



ART CONTAINER: Exploring Art Event Strategies in Urban Renewal

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Abstract

In the context of current urban development, it is urgent to explore diversified strategies to improve the environmental quality of public space and integrate the functions of cultural and artistic aesthetic education. Based on “Event Philosophy” and “Urban Acupuncture” theory, and with Liotard’s “Small Narrative” as a reference, this paper discusses the unique role of art events in urban renewal and highlights the importance in the revival of public space, the improvement of the human environment and the stimulation of social participation. the ART CONTAINER team’s practice of art events in fourth-tier cities was studied through case analysis. The study found that art events promoted urban renewal by focusing on locality, participation, and immediacy, and they built a diversified cultural space. Based on the research results, strategies such as cultural continuity innovation, narrative local brand, diffuse cultural market, integration of old and new skills, and global participation cultural dynamics are further proposed to inject more lasting cultural vitality and far-reaching aesthetic education influence into urban renewal.

Keywords: Urban Renewal; Art Events; Social Aesthetic Education; Cultural Industry

1. Introduction

Urban renewal, as a global redevelopment strategy, originated from the industrial revival of Western cities and has gradually gained worldwide popularity with the advancement of different urbanization stages (Lin Lu, Qianxue Li, 2023). It now involves physical space transformation and significant changes in social culture, economic development, and governance. In China, urban renewal has rapidly evolved, focusing on improving public spaces and integrating social and aesthetic education, necessitating exploring various renewal strategies. As an innovative means of urban renewal, art events show their unique value. With the power of art, urban space can be activated based on low cost and high efficiency, promoting community interaction and cultural inheritance. This paper focuses on the application of art events in urban renewal, especially the art practice of the ART CONTAINER team. It discusses how it promotes local culture and community renewal through art events to improve the cultural taste of urban space and residents’ quality of life.

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2. Definition and Global Practice of Art Events in Urban Renewal

2.1 What Are Art Events

Since the 1970s and 1980s, “event” has entered the field of philosophers’ research and gradually separated from the philosophical concept of “thing,” which has the dual meaning of “material” and “event,” and since then has become an important concept in philosophical and sociological research (Jiang Lan, 2020). Its ideological origin can be traced back to A. N. Whitehead’s critique of static entities in *Process and Reality* (Cambridge University Press, 1929) emphasized that reality is an interconnected network of dynamic events, and its essence is a creative process of continuous generation rather than a fixed entity that exists in isolation (Whitehead, 1929). As a dynamic process, events can be unexpected and closely related to behavior. Their essence lies in breaking the established order and reconstructing reality. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion pointed out that events, as distinct from predictable objective phenomena, derive their abruptness from unforeseen origins (Marion, Jean-Luc, 2003); Alain Badiou elevates it to the logical level, emphasizing events as “singularities” that open new possibilities through the intervention of the subject (Xuanyang Gao, 2014). The sociological framework of events constructed by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* reveals that events are constrained by structure, situation, and actor. At the same time, there is the dialectic of reconstructing society (Marx, 1852). The simultaneous tussle between structure, situation, and actor makes events fall into a strange pattern, full of paradoxes, and the tension between the basic concepts of structure and action in sociology is deeply rooted (Xing Ying, 2017). This provides a theoretical basis for understanding artistic events: events are products of social structures and mediums transforming reality.

In the context of urban renewal, art events broadly refer to urban practices with artistic attributes, covering both emergent and planning dimensions. Lingling Li et al. (2018) defined it as a “large-scale urban event with cultural and artistic activities as the core” (Lingling Li, Yingting Wu, 2018), Lu Wang et al. (2019) emphasized its cultural and creative attributes, and Wenting Wu (2020) highlighted its organizational and planning (Wenting Wu, 2020).

