarize a complex living entity with a single point.

However, this paradigm faces severe challenges in the experience economy era. When all cities compete to create the "tallest," "largest," or "oldest" symbols, the symbols themselves lose their deeper cultural significance in the competition of signifiers. Tourists strike identical poses, leaving highly homogenized images before different landmarks [1]. The city, once a living cultural organism,

becomes simplified and flattened into "exquisite specimens" that can be collected but never truly resonated with.

2.2 The Experiential Divide Under the "Viewing" Mode

Design centered on a "viewing" paradigm presupposes a subject-object dichotomy. Tourists become external gazers, while the city is reduced to a passive exhibit [2]. This relationship creates a profound experiential divide. The core issue lies in the monopoly of narrative control—with city administrators as the sole narrators, presenting a fixed, singular version of the city to tourists. This reduces visitors to passive recipients of information, silent observers in the urban narrative.

This one-way communication model directly results in a flattened experiential dimension, where the body's multisensory engagement is marginalized [3]. Experience becomes compressed into mere visual consumption, while the rich textures, unique scents, ambient sounds, and tactile interactions with physical interfaces—key elements that constitute an authentic "sense of place"—are largely ignored.

Ultimately, this superficial interaction pattern breeds deep emotional detachment. The tourist's "check-in" behavior serves more as social proof of "I have been here" than as a means to establish a genuine connection of "I felt here." Consequently, this paradigm fails to foster true place attachment, causing urban culture to lose its emotional depth and vitality in the rapid consumption of images.

3. Theoretical Evolution and Paradigm Shift: From "Static Symbols" to "Enterable Narratives"

3.1 From "Noun Thinking" to "Verb Thinking"

The "Enterable Narrative" paradigm demands a fundamental shift in design thinking: moving from focusing on urban objects (buildings, logos) as "nouns" to emphasizing urban experiences (exploring, discovering, interacting, co-creating) as "verbs." This means the focus of city image design is no longer isolated symbols, but the entire situation where people encounter the city. The role of the designer consequently shifts from visual beautifier to story architect and experience director. Their core task is to construct an enticing and guiding "story field," inviting tourists to enter as "characters" and complete unique narratives through their own actions and perceptions.

3.2 The Design Connotation of "Enterable Narratives"

Within the context of design studies, "Enterable Narratives" encompass three progressively deepening connotations:

3.2.1 Spatial Narrativization

Urban space is treated as a carrier for narratives. A street, an old door, or a cart track are no longer mere physical presences but are designed as "narrative nodes" that carry stories [4]. The entire city becomes a "three-dimensional script" that can be read and wandered through.

3.2.2 Narrative Interactivity

The storyline is not closed but is a "script framework" with multiple possibilities. Through a series of interactive designs involving physical interfaces, digital media, and social activities, tourists gain the "power of choice" to influence the narrative direction, transforming from story listeners to story drivers.

3.2.3 Emotionalization of Interaction

The ultimate goal of design is to evoke emotional resonance and memory formation through interaction. When a tourist's effort solves a historical puzzle, or their choice alters the plot's direction, they form a deep emotional connection with the place. This experience thereby becomes a valuable fragment where personal memory and urban collective memory blend.

4. The Three-Layer Framework for Constructing Urban "Enterable Narratives"

4.1 Core Layer: Narrative Hearth – From Cultural Resources to Story Material

This is the starting point of design, involving the narrative excavation of a city's cultural DNA. The design task is not to compile historical chronologies or heritage inventories, but rather, like a screenwriter, to seek the "human spark" that evokes empathy[5]. It requires abandoning generalized labels for history and culture (such as "ancient capital" or "industrial hub") and instead conducting an anthropological close-up scan. Designers must identify those "touchpoints" that can instantly connect with contemporary emotions: an object, a minor incident, a personal fate unrecorded in official history. For example, instead of narrating a "glorious history of trade," one might design "the bumpy journey of a specific porcelain piece on a merchant ship"; instead of showcasing "profound folk customs," the focus could be on "the family blessings carried by the bride's accessories in a wedding." This translation transforms culture from knowledge into plot, and from concept into a perceptible story thread.

4.2 Middle Layer: Narrative Interface – From Story to Interactive Touchpoints

This is the core embodiment of design creativity, constructing interactive interfaces that connect tourists with the story. These can be material, digital, or social.

4.2.1 Physical Interface Design: Making Space a Readable Script

In the 1905 Cultural and Creative Park, the rusted gantry crane is no longer an exhibit for passive viewing. Through design, it is transformed into an interactive, check-in-worthy landscape installation. Through the design of materials, movement paths, and lighting environments, the heaviness of history is translated into a physical experience full of exploratory fun.

