

# New-type urbanization and the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns

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**Abstract:** Urban aesthetics is an interdisciplinary science between aesthetics and urban studies. Its emergence is both the result of aesthetics transitioning from theory to practice and the inevitable reflection in the field of aesthetic research of the modern city's development trend from a purely functional city to a composite aesthetic city. The research on the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns integrates the theoretical achievements of Chinese and Western urban aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, and ecological aesthetics. It meets the needs of coordinated development among various types of cities in China, follows the strategic layout of new concepts and trends in modern urban development regarding ecological and humanistic environments, and widely connects with the specific aspects of local aesthetic experience in Jiangnan's characteristic cities, especially small towns (mainly in northern Zhejiang and southern Jiangsu), including nature, history, human culture, and individuality. This research provides theoretical positioning and practical criticism of the aesthetic character of Jiangnan towns, forms an organic constraint on the economic behavior and legal system of urban construction, and constructs an aesthetic system for Jiangnan towns.

**Keywords:** Urban aesthetics, New-type urbanization, Local aesthetic experience, Aesthetics of Jiangnan towns

## 1. Introduction

Western urban aesthetics is closely related to the long history of industrialization, modernization, and urban sociology in the modern West. Allen Carlson from Canada, Yrjö Sepänmaa from Finland, and Arnold Berleant from the United States have respectively established the principles of urban aesthetics that prioritize nature over the artificial, and emphasize the coordinated development of human settlements with nature and the environment, based on their theories and practices of environmental esthetics for human habitation, and a critique of anthropocentrism. These principles have become the paradigm of modern Western urban aesthetics. Unlike the interdisciplinary research of general urban sociology in the social sciences, Western urban aesthetics focuses on making positive aesthetic judgments about existing cities and, based on this, criticizing the negative aesthetic aspects of existing cities. This provides a theoretical basis for criticizing purely functional cities and promotes the development of composite aesthetic cities, achieving a moderate coordination between urban functions and aesthetics.

## 2. Theoretical foundations: perspectives of Marx and Bourdieu

The literary and artistic sociology of Marx and the cultural sociology of Bourdieu also have profound guiding significance for modern urban aesthetics. Marx situates the creation of literature and art within the contradictory relationship between production and consumption, demonstrating that cultural behaviors in human society have their own developmental laws that are not subject to the will of any individual or government. Bourdieu is particularly concerned with the social conditions and environmental factors for the creation of cultural products. He believes that "aesthetic habitus" in the "aesthetic field" is the interplay between the opportunities and constraints of the objective environment and the tendencies and choices of the actors. The modern urban aesthetic system is a collection of material and spiritual symbols. Its influence and guidance on the aesthetic habits of social individuals and groups, as carriers of the overall social aesthetic taste, are important factors in the formation of aesthetic habits. The formation of urban aesthetic habits is

mainly undertaken by the aesthetic character of the city's external architecture and natural landscape, and the cultivation and inheritance of the city's internal humanistic traditions [1]. Many famous cities in modern Europe fully reflect the functional interaction between the promotion of an aesthetic habit by a specific cultural field and the maintenance of that cultural field by the aesthetic habit. The organic connection between Western urban aesthetics and urban construction constitutes the systematic, comprehensive, and critical nature of urban aesthetics, making it an important modern social science discipline that not only bears the heavy responsibility of urban cultural heritage but also makes practical contributions to urban construction.

### **3. The development of urban aesthetics in China**

China's ecological aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, and urban aesthetics began in the 1990s. Though they have a short history, they are embedded in a rich and complex reality and a serious and sharp policy context. The economic development and material accumulation of the past 30 years of reform and opening up have provided an unprecedented opportunity for China's urbanization process. At the same time, they have brought an unprecedented impact on the material and intangible cultural ecology of individual regions, showing a complex situation where destruction and construction go hand in hand and coexist with both praise and criticism. This has posed a major challenge to China's current economic and ecological construction. The report of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China put forward the ecological civilization construction program for a beautiful China, emphasizing the need to pay attention to the ecological model and coordinated development between modernization and culture, and to maintain an appropriate cultural and ecological model between urban functions and aesthetics. Since the 12th National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, the central government has formulated the National New-type Urbanization Plan (2014-2020). Chapter 12, "Promoting the Development of Various Types of Cities," makes a decision to focus on the development of small towns while paying attention to central cities and medium and small cities. Chapter 18, "Promoting New-type Urban Construction," makes a decision to accelerate the construction of green and humanistic cities. The two have thus become the guiding documents for China's current urban aesthetics as well as environmental and ecological aesthetics.

