

GRAPHIC HERITAGE AND PUBLIC IDENTITY: REINTERPRETING THE CULTURAL LEGACY OF LUOYANG ANCIENT CITY GATES THROUGH CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC ART

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the cultural heritage of the ancient city gates of Luoyang, with a particular focus on the application of graphic heritage in public art practices. As emblems of historical defense and cultural identity, Luoyang's gates have undergone transformations in both form and function. This research investigates the graphic heritage of these gates encompassing architectural form, color schemes, and decorative patterns and explores how these elements are utilized in contemporary design and public art to convey cultural value and historical significance. By integrating theories of visual culture, heritage interpretation, and principles of graphic design, the study proposes a series of public art projects inspired by the gates' graphic heritage, aiming to reinterpret their historical meanings. The findings indicate that graphic heritage-based design significantly enhances public engagement with Luoyang's city gate heritage and fosters a stronger sense of cultural identity.

Keywords: Luoyang Ancient City Gates, Graphic Heritage, Public Art Design, Cultural Identity, Heritage Interpretation

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INTRODUCTION

As one of China's ancient capitals, Luoyang has long been a cultural and historical center. The city gates of Luoyang, once serving as part of its defensive architecture, also stand as powerful cultural symbols imbued with deep historical and cultural meaning. These gates function not only as historical defense structures but also as enduring emblems of regional heritage and cultural identity. However, with the rapid advancement of urbanization and modernization, many cultural heritage sites face challenges regarding preservation and contemporary relevance. This study focuses on reinterpreting Luoyang's ancient city gates through public art, using graphic heritage to convey their cultural significance to the public. It explores how graphic elements from the city gates can be effectively integrated into modern design to enhance public understanding and engagement with cultural heritage.

Research Objectives

This research aims to explore how graphic heritage design can be utilized to enhance the dissemination of Luoyang's ancient city gate culture and foster public engagement. By integrating visual culture theory, public art practices, and heritage conservation approaches, this research seeks to analyze the application of graphic heritage in contemporary design and investigate how innovative artistic expressions can elevate public understanding and interaction, thereby promoting the effective preservation and transmission of cultural heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on graphic heritage, visual culture theory and cultural heritage interpretation theory.

In the context of heritage studies, graphic heritage is both a carrier of historical and cultural information and a medium for social group identity and cultural transmission. Its constituent elements, such as colors and proportions, patterns and symbols, not only shape visual aesthetics, but also give architectural heritage a deeper cultural meaning. With development of information technology, graphic heritage, as a cultural symbol, is rapidly spreading around the world through digital media and has become an important tool for cross-cultural communication. Halbwachs (1992), in his theory of social memory, emphasizes that memory exists not only at the individual level, but is also a product of the collective, which is preserved and transmitted through cultural symbols. Graphic heritage, as a carrier of such cultural symbols, can be an important transmission medium of historical memory.

Visual Culture Theory is an interdisciplinary theory that studies visual representations and their social and cultural significance. Mirzoeff (2015) states that visual culture encompasses not only art and images, but also forms such as architecture, cityscape, and digital media, which together shape our cultural perceptions. Visual culture theory emphasizes that images are not just passive symbols, but are important tools for constituting social reality (Mirzoeff, 2015). Visual culture theory focuses on the analysis of visual symbols, paying attention to how cultural symbols communicate messages through elements such as graphics, color, and form. This theory emphasizes that visual elements are not only carriers of cultural expression, but also capable of carrying profound social and historical meanings.

The theory of Heritage Interpretation refers to the process of interpreting, presenting, and communicating the historical value, social significance, and cultural content of cultural heritage in a variety of ways so that the public can understand and experience the heritage (Mersmann et al., 2024). It focuses on how historical and cultural heritage can be interpreted and disseminated through modern methods, especially how to integrate traditional culture with the needs of modern society. Within this theoretical framework, the study argues that traditional cultural elements, especially graphic heritage, can be recreated and communicated for their historical and social value through modern public art design.

