

TRAVERSING HISTORY: TRANSFORMATION OF INTERCULTURAL PRACTICE THROUGH THE SPATIAL EXPLORATION IN HARBIN BAROQUE ARCHITECTURAL AREA.

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ABSTRACT | In an era where social connectivity burgeons, cultural diversity has become a mainstay in the tapestry of modern existence. Intercultural dialogue encourages individuals with different perspectives to overcome cultural barriers, to embrace others' values, and to find their place in society. In art and design education, art focuses not only on decorative aesthetics but can also stimulate innovative thinking and critical reflection through a multicultural lens. This paper revisits the "Through History" art education workshop held in the Baroque Architectural Area of Harbin, Heilongjiang Province, China, exploring cross-cultural practice's transformative role and value in artistic creation. Students engage with the environment to explore the connection between space and culture. Guided by practical creation, students experience space, proactively and passively enter intercultural contexts, and promote the creative transformation of complex cultural backgrounds. Based on the interaction between the space and the individual, this critical transformation encourages students to perceive and understand the cultural layers behind architectural environments and urban landscapes. The workshop fosters delicate interregional dialogue through self-reflection and cultural participation, enhancing the cultural identity of individuals and the community while potentially influencing local culture.

1. Introduction¹

As the interconnectivity between societies continues to grow, cultural diversity is recognized as an inevitable reality of modern life. UNESCO supports interculturalism as a practice and approach that can deepen understanding of others' global perceptions. Interculturalism allows participants with different views to communicate, promoting acceptance of others' values and contributing to the peaceful coexistence between different cultures and identities.

In higher education, intercultural themes are highly regarded by educational scholars. As Tonkin (2004) stated: "If our young people do not learn about other societies, they may well be unable to cope with their own complexities." Interculturalism provides effective solutions; it encourages students with diverse cultural backgrounds to learn to cross cultural barriers, communicate and collaborate in an increasingly smaller multicultural world, enhance communication, decision-making, and teamwork skills, and find their position in the complex work environments of the future.

In art and design education, art provides profound inspiration. Art is not limited to exploring form, resulting in shaping or mere "decorativeness." It also finds ethical ways to intervene between social humanities and technological development through understanding the art creation process and critical construction of imaginative and creative scenarios. In other words, through artistic, creative methods, cultural diversity becomes an essential catalyst for inspiring innovative scenarios and critical thinking. In the digital age, art helps to cultivate the core professional qualities of the next generation of creative and humanities industry practitioners (Eldridge, 2003).

This article will take an interregional art education workshop as an example to explore the critical transformation of intercultural practice. The workshop, titled *Traversing History*, held in the Baroque Architectural Area in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province, China, aimed at cultivating students' creativity and encouraged students to use themselves as research tools, focusing on the direct and indirect experiences of spatial information. It explores the relationship between spatial sites and psychological cognition in the context of cultural diversity. Students are guided through acts of artistic creation to actively or passively explore multicultural scenarios and reflect on the significance of complex cultural environments in stimulating individual creativity. Moreover, the article will discuss the contribution of the workshop, separated as educational influences and the potential impact of fostering creativity on the cultural development of the Baroque architectural area.

This article explores three parts:

The first part explores Harbin's urban history and the Baroque District's environmental changes. Cultural diversity and complexity construct the unique civilization system of Harbin, which provides an objective existence for exploring channels of communication and multicultural coexistence.

The second part discusses the transformation process of artistic methods in a cross-cultural context. In this part, the workshop promotes students' participation in regional cross-cultural narratives through teaching methods. It introduces visual arts practices after interacting with their multiple identities with environmental sites and knowledge information guided by practice.

The third part unfolds in three stages of discussion: Stage [i] explains the narrative logic of spatial sites, underpinning a theoretical base for the on-site exploration for the next. Stage [ii] concerns how art, as an educational method, guides students to dig out and translate local cultural information, train cross-cultural thinking, and cultivate creativity. Stage [iii] analyses the contribution to the educational environment and the indigenous culture.

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2. Background

2.1 Urban History and Baroque Architectural Complex

Harbin, located in the southeastern part of China's Heilongjiang Province, has a history that traces back thousands of years. However, its development as a city began from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries. In 1896, the Qing government, to accelerate the Northeast region's development, permitted Russia to construct a railway that would traverse the Northeast—known as the China Eastern Railway and the Bin Zhou Railway. With the construction of the railway, many Russians, as well as Han Chinese from other regions of China, moved in, spurring local economic development. Harbin gradually evolved into an important commercial center and transportation hub. Due to its strategic location and unique historical background, Harbin rapidly developed from a collection of villages into a major metropolis in the Far East (Clausen & Thogersen, 2016) (Wenzhuo, 2021).

At that time, China Eastern Railway divided Harbin into two parts: Daoli and Daowai. In Mandarin, "Dao" refers to the railway; thus, Daoli is the western area of the railway, and the central was known as "Bu Tou District"². While Daowai, known as "Fu Jia Dian District" is the eastern area (Figure 1), and consisted of several villages that formed a settlement area for Chinese people.