### **4. The theory and practice of the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns**

Since the 1990s, scholars such as Lu Shu yuan, Zeng Fan ren, Chen Wang Heng, Liu Shilin, Cheng Xiang Zhan, Wang Nu, and Hu Zhihong have pioneered the interconnections between ecological aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, cultural symbols, public spaces, and everyday life in the new era of China. However, when it comes to urban aesthetics, especially the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns, the topics are scattered across local issues such as cultural heritage, landscape style, garden construction, urban color, and tourism layout. In terms of the comprehensiveness and systematic nature of theory, as well as the historical and realistic nature of criticism, these studies have not yet kept pace with Western urban aesthetics. Therefore, closely integrating with the general reality of Chinese cities and starting from regional characteristic towns, the construction of the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns has become a typical issue that needs to be prioritized in Zhejiang's new-type urbanization and urban aesthetics. It thus provides an example for China's new-type urbanization construction.

### **5. Aesthetic characteristics of Jiangnan towns**

As a renowned cluster of Wu and Yue cultural tourism towns, Jiangnan towns are scattered across the Hang Jia hu Plain, Ningbo-Shaoxing Plain, Tai hu Plain, and Yangtze River Delta Plain in northern Zhejiang and southern Jiangsu. This includes regions such as Ningbo, Shaoxing, Hangzhou, Jiaxing, Huzhou, Suzhou, and Shanghai. These towns encompass highly integrated regional central cities, distinctive medium and small-sized cities, and widely recognized small towns. Amidst the current trend in urban construction that often prioritizes the "modern," "international," and "omni-competent" at the expense of aesthetic heritage, leading to increasing homogenization of urban aesthetic styles, Jiangnan towns stand out. They exemplify the extensive connections between nature and human settlements, tradition and modernity, public spirit and individual taste, urban character and mass aesthetics, large cities and small

towns, and urban and rural areas. This makes them highly representative and relevant as subjects for contemporary Chinese urban aesthetics research [2]. Therefore, the study of urban aesthetics using Jiangnan towns as a case of characteristic towns is of great practical significance not only for the development of Jiangnan towns but also for China's new-type urbanization construction.

## 6. The practical significance of the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns

The study of the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns reinforces the urban aesthetics position that completely discards the anthropocentrism of the industrialization period and establishes an environmental aesthetics view that prioritizes nature over the artificial. It allows nature and human culture to occupy the commanding heights of urban life. It requires that the external forms of the city, namely public buildings, residences, neighborhoods, nature, and landscapes, must conform to the aesthetic traditions, aesthetic individuality, and cultural and historical heritage of the main population that is infused into these external forms. This enables the city to maintain the original ecological survival of traditional local aesthetic experience and its modern orientation while keeping sustainable modern development. As a typical example of local aesthetic experience in urban aesthetics, it provides a model for the construction of Chinese urban aesthetics.[3]

## 7. The approach of the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns

The aesthetics of Jiangnan towns follow two specific research approaches: the internal disciplinary approach of integrating urban aesthetics with the concepts of ecological and environmental aesthetics, and the external disciplinary approach of regulating urban economic behavior and urban construction regulations through urban aesthetics.