The “art event” discussed in this paper is mainly based on the context of contemporary art, rather than the traditional sense of art and cultural activities. It utilizes Marx’s sociological framework of structure, situation, and actor to define art events as those that reveal the structure of artworks, emerge within specific artistic contexts, and engage multiple participants in a mass-oriented dissemination and cultural acquisition (Sewell, 2005). Art events should focus on the field of contemporary art. Compared with the existing art field, art events are unique and beyond what has happened and can be made possible. They start a new series, which is not a simple repetition, so the whole art event can also be regarded as a contemporary art creation with event characteristics. Contemporary art events are significant in art, exemplified by the 15th Documenta Kassel, a leading contemporary art exhibition. These events, characterized by their temporal nature and public engagement, aim to foster dialogue and cooperation and address social issues while spreading artistic emotions. They often integrate various art disciplines with social, political, and cultural commentary, focusing on current issues and contributing to the evolution of the art scene.

From the perspective of contemporary art history, its context can be traced back to the anti-traditional practice of Dada in the early 20th century. In the 1960s, Allan Kaprow’s *Happenings* and George Maciunas’ *Fluxus* reinforced the immediacy and non-replicability of art (Kaprow, 1966). Higgins Meanwhile, Josef Scharl’s conceptual art and land art were practiced by Robert Smithson (Lippard, 1973). Kastner & Wallis (1998). At the end of the 20th century, Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), reconstructed art as a platform for social relationship production. Brian Massumi further proposed the concept of *Occurrent Arts*, emphasizing the fluidity and non-linear characteristics of events (Massumi, 2011). The social participatory art explored by Chinese scholars Yanhua Zhou and Meiqin Wang (2021) in *Art in Action* also

falls into this category of practice.

2.2 Multiple Dimensions of Art Events in Urban Renewal

2.2.1 Structural Dimensions

The structural dimension primarily concerns the positioning and function of art events within the established social structures, cultural frameworks, and spatial systems. Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) introduced the concept of *longue durée*, emphasizing that cities, as complex socio-historical networks, undergo renewal processes that are shaped and constrained by deep structures such as power relations, economic models, and cultural traditions (Braudel, 1958). While the *longue durée* theory reveals the stability of these underlying structures, critical constructivism in cultural studies offers a possible path for transformation within these constraints. Professor Yong Xiang of the Institute for Cultural Industries at Peking University, in his work *Interpretation, Criticism, and Constructivism: An Explanation of the Paradigmatic Standpoint in Chinese Cultural Industry Research*, argues that constructivism in cultural philosophy differentiates itself from structuralism (which tends to be overly static in its systemic relations) and deconstructionism (which excessively dismantles structures). Rooted in the linguistic turn of modern philosophy, constructivism advocates for the formation of social facts based on consensus and shared ideas. Xiang asserts that “the positions of interpretation, construction, and criticism essentially reflect the current paradigmatic tendencies in cultural industry research,” and he believes that “among the different combinations of these three approaches, a paradigm of critical constructivism should be promoted as a primary direction for contemporary cultural industry research.” (Yong Xiang, 2020)

In this structural dimension, the significance of art events aligns with the critical constructivist standpoint that Xiang proposes. Through creative intervention, art events have the potential to reveal, challenge, and reconfigure these deep structures. The structural relationship between art events and urban renewal often manifests in a dual role: on the one hand, art events are embedded within existing institutional frameworks, relying on government policies, economic resources, and cultural networks for support; on the other hand, they also possess a certain degree of deconstructive power, as they reshape traditional urban functions through aesthetic experimentation and cultural innovation. Michel Foucault’s (1926–1984) “spatial power” theory further concretizes this constructivist approach. He emphasizes that space serves as a crucial medium for power operation. By redefining the meaning of urban public spaces, art events can prompt a reorganization of power relations and contribute to structural transformation.

2.2.2 Situation (Scene) Dimension

The situational (or scenographic) dimension emphasizes the generative nature of art events within specific temporal and spatial contexts. William Sewell Jr.’s theory of “event temporality” suggests that events do not occur in isolation but are embedded within particular timeframes and spatial settings, engaging in complex dialogues with them. In the dynamic process of urban renewal, art events often capitalize on the situational characteristics of a given context, using spatial reconfiguration and contextualized narratives to endow urban spaces with new meanings.