Public Art & Contemporary Design

With the advancement of globalization and urbanization, the importance of public art in modern urban space has been increasing. Public art is not only a visual decoration, but also a platform for conveying cultural identity and historical significance. Through public art, traditional culture can gain new life and identity in modern society. As an important part of urban landscape, public art not only carries visual aesthetic value, but also has the functions of cultural communication, historical reproduction and community interaction (Huang, 2005).

Existing studies have shown that the creation of public art increasingly emphasizes public participation and interaction, especially in the transmission and re-creation of cultural heritage, and that public art provides an effective way to enhance people's sense of identity and belonging to culture. In the process of global urbanization, public art not only shapes the cityscape, but also becomes a carrier of history and culture, enriching its expression in modern society (Hu & Chen, 2020). Modern design concepts combine traditional cultural elements with innovative technologies to present diverse and multidimensional art forms, and this development trend is of great significance to the re-creation of the ancient city gate culture in Luoyang.

In modern public art design, traditional architectural graphic symbols are often deconstructed, reorganized, and fused with modern design language to create new visual expressions. For example, Lindy Lee (2017) "The Garden of Cloud and Stone" incorporates elements of Chinese Taoism and Buddhism, but adapts them to the Australian urban environment to emphasize fluidity and evolving cultural identity. The work features a series of stone, bronze and metal elements arranged along Thomas Street, inspired by Feng Shui principles. The work consists of a series of elements: the "Literati Stone", a natural rock similar to that traditionally appreciated by Chinese scholars, a water feature and natural stone seating, and the "Moon Door", a bronze "fling" embedded in the pavement at the intersection of Hay and Thomas Streets. fluttering bronze elements embedded in the pavement at the intersection of Hay and Thomas Streets, and the "Cloud Gate", a series of circular sun-shading sculptures that hang like floating clouds over Thomas Street.

The "Cloud Gate" component hangs from a suspended chain line between the Market City building and a series of support columns across the street and consists of paired layers of domed, perforated white metal disks. The disks softly reflect light at night and filter sunlight during the day, casting circular patterns of shadows on the sidewalk and street below that change with the time of day and season.

In ancient Chinese philosophy, water has great symbolic value because it comes in 3 states—solid, liquid and vapor. Clouds are important because they embody change, transience and impermanence. (Figure 1)



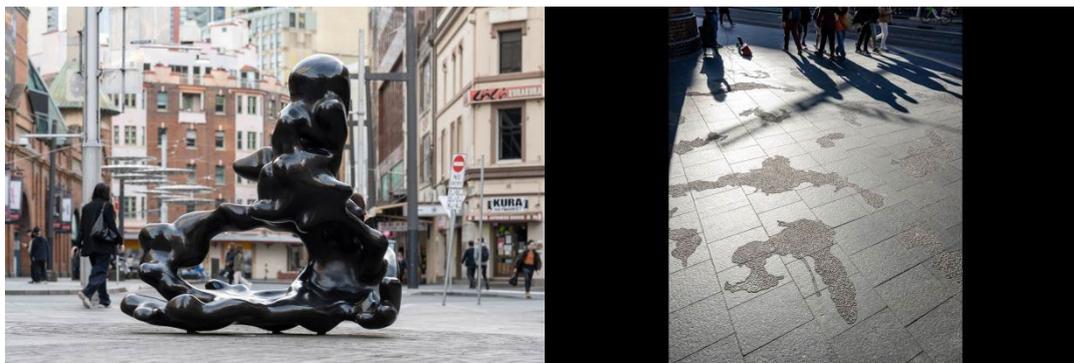


Figure 1 The Garden of Cloud and Stone

Relevant technologies and innovations

In the context of rapid development of digitalization and intelligence, technological innovation has become an important driving force for public art creation (Zheng & An, 2023). Emerging technologies have not only changed the way art is created, but also expanded the boundaries of its application in urban landscapes, cultural heritage expression and social interaction. In particular, technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), generative design, and data-driven art have enabled artists to control visual symbols more precisely, optimize the creative process, and increase the interactivity and economic benefits of their works (Davidson, 2010). In recent years, many public art projects have made cultural heritage more vivid and immersive through the application of these innovative technologies, enhancing the public's sense of experience and participation. For example, projection mapping technology can combine traditional cultural symbols with modern urban architecture, allowing traditional elements to gain new expression in modern environments.