The internal disciplinary approach integrates urban aesthetics with the concepts of ecological and environmental aesthetics. Aesthetics of nature focuses on the discovery of the aesthetic dimension of nature, with ecological aesthetics as its highest form, emphasizing the aesthetic inspiration of the natural environment to people and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Urban aesthetics focuses on the discovery of the aesthetic dimension of the environment, namely artificial landscapes and the limited nature around the city, emphasizing the aesthetic laws of humanized nature and the harmonious relationship between humans and the environment.[4] Urban aesthetics takes the harmony between humans and nature in ecological aesthetics as its fundamental concept and the harmony between humans and the environment in environmental aesthetics as its specific guide. Based on this, it reflects on the aesthetic misguidance of "picturesque aesthetics" in art philosophy, which has always placed artistic artificiality above nature and has caused the negative aesthetic value that has become a common reality in modern urban aesthetics.[5] This rediscovery of the rich beauty that has been obscured by the one-sided aesthetic deprivation of daily aesthetic habits[6] restores the two-way participatory aesthetics(aesthetic engagement)of humans as part of the ecosystem and with ecology as the highest goal.[7] This has led to the theoretical practice of "anti-design" in urban planning.[8] Insightful urban aesthetics, with its philosophical reflection on the modern urban crisis in theory and specific guidance for urban planning in practice, ultimately brings the city into the aesthetic ecosystem.[9] Therefore, environmental aesthetics concerning the city and ecological aesthetics concerning nature have converged in urban aesthetics. This provides an opportunity to repair the aesthetic sensibilities of the increasingly numb urban residents in modern cities and makes urban aesthetics the core of urban construction.

In terms of external disciplinary thinking, urban aesthetics should regulate urban construction's economic behavior and legal system. As an integrated modern cultural criticism discipline, urban aesthetics covers aesthetics, literary theory, modern and ancient literature, folklore, tourism, landscape design, art history, architecture, and urban studies. This creates internal relationships among humanities and social sciences and external ones between them and urban administration. The extensive connection forms a critical force for urban aesthetics. It leads to the emergence of urban critics, who are independent from market actors(builders), construction actors(planners), and institutional actors(lawmakers). These critics can effectively correct pure market and government actions in urban construction, address lagging urban regulations, and elevate the status and role of critical voices. Thus, they become a dominant force in urban construction.

## 8. Key points of the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns

The signature task of the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns is the positioning of urban aesthetic character. Urban aesthetic character encompasses both the aesthetic style and cultural style of a city. While urban aesthetic style is more often reflected in the iconic or distinctive appearance of a city, urban cultural style integrates the humanistic history and its modern inheritance that permeate the aesthetic style and become the iconic cultural connotations of the city. Special attention should be paid to comparative urban studies. The aesthetic and cultural styles of a city naturally emerge through comparisons with other cities, highlighting differences. In-depth exploration of local aesthetic differences can provide aesthetic standards and theoretical foundations for urban development. The appearance positioning of the aesthetic style of residential houses, landscapes, and nature, the connotation positioning of history, humanistic traditions, and their modern inheritance, and the comparative positioning of the city as a collective body of aesthetic individuality—all three aspects echo each other to form an accurate grasp of the external aesthetic style and internal cultural connotations of urban character.

### 8.1. Key aspects of the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns

The positioning of the aesthetic character of Jiangnan towns hinges on establishing a negative aesthetic cognition of cities. This involves applying theory to practice and navigating the complex interests of municipal, commercial, and architectural sectors, making it a highly sensitive and challenging area. In the past decade around the turn of the 21st century, while Jiangnan urban construction achieved remarkable success, it also had some glaring flaws:

In terms of natural ecology, the Hangzhou Xixi Wetland Plan, including the reconstruction of land in the west of West Lake, relocated the original ecological wetland villages, causing a rift between nature and culture. However, small towns like Wuzhen have preserved their history due to their distance from the central city.

Regarding historical culture, the comprehensive construction of residential areas in the west of Hangzhou cut the historical link between West Lake and Xixi. In contrast, Suzhou's division of old and new urban areas has left ample intact historic districts.

In terms of humanistic style, the large-scale demolition of old streets in Hangzhou's main city and the reconstruction of several Fake ancient streets (fake ancient streets) have disrupted the cultural context of Jiangnan residential aesthetics. Yet, the intact preservation of old streets in Shaoxing's main city creates a stark contrast between classical and modern urban styles.

Negative criticism of urban aesthetic character, combined with its positioning, offers valuable case studies for Chinese urban construction and serves as a reference system for Jiangnan urban aesthetics research.