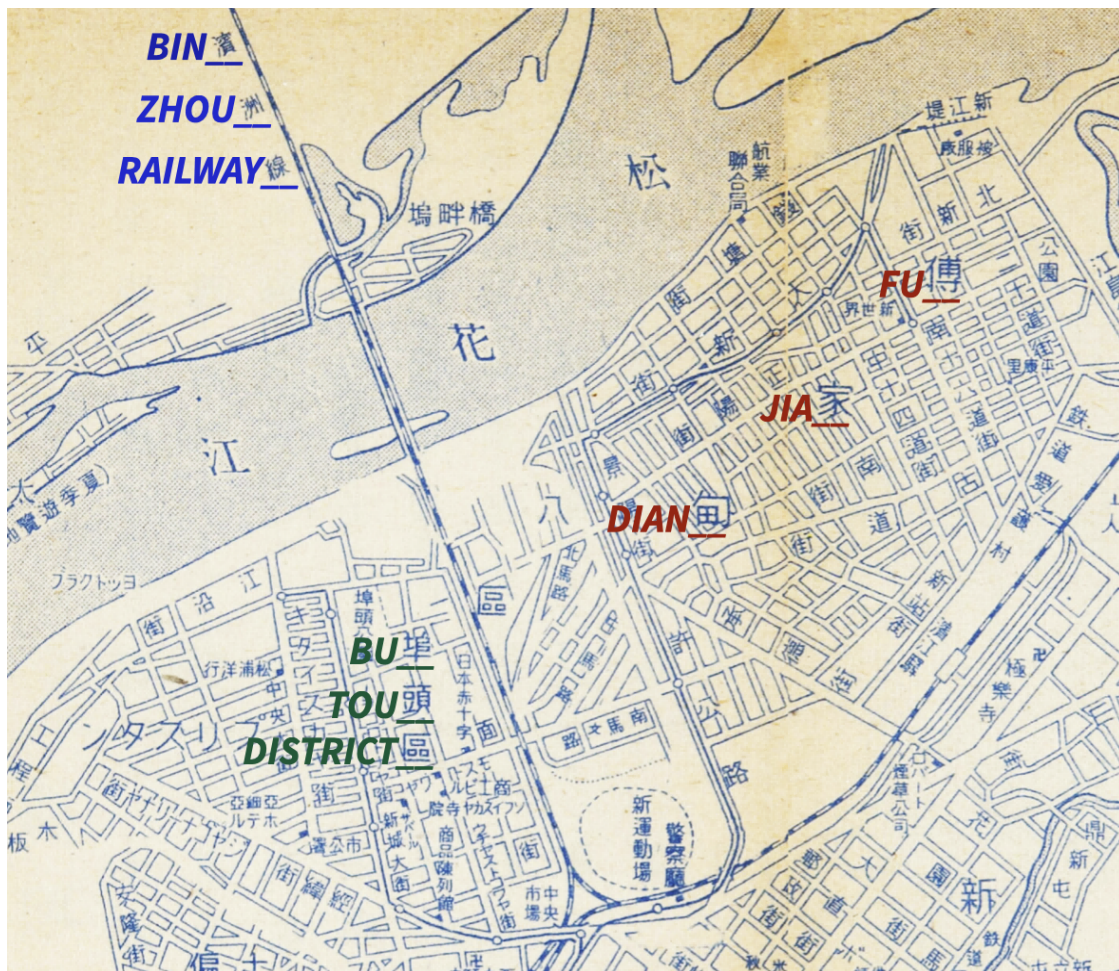


Figure 1. Partial street map of Harbin City, Japanese made in 1940.

² Daoli was separated in three parts by the Japanese military in 1932, Bu Tou District was the one of the three, see details: http://www.hrbdl.gov.cn/hebdldq/col6/202302/c01_862585.shtml.

Daoli and Nangang Districts were territories associated with Tsarist Russia. The foreigners led the large-scale urban construction - buildings featuring Art Nouveau, Baroque, Classical, Renaissance, and Eclectic styles appeared one after another. Among these, Chinese Street (now Central Street) is relatively well-known. In Daowai, Chinese national capitalists and immigrants acquired land in the hinterland of Daowai (Fu Jia Dian) (Figure 2). The enthusiasm and prosperity of Baroque architecture coincided with their desire to flaunt wealth, leading them to replicate the opulent Western-style buildings across the street. They employed symmetrical design to emphasize the centrality and balance of the buildings.



Figure 2. Historical street view: Chinese street in Daoli District and Zhengyang Street in Dowai District.³

Under the meticulous design and craftsmanship of Chinese artisans, architectural concepts influenced by Western systems harmoniously blend with the distinct socio-cultural characteristics of the local area. Across the facades of these buildings, one can witness the emergence of ornate Chinese motifs that symbolize good fortune and prosperity, such as intricately crafted bats, vibrant pomegranates, auspicious money toads, and delicate peonies. These decorative elements exude an aura of luxury and sophistication, elevating the aesthetic appeal of the structures.

Regarding their functional layout, the buildings in the Daowai area serve predominantly for commercial purposes. The front sections are designated as bustling shops in a cost-effective arrangement, drawing in customers and showcasing merchandise. In contrast, the rear sections are set as factories, serving as versatile spaces that accommodate living quarters and storage facilities. This clever utilization of space caters to the practical needs of the community while optimizing resources (Carter, 2000).

The convergence of diverse cultural influences has contributed to the development of a distinctive architectural landscape in the Daowai area. The fusion of Western-inspired architectural concepts with traditional Chinese decorative motifs has given rise to a unique architectural form and style.

2.2 Current State of the Baroque Area

In the 21st century, the economic development of Harbin still relies on traditional heavy industry and manufacturing, particularly in sectors such as aviation, aerospace, and automobile manufacturing, as the global financial market demands internationally shift. The singular industrial structure in Harbin is under significant pressure to transform.

Despite Harbin possessing some well-known scientific research institutions and higher education establishments, its innovative drive, oriented towards high-tech industries, is insufficient compared with its former industrial economic status and the innovative developments in China's southeastern coastal regions. The lack of innovation has led to reduced job opportunities, directly resulting in the outflow of the young population. This, in turn, has exacerbated the issue of an ageing population, with increased

³ Source: https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Sitsky_Postcards.html.

demands for medical care, pensions, and other social welfare needs. Consequently, this leads to slow economic growth and increased financial pressure on the government, particularly in maintaining infrastructural investment, which is reflected in the preservation of local historical buildings (Kirichkov & Levoshko, 2016).



Figure 3. Current street view: Baroque Architectural Area, Daowai District.

Due to the lack of economic impetus and unclear government policies, the Baroque Area needs more cultural maintenance after relocating its original residents. Many buildings have fallen into disrepair over time. Although the buildings have largely retained their original appearance, varying degrees of ageing and damage have appeared on the main brick and wood structures and exterior walls, with some walls showing fractures and partial collapse. In 2007, the local government listed the "Chinese Baroque District" as a critical project for protection and renewal, starting the restoration of the Chinese Baroque architectural complex. However, due to development constraints, the quality of these renovation and renewal projects was low, which showed an excessive homogenization of renewal, leading to a decrease in the regional cultural appeal (Figure 3).

The Baroque architectural area serves as a hub of integration for various cultures, positioned at the geographical crossroads of different cultural spheres and having experienced many economic shifts and political influences throughout history. The intersection of these two factors reveals how cultural diversity and complexity have evolved gradually in this region under the influence of diverse social forces. These evolutions have shaped the local social identities and cultural affiliations and contributed to the construction of Harbin's distinctive civilizational system. This scenario provides a tangible framework for exploring intercultural communication and the coexistence of multiple aspects of cultural context.

3. The Workshop on "Traversing History"

The "Traversing History" workshop was a 10-day immersive program designed for interdisciplinary education, focusing on exploring Harbin's Chinese Baroque Historic District under perspective fields such as facades, courtyard, and historical context. This unique workshop aimed to unite students and professionals from various disciplines, including architecture, intelligent buildings and construction, landscape design, digital media arts, trade economy, Chinese international education, and social service, to comprehensively analyze and creatively represent this architecturally rich area.

In addition to these explorations, participants engaged with literature on space and memory, seeking to broaden their thinking and connect with the multitude of cultures that intersect in the district through the tutoring of scholars. This challenge encourages breaking free from conventional environmental perceptions and constructing imaginative scenarios for the visual translation of poster design. The workshop culminates in an exhibition where these thematic pieces, rich with personal expression, are open to scrutiny from different perspectives of their peers. This fosters a critical understanding of one's views and those of others in the context of the shared spaces and nurtures an individual's poetic and sensory awareness.