Research Gap Analysis

Most existing studies focus on the historical restoration and archaeological analysis of ancient city gates, with limited exploration into the transformation of graphic heritage in contemporary public art. There is a notable lack of interdisciplinary approaches that interpret the symbolic semantics of architectural elements and translate them into modern visual language. Moreover, the aspect of public co-creation in the reimagining of cultural heritage remains underdeveloped, particularly in Chinese academic discourse. Comparative bibliometric analysis also reveals a significant gap between domestic and international research in terms of theoretical depth and methodological diversity.

Based on the bibliometric analysis of China Knowledge Network (CNKI), the current research on Luoyang city gates shows a significant disciplinary imbalance and technical path dependence. Searching with “Luoyang city gate” as the keyword, only 16 pieces of related literature were obtained, which increased to 242 pieces after expanding to the combination of “Luoyang, city gate” (Search time: 22 February 2025), of which the main themes are distributed on the research of Luoyang city and restoration. The main themes are distributed in the study of Luoyang City and its restoration. The main disciplines are in archaeology, ancient Chinese history, building science and engineering, followed by geography and tourism (Figure 2, Figure 3), and there are almost no disciplines related to art and design.

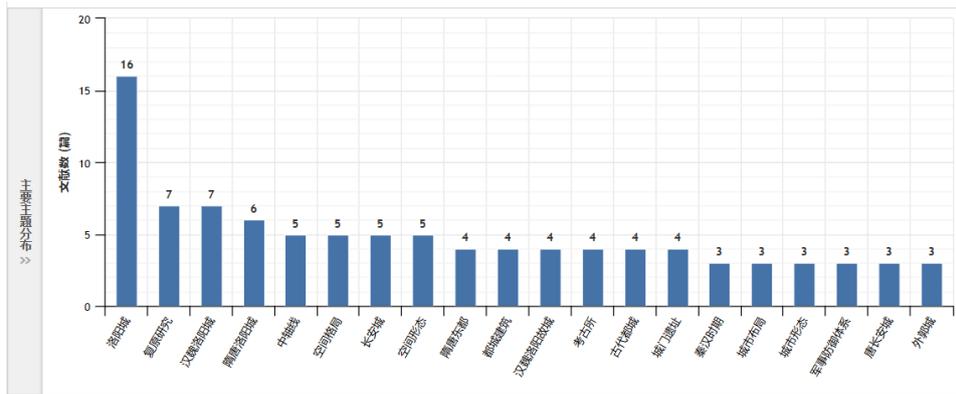


Figure2 Distribution of main themes related to Luoyang city gates

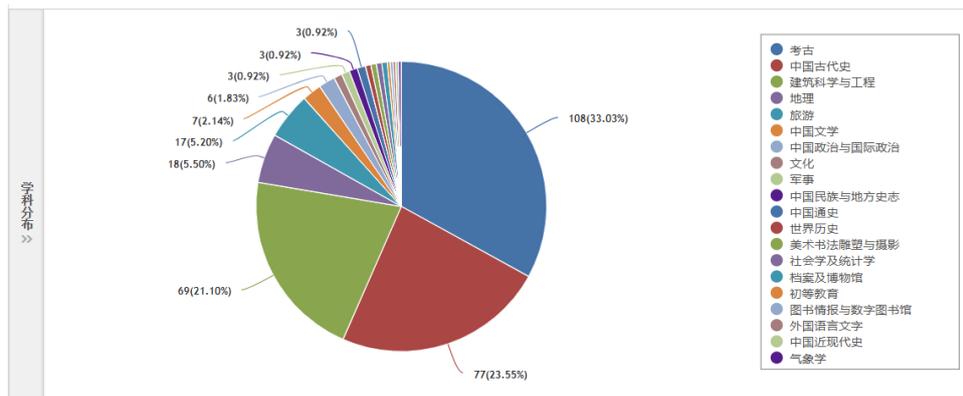


Figure 3 Luoyang, city gate-related disciplines distribution map

Focusing further on the study of Graphic Heritage in Architecture, Graphic Heritage in Architecture includes brick carvings, stone carvings, colorful paintings, architectural symbols, etc., which carry a wealth of cultural information and are widely used in buildings such as city gates, palaces, temples, and so on. However, in addition to concrete patterns and carvings, more abstract visual concepts such as color and proportion, shape and form are also part of the graphic heritage. However, current academic research shows a significant global-local cognitive mismatch.

It can be seen that the abstract dimensions such as color heritage, scale heritage and shape heritage of city gate architecture have long been simplified as “form data” and have not entered the vision of artistic transformation. In order to break through this deadlock, it is necessary to build a three-step model of “symbolic decoding-technical translation-public co-creation” to transform the graphic heritage of traditional city gates into a medium to activate the city's cultural DNA.

The Three-Tier Transformative Model

To facilitate the effective transformation of graphic heritage into public art, this study proposes a “Three-Tier Transformative Model” consisting of:

- 1) Symbol Decoding: Analyzing the historical, cultural, and aesthetic meanings embedded in traditional graphic symbols (e.g., color, proportion, and shape).