In the specific study of Jiangnan urban aesthetics, the following aspects should be noted:

### 8.2. Urban aesthetics led by town aesthetics

Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate in economics from the US, believes that China's urbanization, with 400 million rural laborers moving from low-productivity rural areas to high-productivity cities, will not only shape China's future but also significantly boost global development. The 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China advocated new-type urbanization instead of urbanization, highlighting the balance between urban and rural development. The study of Jiangnan urban aesthetics shifts the focus from cities to the highly developed town clusters in Zhejiang and surrounding Wu-Yue cultural areas, providing the best interpretation and direct cases for the central government's new-type urbanization concepts and plans.

### 8.3. Shaping Jiangnan urban aesthetics with integration principles

The Hang-Jia-Hu area of Jiangnan, with its long-standing historical heritage, is a regional political, cultural, religious, economic, and industrial center, boasting world-famous natural landscapes like West Lake, Taihu Lake, and canals. The organic integration of ecology, culture, tradition, modernity, local, and general elements creates a representative urban aesthetic type for the transformation from classical to modern cities in Jiangnan.

#### **8.4. Leading Jiangnan urban aesthetics with comprehensive research**

Jiangnan urban aesthetics conducts in-depth research on nature, history, culture, and individuality within the urban aesthetics framework. It reviews the origins, development, theories, and practices of Western urban aesthetics, explores China's urban aesthetics journey, and delves into the historical construction of Jiangnan towns. The positioning of Jiangnan urban aesthetic character adopts a coordinate system with nature as the soul, history as the thread, culture as the core, and individuality as the reference. The specific content includes research on the natural environment, urban history and stories, folklore and civil society, literature and art, residential and public buildings, urban planning and design, and architecture and landscape.

#### **8.5. Guiding Jiangnan urban aesthetics with local aesthetic experience**

Jiangnan towns have a mature urban-town-village aesthetic system. The aesthetic planning of "small bridges, flowing water, and homes" creates a harmonious living environment. Their profound historical and cultural heritage, graceful water town charm, and rustic Wu-Yue folk customs make them unique worldwide.

#### **8.6. Building the criticism subject of Jiangnan urban aesthetics with local critics**

Local aesthetic experience takes priority in aesthetic narration. Existing urban development departments should respect local urban critics' existence and opinions. They should change the practice of relying solely on external experts in urban planning. They should learn from the lessons of delayed World Heritage applications and the lack of local critics. They should form a four-party urban aesthetics team with local critics as the main body, supplemented by external critics, led by urban authorities, and supported by urban sociologists, economists, and builders. This team should create a virtuous cycle of criticism and planning.

### **9. Innovation of Jiangnan urban aesthetics**

Jiangnan urban aesthetics innovates the traditional urban aesthetics framework. First, urban aesthetics is an interdisciplinary project. The study shows that in contemporary urban construction, the government, humanities scholars, and artists should jointly participate. Second, urban aesthetics emphasizes theory and practical guidance. It can provide guiding opinions for urban construction cases and plans. Third, Jiangnan urban aesthetics uses regional, comprehensive, and comparative research methods. It draws on European experiences to ensure the style's integrity and inheritance. Fourth, it expands the practical orientation and sociological content of aesthetics. It deconstructs the metropolis tendency in urban aesthetics. It retains the beautiful nostalgia of cultural China and integrates the major demands of current social transformation. It innovates the traditional ecological and environmental aesthetics theories.

### **10. Conclusion**

The study of the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns not only provides rich theoretical resources and practical guidance for new-type urbanization construction but also paves new ways for the development of urban aesthetics. Through comprehensive research on the unique nature, history, human culture, and individuality of the Jiangnan region, the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns has successfully integrated ecological aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, and urban aesthetics, offering new perspectives and methods for the development of modern cities. This aesthetic concept not only emphasizes the harmonious coexistence of nature and human culture but also focuses on the inheritance and innovation of local aesthetic experience, providing strong support for urban cultural heritage and sustainable development. The practical significance of the aesthetics of Jiangnan towns lies in its profound impact on urban planning, architectural design, and cultural heritage. It not only provides an example for China's new-type urbanization construction but also contributes valuable experience to global urban aesthetics research.

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