3.1 Description

The discussion will be opened by the following three Tables (see Table 1, 2, 3). The workshop is structured into five phases, each designed to build upon the last, offering twenty-six participants a comprehensive and layered understanding of the subject matter. The second phase of the workshop is particularly intensive, comprising four separate tutorials that provide in-depth knowledge and hands-on guidance.

PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR INFORMATION *Participants' Age: 21-23

Participants	Nationality / Originate	Major
P1	China /Gansu Province Yinchuan	Architecture
P2	China /Guangxi Province Nanning	Architecture
P3	China /Hunan Province Shaoyang	Architecture
P4	China /Yunnan Province Chuxiong	Architecture
P5	China /Yunnan Province Honghe Zhou	Intelligent Buildings and Construction
P6	China /Henan Province Shangqiu	Intelligent Buildings and Construction
P7	China /Jiangxi Province Shangrao	Intelligent Buildings and Construction
P8	China /Hunan Province Loudi	Intelligent Buildings and Construction
P9	China /Heilongjiang Province Harbin	Landscape Design
P10	China /Heilongjiang Province Harbin	Architecture
P11	China /Heilongjiang Province Harbin	Architecture
P12	China /Heilongjiang Province Harbin	Digital Media Arts
P13	China /Shandong Province Heze	Intelligent Buildings and Construction
P14	China /Anhui Province Hefei	Intelligent Buildings and Construction
P15	China /Hubei Province Enshi	Intelligent Buildings and Construction
P16	China /Shanxi Province Xi'an	Intelligent Buildings and Construction
P17	China /Inner Mongolia	Architecture
P18	China /Guangdong Province Guangzhou	Architecture
P19	China /Yunnan Province Kunming	Architecture
P20	China /Shanxi Province Baoji	Trade Economy
P21	China /Shandong Province Taian	Chinese International Education
P22	China /Guangxi Province Chongzuo	Social Service
P23	China /Shanxi Province Xian	Trade Economy
P24	Russia / Saint Petersburg	Architecture
P25	Russia / Saint Petersburg	Architecture
P26	China /Anhui Province Liuan	Statistics

Table 1. Participants and their information.

CITY WALK PHASE 1

Participants	Fields	Perceptual Touchpoint
P1	Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context
P2	Facade/Yard	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context
P3	Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context
P4	Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context
P5	Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context
P6	Facade	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context
P7	Facade/Yard/History	Texture, Colour
P8	Facade/Yard/History	Texture, Colour
P9	Facade/Yard	Damaged Part, Texture, Historical Context
P10	Facade	Texture, Colour, Texture
P11	Facade/Yard/History	Texture, Colour, Texture
P12	Facade	Damaged Part, Texture, Historical Context
P13	Facade/Yard/History	Texture
P14	Facade	Texture, Colour
P15	Facade	Texture, Colour
P16	Facade	Texture, Colour
P17	Facade/Yard	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context
P18	Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context
P19	Facade/Yard	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context
P20	Facade	Texture, Colour
P21	Facade	Texture
P22	Facade/Yard	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context
P23	Facade/Yard	Texture, Colour
P24	Facade/Yard	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context
P25	Facade/Yard	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context
P26	Facade	Texture, Colour

AFTER THE TUTORING PHASE

CITY WALK PHASE 2

Fields	Perceptual Touchpoint
Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context, Authenticity
Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context, Authenticity
Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context, Authenticity
Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context, Authenticity
Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context, Authenticity
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Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Texture, Historical Context, Authenticity
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Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context, Authenticity
Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Colour, Texture, Historical Context, Authenticity
Facade/Yard/History	Damaged Part, Texture, Historical Context

*P1-P4, P9-P11, P12, P17, P18, P24, P25, They have a more comprehensive experience and understanding of the architectural environment through the two City Walk Phases.

Table 2. Participants with their perceptual touchpoint during city walk phase 1 and 2.

CITY WALK PHASE 1: Leading by Local Harbin Scholars

City Walk Phase 1 is a unique educational experience designed to immerse students in the rich cultural and historical tapestry of Harbin. Students are required to conduct **immediate observational recordings** to capture and retain the depth of their engagement with the architectural heritage in Baroque area.

TUTORING PHASE

SECTION 1: Introduction
Students & All Tutors
The introduction section is designed for students to communicate and share what they recorded during City Walk Phase 1, as well as to get to know one another's backgrounds in the presence of all tutors. This initial interaction will establish a collaborative learning environment and enable everyone to build upon the diverse experiences and insights gained from the first phase of our exploration.

SECTION 2: Facade
Tutors (British art scholar lead)
In architecture and city planning, a facade is the exterior front face of a building that is one of the most important architectural elements, as it sets the tone for the building's design and the surrounding environment. In this section, students are encouraged to observe the design elements, and stylistic features through an artistic and poetic way.

SECTION 3: Courtyard
Tutors (China Harbin-based literary scholar lead)
Yard refers to the grounds surrounding a building or a communal space within an urban setting. In Harbin, yards might be a part of residential complexes, public spaces, or historical sites. This examining yards section teaches students to understand how these spaces are used by residents, their role in community interactions, and their significance in urban design and planning.

SECTION 4: Cultural study
Tutors (UK London-based art & design scholar lead)
The historical component of this section focuses on the way Harbin's past shapes its present. This involves examining the city's development over time, the influence of various cultural and political forces, and the preservation of historical sites. As well as understanding the importance of creativity through the transformation of visual design practice.

CITY WALK PHASE 2: Leading by British art scholar

City Walk Phase 2 enriches the initial experiential layer established in the first phase by incorporating additional scholarly dimensions—namely, the analysis of architectural **facades**, **courtyards**, and **historical evolution**. During this stage, an art scholar from the UK engaged with the locale for the first time, leading two academic readings as part of the walk. The initial reading was sourced from the 2016 article "Tourist Quarter 'Chinese-Baroque' of Dao Wai District in Harbin City: Experience, Problems, and Perspectives of Renovation," which examines the preliminary stages of the district's urban renewal. The ensuing discourse was based on Wenzhuo Zhang's 2021 paper, "Renovation, Gentrification, and Revitalisation of the Chinese Baroque Area in Harbin: Lessons Learned from a Heritage-Driven Urban Development Project." The introduction of this work delineates the derivation of the 'Chinese Baroque' concept, with Zhang referencing Yasuhiko Nishizawa, a Japanese architectural historian, to illustrate the area as a testament to intercultural architectural practices. This phase's objective is to re-evaluate and deepen the understanding of the immediate urban environment by juxtaposing the established local knowledge shared by regional knowledge with the fresh perspectives brought by international scholars. This integrative approach aims to foster a comprehensive re-examination of the urban experience through a multifaceted academic prism.