This situational dimension can also be further interpreted through Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory. Through immediate interactions, art events construct a particular “sense of place,” which is not merely an experience of a scene’s physical attributes but also a reenactment of historical memory, cultural identity, and community networks. As a result, the scenographic nature of art events is not simply an aesthetic presentation of space but also an active engagement with power, memory, social relationships, and shared values—elements that contribute to shaping and responding to the socio-cultural dynamics of urban renewal. In this way, art events serve as a means of “artistic placemaking” in city transformation.

Furthermore, the situational dimension involves how specific scenes stimulate perception and emotions,

a concept that resonates with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment. He posits that an individual's experience of space is not abstract but constructed through bodily perception. By crafting specific scenographic atmospheres, art events direct the audience's sensory engagement toward dimensions that transcend everyday experience. This, in turn, sparks imagination about future urban spaces' possibilities in the ongoing urban renewal process.

2.2.3 Actor (Participant) Dimension

The actor (participant) dimension emphasizes audiences' active engagement and interaction in artistic events within urban renewal processes, reshaping the traditional relationship between art and spectators and transforming the audience into co-creators of artistic production. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice provides a foundational framework for this analysis, as he argues that actors are not merely passive recipients constrained by structural forces but actively construct new relational networks within a given field through strategic practices. In this context, artistic events function as mediums for individual artistic expression and as collaborative processes involving multiple stakeholders, including the public, curators, policymakers, and local communities. The key aspect of this dimension lies in the cooperation of diverse agents and the distribution of their roles.

Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) expands this understanding by suggesting that social processes are co-constructed by both human and non-human actors. In the context of artistic events, not only are artists and audiences' central actors, but material elements such as venues, installations, and technologies also play indispensable roles. This multi-agent collaboration transforms artistic events into complex "event networks," redefining relationships between actors and reshaping the pathways through which urban renewal is practiced.

From the perspective of Mark Granovetter's "weak tie" theory, artistic events activate weak ties by linking local communities, external resources, and cross-sector actors. This interconnectedness provides new pathways for urban transformation and the restructuring of social relationships, reinforcing the role of artistic events as a dynamic force in shaping urban renewal.

2.3 Global Practice of Art Events in Urban Renewal

Global art events produce a twofold effect: they invigorate the urban cultural economy while highlighting the issue of cultural homogenization. Cities like Paris and Berlin craft their cultural identities through major events such as fashion weeks and film festivals, whereas smaller cities like Documenta Kassel and Lianzhou Photo Exhibition utilize local resources. Paco Barragan notes that while these practices bring short-term economic benefits, they compromise cultural distinctiveness due to the "banalization" trend, creating tension between globalization and localism.

Event-driven logic is reshaping the mechanism of urban attraction generation. From Chongqing Light Rail through the building to Zibo barbecue, and then to Black Myth: In the boom of ancient construction in Shanxi driven by Wukong, urban renewal no longer relies on physical landscape construction, but activates traffic through "media events"—local governments provide policy support (such as the establishment of barbecue lines in Zibo), short video platform algorithms boost topic propagation (# barbecue festival has been played more than 5 billion times), and tourists from events through punch-in and secondary creation. This collaborative model of "policy-technology-participation" elevates seasonal/regional resources such as Harbin Ice and Snow World and Tianshui Malatang into sustainable cultural IP.

China's third- and fourth-tier cities increasingly engage in unique cultural explorations. For instance, Chaoshan folk activities have leveraged TikTok challenges to evolve the Yunshen ceremony into a participatory event. At the same time, Yunnan's Songkran Festival has been broadcast live to create an online carnival community. Nonetheless, this trend can lead to overdevelopment, with some cities hastily creating

low-quality “internet celebrity attractions” to chase short-term data gains, potentially devaluing cultural resources.

Global art events face issues with the inflexible Western biennial model and poor-quality marketing in some Chinese practices. The key contradiction is the disparity between the “flow effect” and “cultural depth.” The solution involves integrating events into the urban landscape and enriching them through local cultural exploration. Moreover, the sustainable development framework is introduced to transform art events from “FMCG hot spots” into long-term cultural engines.

