

# Study on Creation Forms of Mural Paintings in Public Space in Light of Critical Regionalism

-- Taking Chongqing as an Example

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**Abstract:** Murals are attached to architecture and landscape, and are closely linked to people in the environment. Today in Chongqing, designers of public space mural paintings are facing increasing challenges. This paper analyzes the linguistic features of public space and mural paintings in public place, as well as issues related to the creation of public space murals. Through introducing the concept of critical regionalism which can guide the creation of public space murals in Chongqing, and exploring public space mural painting forms which are different from the traditional regionalism mode, this paper aims to clarify the relationships among people, public space and mural paintings.

## 1. Introduction

Public spaces are important parts of cities. They serve as the support and carrier of citizens' communication needs. The construction and development of public spaces show the overall development levels of cities and countries. "Openness, publicity and discussion" are basic attributes of public spaces. On the basis of these attributes, the most important manifestation of public space is the dynamic development. Public spaces include multiple space types. Different material spaces can be divided as streets, squares and parks, green spaces, nodes, rivers and lakes; different categories of space can be divided into living space, work space, transportation space and recreational space according to their functions. Public space can also be classified in accordance to the purpose of land usage. Public spaces are the most important part in the urban structure system, and are of great significance to the strengthening of the integrity and continuity of urban space.

Mural paintings are decorative wall paintings. Mural paintings were independent from other painting forms in ancient times; but they were "minority arts" belonged to noble and upper class at that time. Today, mural paintings have diversified models, and can be appreciated by ordinary people as well. Murals do not only organically integrate paintings with architecture, in order to improve the quality of space environment and enrich the connotation of city construction, but also express humanistic care and psychological aspects in public demands through appealing emotions. The relationship between murals and public space can be concluded as mutual restriction and mutual promotion. Murals are dependent on the environment; they need to combine with the space environment to create a system. Along with the increasingly aesthetic requirements of citizens, public space and murals should show features of openness, participation and spirituality. Public space murals can be divided into following types according to their use functions. First, residential murals created around the living space: they are most close to people's daily life, and have characteristics of interesting, living and artistic. Second, commercial murals created in shopping malls and enterprises: they are goal-oriented art works and have target populations. Third, cultural murals which can be found in schools and government agencies: they have obvious educational features, and are used to represent humanistic spirits like humanity history, patriotism, benevolence, etiquette and love for motherland. Fourth, pure decorative murals which are featured by artistic expression: they are painted to show designers' ideas, and are often rich in gradation and texture.

Today, modern mural paintings in public space have fully developed with the emerging of diversified building forms, as well as the development of environmental information technology and

open culture. Excellent public space mural works provide audiences with strong sense of vision, and can cause their sympathetic reactions. The participation and experience emotions can trigger audiences' mental activities. Through these works, audiences can notice the hierarchical structure and changes of space, and extend the environment of public space. When audiences understand the original intention of the design, or follow the memories of the times and feel the emotions of resonance, mural paintings will enrich their feelings and emotions. However, due to the uneven design levels of murals, some works in public space are inconsistent with the local natural, economic, social and cultural features. Mural designers are lack of consciousness of space function planning, and understandings of public space murals; some designers even do not have basic history knowledge. Thus, many paintings cannot match with the environment of public space from many aspects: space and size, form and structure, color and environment, content and audience, process and materials, space and time, as well as technology and ecology.

This paper takes the city of Chongqing, the youngest municipality directly under the central government in China as an example. In Chongqing, the most representative Ba Yu culture and immigration culture constitutes an important part of cultural images in public spaces. Chongqing has been open to immigration for a long time. In the period of Anti-Japanese War, Chongqing served as the political, economic and cultural center of the rear area; in early 60s, the "three line" construction brought large-scale migration population. Immigration offers Chongqing with modern science, culture and modern industrial civilization; it changes the population structure and improves the quality of the city. Immigration also promotes cultural exchanging, integration and communication. In the inheritance of Ba Yu culture, Chongqing also absorbs Wuyue culture, Qi-Lu culture, You Yan culture and other cultures. The regional culture of Chongqing, which combines the firm and persistent Ba Yu culture with the open and tolerant immigration culture, brings the urban space of this city with infinite charms of diversity.