CREATIVITY PHASE (SAMPLES FROM 5 STUDENTS)



P22



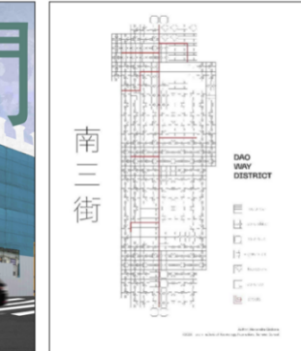
P13



P12



P19



P24

EXHIBITION

Table 3. The workflow of the workshop.

Participants are engaged in city walks for the initial phase and again in the third phase. These city walks serve as practical settings where attendees can directly observe and interact with the subject of their study - the Harbin Baroque Architectural Area. The first city walk is a quick-look exploration and observation, allowing participants to familiarize themselves with the area and its unique characteristics. Following the initial city walk, participants engage in the second phase with scholars who provide valuable insights and theoretical frameworks relevant to the district. This learning phase is critical as it equips participants with the necessary tools to analyze and interpret their observations. After introducing the participants and scholars, they had an initial impression of each other. Then, the third phase sees another city walk, but this time with a more analytical lens. Participants are encouraged to apply the knowledge gained from the scholarly tutorials. They compare and contrast their initial recordings and impressions with a more informed perspective. This juxtaposition aids in understanding the evolution of their perceptions and the depth of their learning.

Notably, the tutoring phase has one introduction section and three sections in facade, yard, and history perspectives led by three scholars. This structured approach allows students to delve deeply into their subject matter, preparing them to undertake their second city walk in phase three with a more critical and informed eye (Figure 4).



Figure 4. City walk phase 1 and 2.

Participants also have the opportunity to synthesize their observations and insights in the creativity phase. They engage in collaborative projects that challenge them to represent their understanding of the Chinese Baroque Historic District through various forms of visual communication. The final phase culminates in a showcase where participants present their projects. This phase is designed to foster an environment of peer review and open dialogue, allowing for a rich exchange of ideas and feedback. It is an opportunity for participants to display their work and reflect on their growth and the collective knowledge they have built throughout the workshop, contributing to the existing method of education.

3.2 Significance

The workshop's significance is deeply rooted in its structured approach, which integrates classroom learning with experiential activities by combining tutoring (Figure 5) and city walk phases.



Figure 5. Tutoring phase.

As the Table 3 shows, the Tutoring Phase is fundamental in laying the groundwork for a multifaceted exploration of culture and creativity. The diversity acknowledged in the self-introduction session celebrates variety and strategic recognition of the rich tapestry of experiences that can inform and enhance learning. The students were exposed to a spectrum of perspectives, from the Baroque-inspired works of Pablo Bronstein to Julia Cameron's insights into creativity (Cameron & Bryan, 1993).

This phase is significant because it primes students for a transformative journey, urging them to step beyond their comfort zones and habitual perceptions. Another one is the City Walk Phase, which is crucial in embodying the learned concepts and transitioning from theoretical instruction to tangible, real-world engagement (Bradfield et al., 2022).

The dual-part structure of the walks - from local insights to an external academic lens - enhances the learning experience by contrasting and complementing local knowledge with broader, philosophical interpretations of space, as inspired by thinkers like Gaston Bachelard (2014). The evolution of student perception from an aesthetic appreciation to a deeper contemplation of authenticity and cultural narratives illustrates the profound impact of active, observational learning.

The workshop's holistic approach signifies a powerful educational paradigm where the integration of stimulating classroom discussions and direct observation leads to rich, contextually grounded creative expressions. This methodology promotes cultural intelligence and sensitivity, equipping students with the necessary skills to produce culturally meaningful and impactful work. As they transition from passive learners to active creators, they engage in a deeper dialogue with their subject matter, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural art education.

3.3 Creativity Outcomes

In the creativity phase, post-tutoring, students were tasked with transforming their sensory abstractions into visual forms within an educational setting intentionally crafted to disrupt the norm. The instructors galvanized students to venture beyond the typical, urging them to rethink and reshape standard visual interpretations and representations, resulting in pioneering and unorthodox visual creations. The following images (see Figure 6-10) are of the students' works, along with five students' feedback.



Figure 6. Students' practices part 1.

Student P2: The inspiration for the work stemmed from a city walk along the Chinese Baroque-style street. At that time, the entire street was undergoing restoration and renovation of dilapidated buildings, thus intertwining traces of new and old architectural context were visible, alternately revealing a sense of historical depth and vibrant life. It felt like with each step, one might step into a different era. One could

only measure it step by step. As a result, I combined the photos I took at the time with historical photos from the historical era to create a collage poster. This poster is intended to express the feeling of traversing through time and space and hopes to remind people to protect historical architecture and to appreciate the enduring charm of Harbin, which remains even after dramatic changes over time.



Figure 7. Students' practices part 2.

Student P5: "Behind the Window" captures the visage of women from the historic Chinese Baroque district using a two-dimensional composition. Wandering through the Chinese Baroque streets, I came to realize that it once harbored the marginalized, including many deaf-mute women, who had lost their agency in life, their traces are now scarcely discernible in contemporary documents. "Behind the Window" seeks to preserve their narratives.

In the piece, Baroque window designs are merged with the traditional peony motif, symbolizing the women's view of the outside world; while the courtyard staircases represent the cyclical and confined lives within the 'front shop, back factory' layout. "Behind the Window" serves both as a tribute to these women and a poignant reflection on that era.