3. ART CONTAINER Case Studies of Art Events

3.1 Philosophy and Methods of ART CONTAINER Team

Since 2010, especially after China released “Several Opinions on Promoting the Integration and Development of Cultural Creativity and Design Services and Related Industries” in 2014, the application of Chinese art events in urban renewal has significantly increased, mainly concentrated in three aspects: College-led, government-led, and social team-led. The ART CONTAINER team, a social initiative, targets small art events in minor cities and rural regions. Their main objective is to merge contemporary art with various domains and formats through events, focusing on crafting spaces for narratives and events that preserve memories.

ART CONTAINER, established in late 2020, draws inspiration from the cargo container system of Shanghai Yangshan Deep Water Port. Its slogan is “To speed up the circulation of art resources.” The team’s event planning is based on three core plans: Moving Art Space Exploration, Customs Generation Plan (Figure 1), and Folk Creative Talent Journey Program, supported by three key theories. These include Jean-Francois Lyotard’s “petit recits” for focusing on local cultural snippets and creating emotional bonds with communities, de Sola Morales’ “urban acupuncture” for activating spaces with minimal intervention and integrating contemporary art with “curation” as a form of critical cultural engagement. Finally, expansion is achieved through the Cultural Fair model.



Figure 1. Customs Generation Plan. Source: made by the author himself.

3.2 Inspiration for ART CONTAINER Events

In the practice of ART CONTAINER’s art events, the actors not only rely on strategic organization and execution but also trigger interactions and ideological shifts among various social groups by deeply

embedding them in social structures and situations. Specifically, events such as *Clothing Spring*, *Seeking Rabbits*, *Searching in Xilin/Tuojiang Mysteries*, and *Stop at Any Stop* can reflect the first is to regain the cultural connection innovation in the custom, the second is to dig the narrative of local brand cultivation on the historical mark, the third is the “Cultural Fair” effect in the emotional memory awakening, the fourth is the mass aesthetic education transmission of the integration of new and old technologies. Fifth, interactive participation in the co-tour plan.

The *Stop at Any Stop* train exhibition has impacted Chongqing’s passenger section activity planning by introducing curatorial concepts. Currently, train carriages are artistically curated during festivals, exceeding initial ideas and demonstrating art events’ structural influence.

Not all ART CONTAINER events proceeded smoothly as planned; many faced complex social and structural challenges during implementation. This dynamic adjustment highlights the appeal of art events. For instance, while the *Loong Retrospective* project was not fully realized, its planning inspired the local cultural tourism department, influencing their future planning for the Nanguan Stone Arch scenic area and expanding its indirect public impact.

The Xin Lin Fu Ying project also clashed with the Zizhong County Cultural and Tourism Bureau’s renovation plans. Despite major differences in the proposed plans, ART CONTAINER’s proposal provided complementary ideas after the Bureau’s implementation, illustrating the unique role of art events in driving social change. The project shifted focus to explore rural grotto landscape paradigms in Sichuan and Chongqing.

ART CONTAINER’s events blend contemporary art with diverse aesthetics, emphasizing process and social integration. Structurally, they embed into local culture, fostering interaction between government, communities, and cultural entities, driving policy changes. Strategically, they adapt to social dynamics, showcasing art’s adaptability. The team, acting as planners and catalysts, guides shift in social perception, making art events a medium for conceptual and structural transformation.

4. Conclusion

In the urban renewal strategy, art events show a unique role of cultural empowerment, which provides a new path for shaping the urban cultural brand, promoting community interaction, and enhancing social aesthetic education. The practice of ART CONTAINER shows that art events are not only the carrier of cultural content but also a way of social intervention embedded in the social structure, adapted to the changes of the situation, and mobilized by multiple actors. Its curatorial logic reshapes local identity through cultural narration, expands social influence through media communication, and generates innovative models with local adaptability in different urban environments.

Combining theory and practice, this study summarizes five strategies: cultural continuity innovation, narrative local brand, diffuse cultural catch-up, integration of old and new skills, and global participatory cultural dynamics. Together, they point to the core values of artistic events in urban renewal, balancing cultural heritage with modern creativity, promoting community engagement in public areas, and influencing policy changes by integrating social structures. These strategies respond to the needs of contemporary urban renewal and provide a practice-oriented theoretical framework for future research.

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