

EMPHASIZE CHARACTERISTICS OF SMALL TOWNS BY STRENGTHENING THE URBAN DESIGN

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Abstract: The traditional character of small towns is fading out with the rapid economic progress. Based on the investigation and research, this paper analyzes the phenomenon and problem found in the landscape environment construction of small towns, emphasizing the important function of urban designing. It also put forward some countermeasures to the urban design of small cities from the aspects of concept, legislation and management.

Keywords: small town, urban design, the character of small towns

The town ecological space is an important part of living space to mankind. With the rapid development of social industrialization and with the great progress of social-economy, the scale of town space is expanding and the town status in national economy is even more important. Beijing is in the speed-up progress of urbanization now. At present there are 212 towns in Beijing, among which there are 142 organizational towns. For the sake of the development of small towns, the Beijing municipal government started a small town construction experimental project since 1995, and in 2001 defined 33 towns that have better conditions as the Central small towns in order to construct emphatically. The 33 central small towns have become the key hinge between the development of the country and the city. The environmental resources are of great significance to the style and the feature of small towns in exploring the unique country culture and district characters.

Since 2003 the author has investigated the history and present conditions of more than 20 central small towns. We found that as Beijing region is in the leading place in Chinese urbanization, the small town construction has been developing quickly and the output of the industry increases in a high-speed. While at the same time, the images of small towns follow the same pattern and traditional style is vanishing.

The reason causing that phenomenon are various, but neglecting city plan is the primary one. Most towns get into the architecture designs after the central area plans, lacking planning to regions, towns and central areas. That means lacking the macroscopic and microcosmic consideration. At present, the small town construction is in the stage, which is the key stage forming the environmental styles and features. If such conditions can't be changed, it will do harm to the healthy development of the small towns. The great importance is attached to the plan, design and construction with the realization of the seriousness of the problem. Otherwise, if the bad style has been formed, the later generations can do nothing about it or compensate it at a high price.

1 THE VANISHING OF TRADITIONAL CHARACTER OF SMALL TOWNS

In small towns, there are no developed traffic pivot, a forest of high buildings and dense population, but there have distinctive geography environment, natural scene, dwelling houses close to the folk customs, spacious space and fresh air. Small towns are short of the economical superiority, but have more local

characters. The small town character is the resultant of many forces and should be reflected under the direction of city plan. Lacking the city plan is an important reason influencing the image of small towns. After the plan design, most towns' construction would enter the architect design directly according to the district function and land quality, even just according to the like of local leaders. All the reasons above create the confusion of small town's style and features. The style, color and image of buildings lack necessary relation.

1.1 Pursuing large public space blindly

The most obvious difference between the small towns and large cities is reflected on the space scale whose rationality affects the dimension of the small town. It is not advisable to construct blindly without the consideration of concrete circumstances and imitate the large scale of big cities. But after our investigation we found that the misadjustment of public space existed in many towns. For example, some towns built particularly large squares about ten thousands square meters, which exceed the need of the town residents. What's more, most squares use hard paving tile and lack green facilities, which are unfavorable to both the residents and the environment.



Fig.1.Large square of a small town in BeiJing

1.2 Copying the European style mechanically

The environment landscape of anytime in history all continues the creation of forefathers. So only by esteeming the history and present conditions, showing the characters using the quintessence of history, we can make the small town characters natural.

With the speeding-up of urbanization development, in small town construction, people still have not realized the big influence of city plan to dwelling environment and do not understand the significance of town appearance, so the European style is popular just because some people thought it means modern. For the small town in the speed-up stage of development, the wrong consciousness is influencing its architecture style seriously.

A town government of Beijing has decided to construct distinguished small towns 10-20 kilometers around the central area. The plan is to construct 5 small towns with the style of France , Spanish, North-America, Japanese and Islamic in order to enrich the intention of touristic satellite town. The starting point is good, but it is not proper to copy the foreign architecture style without the consideration of the geography position, climate, and the customs of the specific district. After the investigation, the author found that the so-called constructing Spanish style town is only the construction style of some Spanish buildings. Those buildings lack careful designs in color, scale, and architecture material, to say nothing of the connection with the history. It is a pity that doing it in such way can not give people the feeling of foreign countries, at the same time it will destroy the town space pattern that formed naturally for many years.