- 2) Technological Translation: Utilizing digital tools such as AR/VR and generative software to reconfigure traditional motifs into interactive, immersive art experiences.
- 3) Public Co-Creation: Encouraging public participation in the design process through interactive platforms, fostering a shared sense of ownership and emotional connection to cultural heritage.

This model bridges heritage interpretation, technology, and community engagement.

Related Research

There have been some results of research on the combination of cultural heritage and public art at home and abroad. In China, Sun Mingjun and Sun (2024) believe that integrating the city's historical resources into public art in an artistic way can stimulate people's pride and sense of belonging to the local culture, and promote the formation of cultural identity and cultural self-confidence. These arts skillfully intertwine the city's past, present and future, allowing the uniqueness and difference of regional culture to be preserved (Sun & Sun, 2024). Jin (2024) argues that traditional symbols can be reinterpreted through digital media and dynamic installations so that they carry both historical depth and modern aesthetics. They can be combined through public participation mechanisms, digital platforms and interactions to enhance emotional identity and cultural belonging (Jin, 2024).

Research abroad has generally focused on how to enhance the public communication of cultural heritage through modern art forms and digital technologies, engaging the public in new dialogues about architectural history through the digital interpretation of architectural forms, the visual reconstruction of architectural symbols, and the interactive presentation of cultural heritage. Public art that reinterprets historical symbols challenges social conventions in a meaningful and educational way. By reinterpreting material and symbolic elements, public art interacts with heritage and engages the public in new ways with historical contexts. Interactive public art recontextualizes historical symbols, allowing people to experience and interpret them in different ways in different urban spaces (Kwastek, 2013).

These interactions between public art and viewer also reshape heritage experience, making historical and cultural heritage symbols dynamic and evolving rather than static relics of past.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is guided by two key research questions and corresponding hypotheses:

RQ1: How can graphic heritage design enhance public engagement with Luoyang's ancient city gates?

RQ2: Which visual elements (color, proportion, form) most significantly impact public cultural perception?

H1: Graphic heritage-based public art improves public understanding and appreciation of Luoyang's cultural identity.

H2: Participants with design-related backgrounds respond more positively to visual reinterpretations than general audiences.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative and quantitative strategies to evaluate the aesthetic and cultural identity impacts of graphic heritage-based public art. Data collection included semi-structured expert interviews, questionnaire surveys, and controlled design experiments.