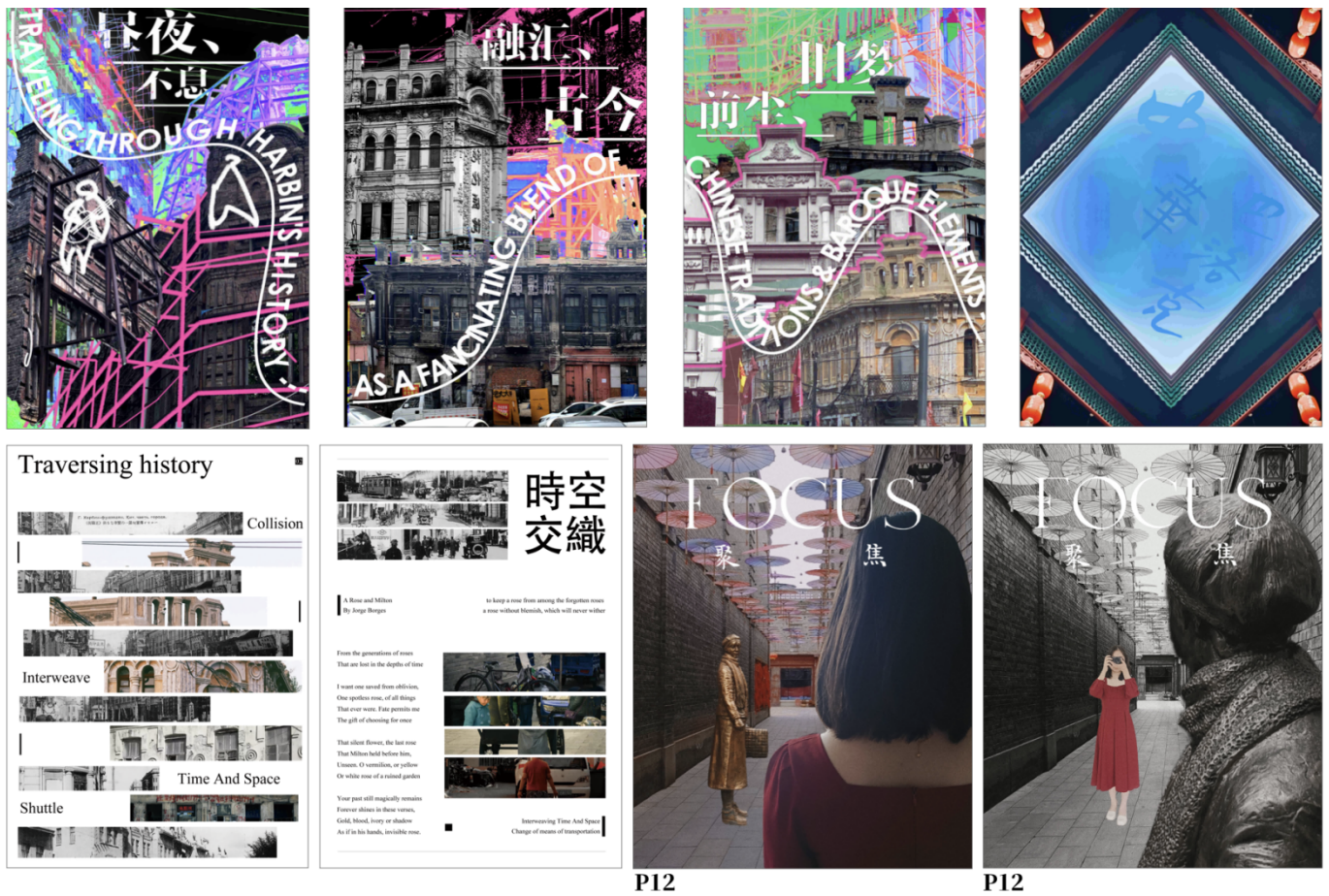


Figure 8. Students' practices part 3.

Student P12: The "Focus" series posters showcase the historical depth and modern vitality of Chinese Baroque streets. The two posters depict a girl and a statue of Xiao Hong (1911-1942, a female writer born in Heilongjiang Province), gazing at each other, seeking a connection between history and the present, and exploring their implications for the future.

The first poster features the image of a modern girl representing the present, with the statue representing history. The red color in the poster, inspired by the little girl in the red coat from the film "Schindler's List," symbolizes the power of life and the longing for the future. In the second poster, the girl is seen with her back to the camera, looking towards the statue that symbolizes history, representing reverence for the past and anticipation for the future. The blending of red and gold hues emphasizes the vitality of life and the significance of history. The statue of Xiao Hong not only commemorates this literary master but also serves as a bridge between history and modern times, inspiring us to draw strength from stories to move forward.