1.3 The confusion of the architecture style

Different distribution and style of architecture constitute different environmental forms and space characters which are the direct expression of substance landscape of the towns. But many small towns are in difficulties of ordinary looking because of lacking of urban design. Some marked buildings are been sought with new and modern styles in their own way but without the consideration of the whole environment. At the same time, large numbers of common buildings are in the service of function, lacking plastic design. Some buildings using china brick as facade material, look like matchbox without expression. What's more, the composition of the buildings are short of the different local styles. There are both the Chinese and foreign styles in architecture designs and the color of buildings looks dull or disordered. All that above can not reflect the local characters.



Fig.2. Different architecture styles in the same street

Furthermore, the advertisement board needs macroscopic control and many kinds of facilities are different in scale, color, material and position, which made the town buildings look improper, influencing the whole view of the town.



Fig.3. Disordered advertisement boards which make the town buildings look improper

2.THE REASONS OF THE VACANCY OF URBAN DESIGNS IN SMALL TOWNS

2.1 Lacking the consciousness to the function and the significance of the urban designs

The city design has been put into practice in our country about only ten years, therefore, there exist more or less perplexity and uncertainty not only in small towns, even in the construction of big cities. There are many specialized people still lacking the knowledge of urban designs.

In more than 20 central small towns we had investigated, all the town leaders know the law effect of the

town plan, but when talking about the urban designs, from the concept to the significance, they know little. What they are really interested in is the construction of single buildings. We had looked at the plan paper that had been sanctioned of the 26 central towns, both texts and drawings are almost never concerned with the content of urban designs of small towns. Only very few talk of some instructive principles of city designs. Two central towns once had the plan of urban designs, but it was delayed because of SARS in the spring of 2003.

Because of the less consciousness to the urban designs, there is no context from macroscopic plans to concrete projects in small town construction. So the entire environment of small towns is hard to enhance and the character is difficult to form.

2.2 Lacking the theory and practice in city designs

In theory, the urban designs of the small towns in our country is almost blank and in the present research about city designs, big cities have been used as object. The research about small towns almost centralized on the aspects of scales and tapes, developmental tactics and systems, and planning management. While the research on the small town city design is mostly the description and the introduction to the examples of small towns, lacking the systematic theory as instruction.

2.3 The needs of the legal position and the management system in urban design

England and America are the earlier countries that put the methods of urban designs into practice. In England the Ministry of Environment and Design modified the guided paper on the plan policy in 1997, defining the position and the content of the urban design. America has implemented the management and the investigation system of the urban design in more than 1000 cities, which have the important meaning to the practice of the design achievement.

While in our country, there is no explicit regulation to the content, depth and gain of the urban design. Even in some towns, the urban design is accomplished elaborately, but doing that is only for alluring capital. Another problem is that the urban design has no legal position, so it has no instructive and control power to the city construction.

3. THE CHARACTER OF THE URBAN DESIGN IN SMALL TOWNS

The urban design of small towns is the same as that of common cities in result, actualization and operational manner. Although the small towns belong to the city category, it is not the simple dwindlement of big cities, so the theory and practice in cities can not apply mechanically to the small towns.

The small towns are now in the different progress stage with the big cities. Although the small towns have a good progress tendency, but they start late and their foundation is weak, so they still need a long time to grow up. If the leaders who are in charge of the small towns construction can grasp the chance at the beginning and consider the urban designs in every stage of the plan, they will get twice the result with half the effort. For example, small towns are more close to the nature and have more context to the history and the folk customs, which can form the city image easier. The result of its urban design is simpler than big cities, but the small towns have more superiority in utilization of history and custom material, which can strengthen the individuality.

Because the scale of the small town is relatively small, so the time of construction is short and the control process of the urban design is relatively easy.

The small town characters chiefly embody individually and they are different from the big cities and the other towns, thus providing the atmosphere of the nature and culture to the designs. The factors influencing the urban design of small towns specifically and directly show in the following four aspects:

3.1 Controlling the space scale reasonably

The great difference between the architecture in small towns and big cities embody on the scale. In big

cities, the population and buildings are densely built, so the public buildings are enormous. On the contrary, there are streets close to people and small dimension buildings, which bring us comfortable feelings that had been lost in the city life. So the architecture and the environment design of small towns must include the relevant scale and composition.