Participants included:

- 1) Experts (N=8) selected via purposive sampling from fields such as public art, architecture, and heritage studies;
- 2) Design professionals and students (N=50) selected through stratified random sampling by discipline and training level;
- 3) General public (N=100) recruited via stratified convenience sampling in areas adjacent to Luoyang's cultural sites.

Qualitative data from expert interviews and open-ended survey responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, with NVivo software employed for systematic coding. Key recurring themes included "aesthetic appreciation," "cultural pride," and "symbolic recognition."

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical techniques (mean, standard deviation, t-test, ANOVA), while qualitative responses were subjected to thematic analysis. This approach

enables a multi-faceted understanding of how different visual variables (color, proportion, form) influence public perception and cultural connection.

Interview protocols included open-ended questions such as: “What visual aspects of the city gates resonate most with you?” and “How do you interpret the cultural meanings of traditional patterns or colors?”

The questionnaire included Likert-scale items assessing participants’ agreement with statements such as: “I feel more connected to Luoyang’s history after viewing these designs.”

RESEARCH RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study, focusing on how visual elements of graphic heritage—such as color, form, and proportion—are reinterpreted in contemporary public art and how these reinterpretations influence public engagement and cultural identity. Drawing upon field data, expert interviews, and representative case studies, the findings are organized thematically to address the research questions and demonstrate the role of graphic heritage in reactivating historical meaning within modern urban contexts.

Present Condition of Luoyang Ancient City Gates

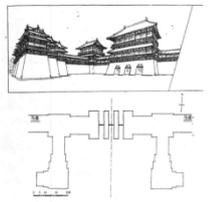
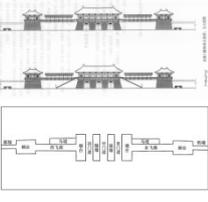
As a former imperial capital, Luoyang holds important archaeological sites linked to its ancient city gates. Recent excavations have led to the discovery and restoration of key gate structures, especially Yingtianmen and Dingdingmen, both known for their well-preserved layouts and historical value.

The Yingtianmen Gate, originally named "Zetianmen," was the principal south gate of the palace city in the Eastern Capital of the Sui and Tang Dynasties. Since the opening of the Yingtianmen Ruins Museum in 2019, the site has become a major cultural venue, hosting national events and symbolizing Luoyang’s historical continuity.

The Dingdingmen Gate, built during the Sui Dynasty, served as the main southern gate of the outer city for over five dynasties and more than 500 years. Dingdingmen Ruins Museum, opened in 2009, uses multimedia and on-site remains to recreate the site’s historic form. It was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2014 as part of Silk Roads project.

The following table summarizes the spatial and architectural features of the two gates.

Table 1 Analysis of representative city gate shapes in Luoyang

City gate name	Study of restored images and floor plans	Current image	Roof form	Gate building form	No. of door ways	Que tower
The Yingtianmen Gate			HIP-ROOFED	Two-story gatehouse	3	Double direction, triple outlet que
The Dingdingmen Gate			HIP-ROOFED	One-story gatehouse	3	Both sides of the que (parallel)

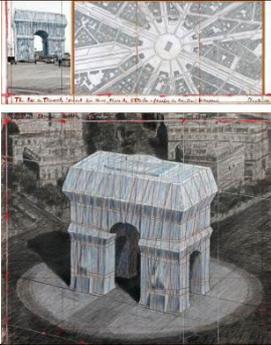
The Cultural Transmission Function of Graphic Heritage in Public Art

In contemporary urban environments, graphic heritage elements have emerged as vital tools in the field of public art for conveying cultural narratives. These visual symbols, often originating from historical architecture, transcend their decorative purposes to serve as carriers of memory, identity, and collective values. When incorporated into public art, such elements undergo transformation being abstracted, restructured, or recomposed to fit new spatial, material, and aesthetic contexts. This process enables them to operate effectively within modern public spaces while maintaining a connection to their historical origins.