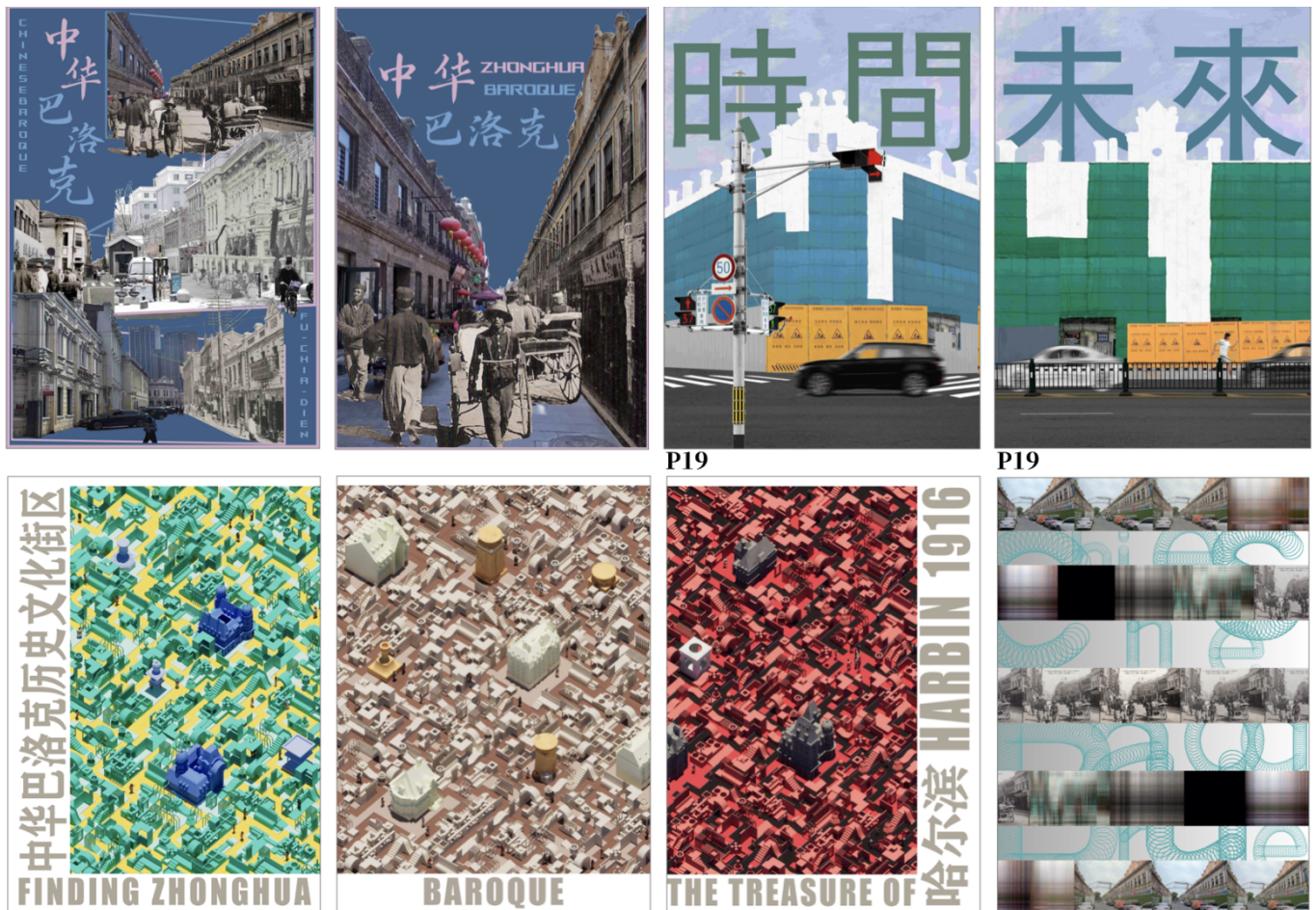
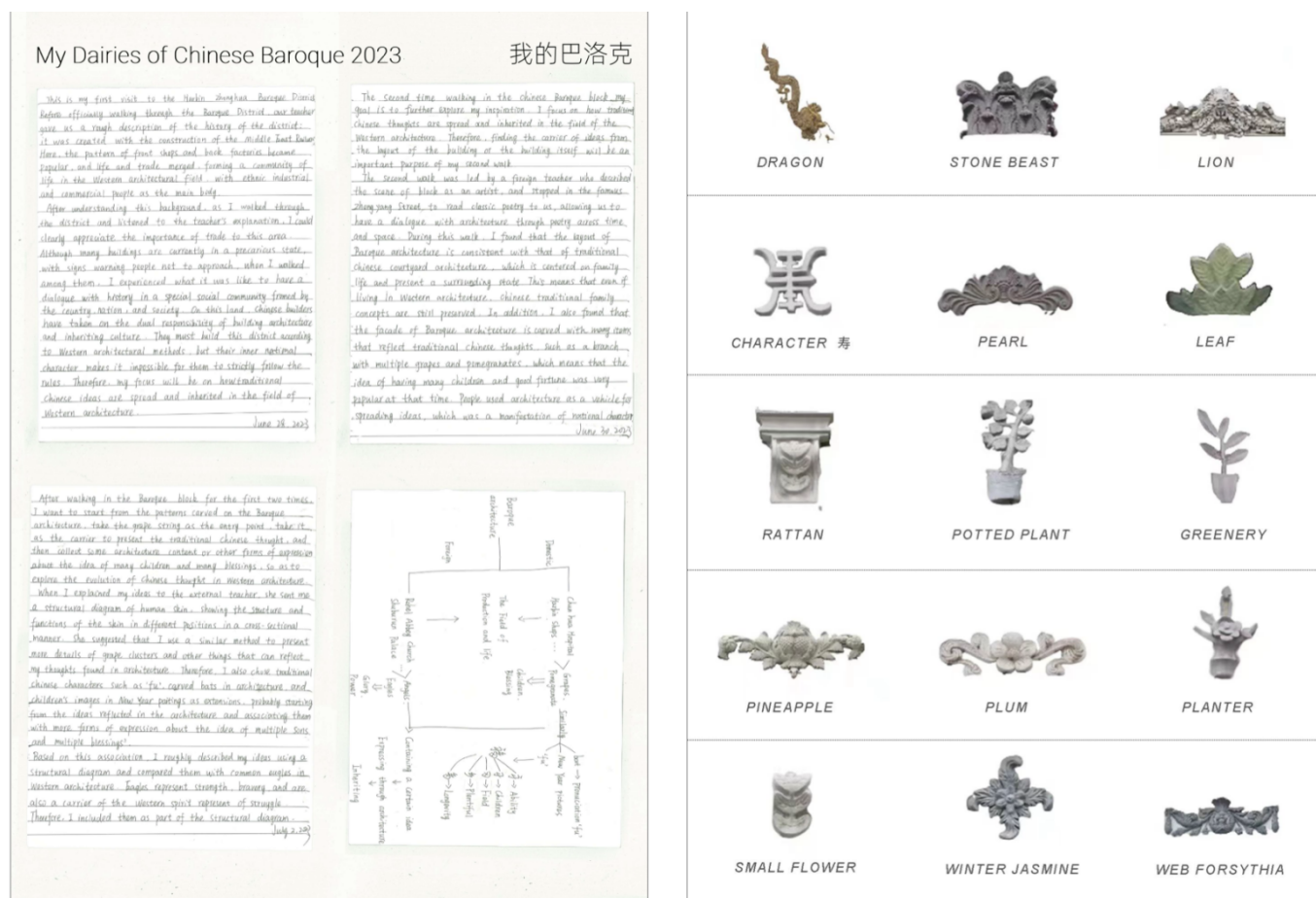


Figure 9. Students' practices part 4.

Student P13: The Baroque district under renovation is draped with a fabric-like protective cover, and even the broken mesh cannot hide the variegated walls sculpted by time. The once-magnificent decorations are gradually falling away. Visitors stop to ponder over the concealed future—a dazzling whiteness that will shimmer in the sunlight. I wish to capture this moment of transition, to document the neighborhood's story as it steps from the old into the new.



P22

Figure 10. Students' practices part 5.

Student P22: Lacking a background in art, I have used a handwritten diary to reflect my personal contemplations and understanding of the Baroque district. How have Chinese architects integrated traditional eastern thought into Baroque style while ensuring the continuation and enhancement of its culture? Delving into the architectural details, I noticed that elements of Chinese blessing culture, such as pomegranates and grapes symbolizing fertility and good fortune, are prevalent, resonating with the meaning behind the character "福fú" (fortune). Western Baroque, by contrast, employs angels and eagles to represent glory and strength. Both styles express their cultures' emotions and values through architecture. Despite its Western facade, decorative façade, still reveals the essence of Chinese culture, reflecting the wisdom of craftsmen and the flexibility of the culture.

This process of creating posters was underpinned by a strong focus on critical evaluation of one's work and that of peers, fostering a more profound connection with their subjects and a more nuanced conveyance of intricate concepts through their art. Students were encouraged to channel their distinct experiences into their work, infusing their visual output with deep personal meaning and symbolism. They were also steered to contemplate the complex interplay between their mental constructs and artistic expressions. This practice refined their capacity to manifest abstract ideas visually and deepened their comprehension of the interdependence between conceptual thought and creative actualization.

3.4 Key Findings

The workshop's initial phase of spatial exploration set the stage for participants to develop a fundamental grasp of Baroque architecture's intricacies. A notable observation was made by an international architecture student from Russia (e.g. P24), who approached the study focusing on the primary spatial forms, and also expressed an interest in Chinese typography. This approach allowed for a comparative analysis of architectural styles, highlighting the distinctive differences between Russian and local Baroque edifices. Such insights reveal how cultural and geographic backgrounds influence the initial engagement with and interpretation of architectural styles.

Students with a more diverse academic palette, including those from architecture (e.g. P19) and digital media arts (e.g. P12), demonstrated a broader and more integrated understanding of their surroundings. Their observations transcended mere structural analysis, delving into history, memory, and the literary aspects of the Baroque environment. This group's balanced approach underscored the value of interdisciplinary perspectives in grasping the full spectrum of the cultural and aesthetic significance embedded within architectural spaces.