3.2 Conforming to the history context

Town has the characteristics of people's spirit and culture. The form of the traditional building is the result of the outlook, life style and aesthetics of the residents. Small towns have their own original history, culture and tradition which can not be copied easily. The character of the small towns is the accumulation of the tradition and needs an integrated background, because the culture is the most intrinsic and constant thing acting on the character of small towns. At present, many designs of the architecture in small towns copy from the west style buildings. It's a pity that although it's at the price of diminishing our own buildings, the foreign ideology under their style can not be removed from such buildings.

3.3 Exploring the natural resources in small town construction

Natural environment is the key factor influencing the small town character. The small towns in Beijing have more ecologic dominance than the city regions. Many towns have abundant supply of water and forest resources, and they have fresh air and pleasant microclimate, which are fit to human subsistence. So in the urban design in small towns, the utilization of natural resources should be considered, so as to let the nature and building attain intergrowth.

3.4 Urban design and industry orientation

Economy configuration and industry orientation is essential element of the small town character. Exploiting the industrial resources of different towns and orientating the economy structure can avoid the blindness in the small town construction. It can also reduce the demand of the resources in each town and can prevent competition, so as to form the different needs of the urban designs. The representative example is Houshayu in Shunyi district of Beijing. Because Houshayu is a small town with the beautiful landscape and favorable position, it has become the inhabitable places of the advanced white collar workers and foreigners, so the industry orientation of Houshayu is real estate.

That town has built a lot of villas and a series of common facilities that are in the same style, which form the graceful inhabitancy with the small town character.

However, many small towns have no specific industry orientation and haven't exploited the characteristic industry at present, which leads to the loss of the distinctions between the towns and the loss of the building characters.

4. CREATING THE CHARACTER OF THE SMALL TOWNS BY STRENGTHENING THE URBAN DESIGN

4.1 Requirement and impetus are needed in the urban designs

The small towns' development and grown-up is the course to accumulate natural and humanistic resources. At the same time it is the course for the small towns to compete for the markets and to distribute the source rationally. But in the definite time and space, the source and the market is limited, so utilizing the theory and the manner of the urban design can help to develop the small town characters and perfect its systems step by step, causing the town to be attractive.

4.2 Legislation and management need to be strengthened urgently

According to the foreign experience, the urban design on one hand is the colligation of many skills which need both architecture three dimensional space skills and city plan knowledge, on the other hand, it is not the simple combination of the two subjects but it needs means of harmonious management to bring the result into effect.

City plan is a sort of society interventionist means that is put into practice to some extent. In allusion to our actuality, we suggest strengthening the legislation first and at the same time giving the definite requirement about the profundity of the design fruit.

4.3 The fruit of the urban design needs much maneuverability

Urban design involves two stages: design and actualize. Small town design is the instrument of the resource collocation while actualize action is the favorable process of the resource collocation.

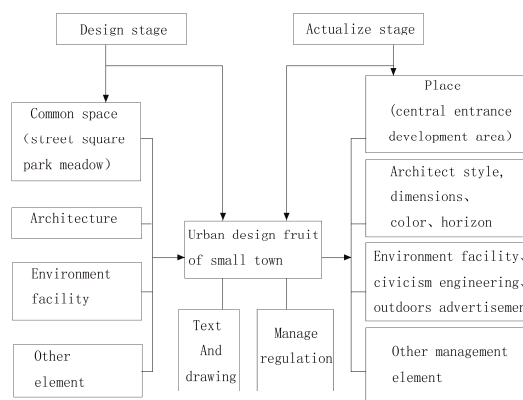


Fig.4. Urban design includes two stages: design and actualize

The urban design outcome of the small towns should strive to popularize and assure actualization. In the design process, we should lay the emphasis on the place, the section and the building considering the local characters, grasping the construction of the representative entrance area, central area, street passing through the town, scenic spot and history site to manifest the local scene.

In this way we can improve the town image with less capital and shorter time period while exploring the latent value, which is propitious to the activity of the trade and the attraction of the investment and ultimately advancing the whole environment.

The appearance of our small town is changing day by day. We would feel a great pity if we saw thousands of buildings that look just like matchboxes following the same pattern, if we saw the disordered advertisement and low shops beside the wide commercial streets and if we saw the rural houses becoming townish. The small town construction has entered the speed-up development, which will help to unfold the urban design, and inevitably become the economy support of the small town character and quality. The urban design as a specialized activity will move towards small towns from big cities, and become the powerful instrument to improve the environment and the character of small towns.

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