4.2.2 Digital Interface Design: Superimposing Narrative Layers onto Reality

Utilizing technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR), Location-Based Services (LBS), and spatial audio, a layer of storied "digital phantoms" is overlaid onto the authentic urban fabric. Through smart devices, visitors can summon the apparitions of vanished buildings, witness virtual reenactments of historical scenes, or listen to "spatial monologues" in specific corners. The digital interface shatters the unidirectionality of time, creating a fantastical experience where reality and memory intertwine, thereby transforming the city into a vast, blended-reality narrative stage.

4.2.3 Social Interface Design: Living Narrative with People as Nodes

By integrating local residents, merchants, and professional actors into the narrative network, and through meticulously designed immersive theater, live-action role-playing games, or thematic events, public spaces are transformed into a theater without a fixed stage. Visitors may unexpectedly encounter "historical figures" on a street corner or unlock hidden plotlines by completing specific "tasks" within a shop. Social interaction itself becomes the most dynamic and unpredictable narrative driver, ensuring that each experience becomes a unique "live version."

4.3 Manifestation Layer: Story Life – From Interactive Experience to Emotional Memory

This is the final outcome of the design – the complete experience and emotional sedimentation acquired by the tourist after a series of interactions. At this layer, the tourist completes the identity metamorphosis from "visitor" to "character," and then to "storyteller."

4.3.1 Experience Flow Design: Shaping the Character Arc

Design a complete experience cycle of "Role Summoning – Mission Challenge – Achievement Feedback." Endow the tourist with a simple "role" (e.g., explorer, inheritor, time traveler) and, through a series of rhythmic challenges and explorations, guide them to complete a "character arc"

progressing from "curiosity" to "engagement" and finally to "resonance." The core is to make the tourist feel that their own actions have influenced the narrative process.

4.3.2 Memory Carrier Design: Creating Personalized Narrative Evidence

What the tourist takes away should not be mass-produced souvenirs, but unique "narrative evidence" of their participation and creation. This could be the rubbing of an ancient brick pattern they made by hand, an exclusive historical archive they obtained by solving a puzzle, or the unique story ending led to by their personal choices. This evidence is a materialized bond connecting the tourist to the local emotion and also social currency they are willing to share.

Through the coordinated operation of this three-layer architecture, city image design completes a fundamental leap from providing "objects to view" to creating "life experiences." The city is no longer a silent backdrop but becomes a "living story field" that can converse with everyone and be personally written by them.

5. Future Design: Towards a "Trans-domain Storyfield"

Empowered by evolving technologies, the "Enterable Narrative" paradigm will undergo revolutionary expansion in its boundaries and depth. The design of city image will no longer be confined to the intensive cultivation of physical space but will advance towards a "trans-domain storyfield" characterized by human-machine interaction and virtual-physical symbiosis.

5.1 Digital Twins and Metaverse Narratives: From Restoration to Creation

Future cities will possess high-fidelity "digital twins," but this extends far beyond static archival backups to become an enterable, editable narrative platform [6]. Here, designers can break the shackles of linear time and creatively reassemble fragments from different historical periods in virtual space. The virtual avatars of tourists can stroll through a Song Dynasty marketplace or witness the bustling port during the Industrial Revolution's peak. This design pushes history from "restoration" to "creation," providing an infinite and malleable stage for cultural narratives.

5.2 AI as a Personalized Narrative Engine: From Uniformity to Individualized Experiences

Artificial intelligence will serve as a core "narrative collaborator." Through deep learning of users' interest preferences and behavioral data, AI can generate and recommend unique tour routes and storylines in real-time. For an architecture enthusiast, it might reveal a hidden "Art Deco architecture exploration path"; for a culinary researcher, it could weave a story about "the origins of local snacks." At this stage, the core of design shifts from "creating one perfect story" to "designing a set of generative rules and algorithms capable of birthing countless stories," truly achieving personalized narratives of "one person, one scene."

5.3 Sustainable Narrative Ecosystem Design: From Consumption to Co-creation and Symbiosis

Future urban narratives will place greater emphasis on building a sustainable, organic narrative ecosystem. Local residents will be deeply integrated as "resident storytellers" and "living inheritors," with their daily lives serving as the most valuable narrative material. Simultaneously, tourist UGC (such as videos, guides, and comments) will be captured, analyzed, and fed back into the core narrative database by intelligent systems, becoming nutrients that foster the growth of new stories. This system enables urban stories to continuously self-renew and evolve, forming a co-creative cycle maintained by designers, residents, and tourists alike, living on and propagating.

6. Summary

This paper critiques the limitations of the "static symbols" paradigm in city image design and proposes the "enterable narrative" as a new approach. This represents a fundamental shift from visual

design to experiential systems, requiring designers to view cities not as objects to be beautified, but as "story worlds" to be constructed. Through the framework of "Cultural Genes - Narrative Interface - Immersive Experience," we demonstrate how to transform cultural resources into participatory narratives. This approach not only advances cultural-tourism integration but also enables creative urban cultural regeneration.

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