On the other hand, those with a background in intelligent architecture (e.g. P13), whose studies typically lean towards engineering and data-focus, exhibited a markedly different cognitive orientation. Their understanding of the environment is more direct, and their analysis process is more structured, prioritizing practical logic over abstract aesthetic factors. Additionally, after their initial walk, they develop a sense of disregard towards the aging structures. Students not trained in art and design (e.g. P22), they often require guidance from scholars to delve into the understanding of cultural and human narratives, and to build confidence in aesthetic expression.

Despite these initial inclinations, the tutoring phase of the workshop facilitated a shift in understanding across the board. After engaging with the second, third, and fourth modules, the students began to appreciate the purpose of their observational walks. Their understanding evolved to encompass abstract interpretations of the environment, especially within the Baroque context. Yet, even with this newfound appreciation, remnants of skepticism persisted, particularly regarding the efficacy of walking as a method of knowledge expression. This skepticism is influenced by their diverse backgrounds, hinting at the entrenched educational paradigms that shape their approach to learning and knowledge articulation.

Additionally, compared to educational impact, the influence of geographical factors seems to be weaker, which may be attributable to the smaller data volume that doesn't allow for more definitive conclusions. However, these initial data also indicate that in the era of informatization, the intensity of Interregional (partly international) cultural exchange and communication has reached a new height, rendering geographical distance no longer an effective barrier to cultural exchange.

3.5 Communication and Feedback at the Exhibition Site

Upon the workshop's conclusion, an exhibition was chosen as the preferred medium to display the students' artworks at the site they visited. However, due to construction inside the building, the students displayed their works by affixing them to the walls inside the courtyard. This seemingly compromised choice transformed this outside space as an exhibiting realm, while showcasing the architectural characteristics, also displaying the reality of the building.



Figure 11. Exhibition event.

The curating of the show aligns with the sentiments of authors Susan Liggett and Mike Corcoran (Liggett & Corcoran, 2018), who argue that exhibitions, due to their open, creative, and engaging nature, serve as an effective means of communication situated at the nexus of diverse audiences. They further assert that exhibitions play a significant role in overcoming challenges associated with interdisciplinary communication. The culmination of these meticulously orchestrated experiences produced a compilation of visual imagery that was multifaceted, innovative, and deeply interconnected with the individual's cognitive processes. Consequently, the exhibition transformed into a pivotal platform, operating as a visual language that encapsulates the essence of the ideas, concepts, and emotions that the students sought to convey (Figure 11).

The exhibition space in the Baroque Architectural Area fosters a dialogue between the viewer and the exhibited works. The on-site exhibition transcends a mere showcase of the students' creative outcomes and is a robust medium for communication and knowledge dissemination. In conjunction with the exhibition, presentations profoundly influenced this cross-disciplinary educational process. This approach transformed the display from a mere exhibition into a dynamic discourse within the public space, engendering a collaborative learning culture and shared understanding. This engagement nurtured a multicultural community ethos and facilitated an open dialogue surrounding the designs. Each exhibited piece initiates a conversation, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the students' visions and the subject matter explored during this workshop.

The workshop successfully established an environment of cultural integration deeply rooted in the local community's culture, customs, and everyday life, nurturing a harmonious coexistence based on mutual respect and symbiosis. Against this backdrop, not only was there a respect for local traditions but also an infusion of new ideas and innovative inspiration. The exhibition drew a continuous flow of visitors to the courtyard, engaging in meaningful interactions with students to explore the event's substance. Residents participating in the exhibition responded enthusiastically, looking to this platform to promote their native culture and hoping for it to gain wider recognition and preservation. Moreover, we aimed to avoid collecting data on-site to preserve the relaxed atmosphere of community interaction. Therefore, we relied on local media's online coverage to gauge the event's impact, with readership data from news pages indicating that the activity had reached a substance.⁴

3.6 Problems and Improvement

The workshop's exploration phase highlighted the influence of individual cultural and academic backgrounds on the perception and analysis of Baroque architecture. Students with interdisciplinary studies showcased a deeper, more integrated understanding of the Baroque environment, suggesting that a diverse academic palette may enhance the comprehensiveness of analysis. This inclination towards the structural at the expense of the historical and cultural suggests a potential disconnect the workshop's design may need to address.

Meanwhile, encouraging students to incorporate personal meaning into their art was commendable. Yet, critiquing and refining these expressions requires further elaboration to ensure that students can effectively evaluate and improve their work. The further incorporation of guided techniques for visual representation and structured critique sessions would likely enhance the learning outcomes of this phase. We aim to involve a more detailed strategy for engaging the audience and a systematic method for collecting feedback. This would significantly bolster the exhibition's role as an educational tool and a medium for interdisciplinary dialogue.

⁴ The event was reported by an local online media news, with a readership reaching 8,176 views, up to 31th March 2024. Source: https://zmt-m.hljtv.com/news_details.html?from=wap&id=819789×tamp=1707800454893.

4. Discussion and Future Work

By the preceding text, the discourse is sequentially delineated across three distinct phases. Initially, the discussion examines the impetus behind student engagement within architectural environments, investigating the presence and underlying logic of narrative elements within these spaces and delineating the interplay between the spatial constructs and the participants. Subsequently, the conversation pivots to how such interplay might be harnessed and transmuted into a pedagogical strategy, aiming to augment the students' competencies to interact with and comprehend the intricacies of cross-cultural narratives. Conclusively, the treatise probes into the potential ramifications of such pedagogical interventions on the autochthonous culture prevalent within the Baroque area.

4.1 The Phenomenon of Spatial Position

The entire process of the workshop was concentrated on the experiential aspect of the spatial environment, and what follows will discuss the fundamental framework of this theory. Langer and De Certeau (1988) referenced the theory of walking in the city to characterize Manhattan as a space constructed for life, where the complex grid of the city manifested a kind of syntactic logic similar to that of a literary text. Here, the "text" differs from the text in actual language; it is composed of the volumetric system of the urban landscape, edited for experience.

Through his perspective, the regularity of the city is transformed into a specific spatial language or code. Individuals navigate the city based on the physical clues of their surrounding environment. In the context of the Baroque area of Harbin, this means interacting with the rich architectural details that tell of the city's multicultural past, thus developing a dynamic urban experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002) proposed that space is an immersive experience transcending the physical environment. Walking through this historical complex validates this concept, where the spatial system constructed by the architectural facades is not just objective but an all-encompassing state.