When used in large installations or urban settings, graphic heritage bring historical context into everyday life, invite public reflection, and strengthen cultural visibility. Both international and local projects show how redesigning architectural graphics can renew public interest in heritage and reshape how we see familiar places.

The following table presents examples from various regions. These cases show how graphic heritage, when creatively used, can refresh cultural memory, enhance urban identity, and create engaging public spaces. They reflect a shift from preserving heritage as static relics to reimagining it as a living part of modern city life.

Table 2 Summary of Cultural Transmission Applications of Graphic Heritage in Public Art

No.	Project Name	Project Image	Location / Year	Graphic Heritage Element	Transformation Method	Cultural Function
1	China Pavilion, Shanghai Expo		Shanghai, China / 2010	Dougong brackets + Red walls	Structural abstraction, scaled symbolism	Symbol of national identity and continuity of architectural tradition
2	Subway Art: The Four Great Inventions		Beijing, China / 2020s	Ancient scientific icons	Figurative sculpture, vibrant color design	Representation of scientific heritage and civic cultural pride
3	Pole Star by Locky Morris		Letterken ny, Ireland / 2006	Timber columns + railway metaphor	Modular geometry with lighting design	Regional transportation history combined with visual modernity
4	L'Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped		Paris, France / 2021	Monumental architecture	Full-scale architectural wrapping	Emphasizes proportion and renews public perception

No.	Project Name	Project Image	Location / Year	Graphic Heritage Element	Transformation Method	Cultural Function
5	Wrapped Pont Neuf		Paris, France / 1985	Historic bridge structure	Gold fabric covering with rope enclosure	Reflects urban terrain and enhances historic landscape features
6	Wrapped Reichstag		Berlin, Germany / 1995	Parliament facade and towers	Silver fabric + blue rope	Symbol of democracy, transience, and historical reflection

Immersive Narratives of Cultural Heritage through Projection and Digital Technologies

With the rise of digital media, projection and interactive technologies have become important tools in presenting cultural heritage through public art. These technologies free historical content from static forms and create new ways to experience time and space. By using light, motion, and interaction, cultural stories become immersive and emotionally engaging.

Projection mapping brings heritage to life on buildings, while augmented reality (AR) and data visualization offer interactive ways to explore historical content. These methods don't just show the past they reconstruct it in real time, making history more accessible and personal. Viewers are no longer passive; they actively explore and engage with cultural memory.

The table below presents key projects from different regions. These examples show how digital media transforms heritage from something static into an immersive narrative, helping public art connect with audiences in deeper and more meaningful ways.

Table 3 Digitally Enhanced Public Art Projects Conveying Cultural Heritage

No.	Location	Project Name	Project Image	Artistic Format	Heritage Theme and Communicative Role
1	Paris, France	Atelier des Lumières		Immersive digital projection	Bridges time through sensory reinterpretation of Van Gogh, Monet, and other masters
2	Xi'an, China	Digital Forest of Steles		AR interaction	Transforms static epigraphy into an interactive cultural memory platform
3	Berlin, Germany	Berlin Cathedral Light Festival		Architectural façade projection	Narrates Germany's history through light on iconic architecture

Reconstructing Cultural Heritage through Experimental Public Art

Experimental public art redefines how we engage with cultural heritage by introducing movement, mixed media, and conceptual approaches. Unlike traditional monuments, these works use space, illusion, and temporary forms to reshape public understanding of historical memory.

The following table presents diverse methods of heritage reinterpretation from invisibility to mobility, from critique to inclusion showing that experimental art can activate public space and turn heritage into a platform for dialogue and imagination.