Norberg-Schulz (1979) also wrote that the definition of space contains dual dimensions: one is geometrical, and the other relates to the cognitive "perceptual field." Space intersects these dimensions, where geometric complexity overlaps with cultural significance and links with participant interpretation. This linkage constructs a composite information, a process of individual thinking stimulated by the spatial environment to turn back to the space itself. The ensuing personal experience opposes purposeless imagination, instead searching for clues about the things themselves (Cody & Siravo, 2019). Thus, the experience is a perceptual response that evokes personalized and rich cognition, emphasizing the interaction between the architecture's physicality and the participants' subjectivity. This theoretical reflection supports the activities in the Baroque architectural scene, where cross-cultural thinking and the multicultural background of the regional environment interact, intertwining physical and abstract spaces and thereby sparking individual experiences and thoughts.

4.2 Art as Methods

Neri Oxman's Krebs cycle of creativity (Figure 12) is an interdisciplinary design methodology that links art, design, science, and engineering. It is inspired by the Krebs cycle in biochemistry, which is a fundamental process of energy transformation within cells. In the realm of design, Oxman's Krebs cycle of innovation draws on the concept of this biological cycle to advocate for a cyclical approach to innovation and collaboration among art, design, science, and engineering (Oxman, 2016).

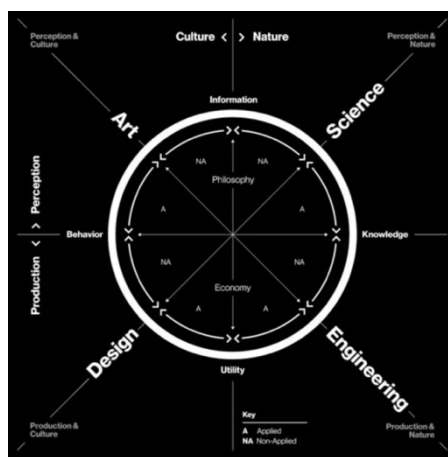


Figure 12. Krebs cycle of creativity.

In this cycle, art is explored for its decorative aspects and as a catalyst for innovation. Art fosters the development of innovative thinking through personalized and autonomous expression, as well as a critical attitude, creating scenarios filled with new ideas and imagination. This, in turn, establishes connections between societal needs and technological advancements, leading to the development of new designs and solutions (Blacklock, 2024) (HadaviBavili & İlçioğlu, 2024).

The intercultural emphasized in this paper is understood as an operational method that encourages students and practitioners to enhance their perception of cultural diversity through the practical activities of walking, observing, and reading. Furthermore, in image translation, practitioners are encouraged to cross cultural barriers and, by establishing a critical viewpoint, to more clearly recognize how their work translates environmental and cultural information. They are also encouraged to understand their position in this translation process and become aware of the skills that match this position (Roguska-Németh, 2023) (Gros, 2014) (Slak et al., 2023).

Translating cultural information trains each student in cultural sensitivity and autonomous critical capacity. Cultural sensitivity (Alam, 2020) allows for recognizing cultural differences. This cognitive ability is the foundation of independent criticism because practical critical thinking requires respect for the cultural content to be analyzed and its interpretation from multiple perspectives. Consequently, this process actively or passively trains the ability to convert structured thinking into abstraction, establishes unique perspectives, and enhances independent creativity. Furthermore, the artistic scene constructed by the entire exhibition serves as a contemplation and protest against the disappearance of regional cultural values.

4.3 Contributions

This event adopted a relatively conventional approach in its teaching methods. Still, its uniqueness lies in establishing direct connections with the region, creating a context for cross-cultural studies, and sparking dialogue and collaboration among participants to explore the potential influences of cultural diversity on regional development. Therefore, the discussion of the contributions can be divided into two parts: firstly, it is centered on the educational environment; secondly, it pertains to the potential impact on the Baroque architectural region.

Impact to the Educational Environment:

The ways of training the individual creativity were promoted by a collaborative learning technique in the workshop. The process, known as peer review in the classroom (Pirttinen & Leinonen, 2022), prepares students for future career-related assessments and collaboration (Le Sueur et al., 2020). Through this activity, the teaching module of peer review in the classroom has made the following three aspects of education:

First, facilitating active learning: Each student brings a unique perspective of knowledge. In explaining concepts to peers and providing constructive criticism, they immediately express and give feedback, evaluate arguments, identify strengths and weaknesses, and understand high-quality work standards.

Active involvement in the learning process through peer review promotes a deeper engagement with the material. Students are not passive information recipients but active learning environment contributors. When classroom peer review is well-structured and guided by clear objectives and standards, it can significantly enhance the educational experience. It supports a dynamic learning process in which students actively receive and provide feedback, making the educational journey more engaging and effective.

Secondly, increasing engagement and responsibility: Knowing that peers will review their work can motivate students to exert their most significant effort. Moreover, being responsible for providing high-quality feedback to classmates can create a sense of accountability.

Furthermore, encouraging a community of practice: Classroom peer review fosters collaboration with the broader community. Students engage in mutual learning and support each other's academic growth, leading to a more active and inclusive classroom environment.

Potential Impact to the Local Context:

The impact of this workshop event on the culture of the Baroque area is transient. In the long term, similar activities are a dynamic development process, and their changes will be subject to various objective factors that constrain and influence them. This will lead to the topics it triggers being broad and complex. In this teaching session, after the research, observation, and evaluation conducted jointly by teachers and students, individual creativity will potentially impact the historical architectural area in the following aspects.

First, establishing cross-cultural dialogues with an interregional perspective provides opportunities for interaction between local cultures and other cultural groups. Workshop participants, through multi-angle learning and diverse interpretation of the indigenous region's cultural arts, historical traditions, and values, can help the area's local people recognize the importance of individual thought. It enables them to rediscover their cultural interests from a broader perspective, to appreciate their cultural heritage, and to enhance their sense of identity and artistic confidence. Secondly, against the backdrop of continued economic downturn. Cross-cultural activities centered on art education potentially encourage local people to re-express the cultural value of regional architectural resources through artistic means, creating new economic growth points through cultural innovation. Furthermore, from an interregional perspective, the activities are driven by both cultural resources and economic transformation, enhancing the recognition of the importance of architectural culture and the awareness of the protection of the Baroque architectural complex.

5. Conclusion

The informational essence of this particular architectural complex transcends mere physicality. The material properties embody a confluence of diverse elements, serving as a direct expression of both historical context and regional cultural characteristics. The expression of personal practices requires a foundation of confidence. This confidence is deeply rooted in the student's cultural experiences and ability to project these onto the regional culture.

Therefore, this engagement with the built environment offers a unique perspective through which students can interpret and interact with their surroundings. Through this lens, they learn to see the layers of history and culture that buildings, spaces, and cities embody. When students approach their creative practices with a robust sense of self, informed by an intimate understanding of their cultural narratives, they are better positioned to contribute authentically to the regional cultural milieu. This interplay of self-awareness and cultural immersion ultimately cultivates a rich, nuanced dialogue between the individual and the region. This exchange can enrich both the personal and collective spheres of cultural expression.

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