Table 4 Experimental Public Art Projects Reconstructing Cultural Heritage

No.	Project Name	Project Image	Location / Year	Experimental Strategy	Heritage Subject / Symbol	Reconstruction Method & Cultural Meaning
1	Makes the Louvre Disappear		Paris, France / 2016	Optical illusion, photographic overlay	Louvre Glass Pyramid	Visually dissolves architectural volume, prompting public reflection on modernist design
2	Floating Museum: River Assembly		Chicago, USA / 2017	Urban mobility, migratory exhibition	River heritage, historical figures	Connects geographic zones via waterborne art, giving mobility to cultural memory
3	Founders		Chicago, USA / 2019	Inflatable sculpture, multiethnic collaboration	Founding myths, diverse identities	Redefines monumentality and provokes civic debate on dominant historical narratives

Across the various case studies, several key trends emerge regarding the reinterpretation of graphic heritage in public art. First, visual elements such as color, proportion, and symbolic motifs are consistently used to evoke emotional resonance and cultural recognition. Second, the integration of digital technologies—including projection mapping, AR, and dynamic installations—transforms heritage from a static object of observation into an immersive and participatory experience. Third, public art projects that embed graphic heritage into urban spaces contribute not only to aesthetic enhancement but also to the co-construction of collective memory and local identity. These findings confirm that graphic heritage is not merely a decorative legacy, but a dynamic cultural resource that, when reinterpreted through art and technology, can revitalize historical narratives and engage contemporary audiences in meaningful ways.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study synthesizes four recurring patterns observed in the case studies of graphic heritage-based public art:

- 1) symbolic and emotional use of visual elements such as color and proportion;
- 2) transformation of static heritage into interactive experiences using digital technology;
- 3) cross-cultural reinterpretation of historical symbols in modern contexts; and
- 4) revitalization of collective memory through urban spatial intervention.

These patterns demonstrate how graphic heritage moves beyond ornamentation to become an active agent in cultural communication, identity construction, and public engagement.

In addressing RQ1, the findings indicate that graphic heritage effectively enhances public engagement when integrated with immersive technologies and urban spatial design. Cases such as the “Digital Forest of Steles” in Xi’an and the “Berlin Light Festival” reveal how reinterpretation of heritage through light, projection, and interactivity transforms viewers from passive observers into active participants in cultural memory. Public co-creation, when incorporated, further fosters emotional connection and collective ownership of cultural identity.

Regarding RQ2, the analysis identifies color, proportion, and architectural form as the most impactful visual elements for evoking cultural recognition. Across both expert and public responses, color emerged as the most emotionally resonant, with red and gold commonly associated with authority and heritage. Form and scale, especially when abstracted and recontextualized, further deepened symbolic interpretation and aesthetic engagement.

Both hypotheses are supported, demonstrating graphic heritage’s role in cultural identity.

These findings illustrate that graphic heritage from Luoyang’s ancient city gates has strong potential for cultural communication and public engagement. As symbols of both history and architecture, the gates hold deep visual and cultural meaning. When their graphic elements such as patterns and proportions are reinterpreted through public art, they become dynamic tools for storytelling in modern cities.

Case studies reveal that these visual elements connect historical identity with contemporary urban spaces. Through abstraction and symbolic design, they preserve authenticity while making heritage more accessible and inspiring public imagination.

Overall, this research underscores that graphic heritage functions not merely as a tool for preservation, but as a catalyst for cultural regeneration. Through the symbolic reinterpretation of visual elements in public art, historical structures (such as the ancient city gates of Luoyang) are transformed into dynamic cultural narratives. These reinterpretations actively engage citizens in co-constructing urban identity and reconnecting with historical memory. By integrating theories of visual culture, public art, and heritage interpretation, this approach provides a robust framework for sustaining and renewing traditional meanings within contemporary urban spaces.

Recommendation

Recommendations for future research include:

- 1) Expanding graphic heritage transformation to other urban heritage types (e.g., temples, walls, bridges).
- 2) Exploring immersive technologies such as AR and VR to develop more interactive and emotionally engaging cultural heritage experiences.

This study provides a conceptual and methodological framework for integrating traditional cultural elements into contemporary urban narratives, offering valuable insights for cultural preservation, design innovation, and participatory heritage strategies.

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