In the public space of Chongqing today, mural works which reproduce or even remold the symbols of traditional culture are common seen. Many public space murals in Chongqing adopt the form of "copy and paste" to inherit traditional culture. These paintings which remain formalism in historical inheritance can even be printed in historical textbooks as illustrations. They directly refer to traditional elements, or deliberately imitate traditional elements. Designers use Han and Tang culture to reflect civilization of Xi'an, use prairie and horses to represent Inner Mongolia, use the Great Wall to show Beijing, and use the upright folk custom, spicy hotpots, mountain buildings, beautiful girls, the Three Gorges Dam and work songs of boatmen to express the image of Chongqing. Thus, mural works of public space in Chongqing fail to present this city with unique performances and recognition. Audiences can not compatible with the identity of environment. Some the mural works have caused network disputes and media questioning already, which represents the dissatisfaction of citizens on public art works.

Contemporary society needs initiative and creative public mural works with vitality. Ideal murals can express the profound connotation of regional culture, demonstrate the spirit of times and promote sustainable development; they can also promote the pioneering spirit, and help citizens to realize human values and give full play to people's subjective initiatives. Chongqing developed rapidly in modern times; the modern times call for innovation in public space murals of Chongqing. Mural designers need to use their creation consciousness, and create murals which can play a role in public space of Chongqing. Starting from the interaction between city environment and further understanding of cultural spirit, corresponding countermeasures should be proposed, while critical regionalism should be introduced as the creation philosophy of public space murals. Based on above analysis, this paper puts forward to following suggestions on the forms of creation.

## **2. Chongqing mural works in public spaces should combine history with reality**

The soul of the mountain city of Chongqing is hidden behind its natural and historical relics, and represented in architecture styles, street layout, customs and folk lives. How to show the soul of Chongqing city in mural works? First, designers need to understand the significance of representing it in mural painting creation. History is a living thing; murals cannot simply copy or imitate the history.

They should emphasize the combination of history and reality. Public spaces are important in the life of citizens. When creating murals, elements about historical values of citizens, such as their living forms, life styles, as well as their thinking and production modes should be kept. Through extraction, detachment and recombination, these elements can express the historical and regional characteristics in new ways.

### **3. Chongqing mural works in public place should emphasize the participation of citizens**

Human is the main body of public space. Public space arts should start from the values of human existence, and always adhere to core of serving for human beings and the survival values of human beings. Murals which are suitable for the era and the environment can effectively bridge the communication gaps between different audiences. Citizens help to form the unique picture of the city and make the city more attractive. In order to achieve the goal of designing "people first" murals in public space, procedures below should be followed. First of all, designers must understand the importance of human beings in current space. In public space, people may stand still, walk in a hurry, sit and watch or listen to conversations; these are most basic behaviors. Through appropriate artistic expression, murals works can communicate with audiences with different actions. Audiences are able to be interested in mural works, and realize the starting points and key points of the design. These murals reflect people's inner needs and cause their emotional resonance. Designers need to understand the space behaviors of audiences, and taking them as the starting point of the design. It is a great honor and challenge for designers to create murals works in leisure square which can attract people's attention, make them stop, appreciate, and communicate with others. It is the premise of people's participation in public space.

There is another important element in audience's perception of mural paintings: speed. For instance, in Chongqing metro stations with great number of travelers, mural paintings are easily ignored by people who pass during the rush hour. For murals painted on both sides of short tunnels, they cannot be appreciated by passengers or drivers due to the high speed of trains. High speed motion greatly reduces humans' abilities of detail observation and information processing. Therefore, the moving speed of viewers should also be noticed in design.

### **4. Third, designers of mural works in public spaces should pay attention to the timeliness of murals**

Due to the needs of urban planning and construction, present public spaces are changing and integrating at all time. The timeliness of mural works in public space also affects the design of mural works. Timeliness is the effectiveness of something in a certain period of time. A large relief mural in square is likely to become a demolition object in the new planning; when the functions of a public space declines, its artistic creation may be forgotten. Even if the place does not change, mural works will lose their corresponding social effectiveness when the users are changing. Nowadays, consumption patterns are changing; habits of sports are changing; business models are changing. Murals creation should also change more frequently to strengthen its sense of existence and space value. Relevant departments should establish an assessment mechanism to timely dismantle public art works which are ignored or even disgusted by citizens. The connotation of Chongqing public space murals creation should be constantly updated, explored and improved according to the changing social environment and public demands.

### **5. Critical regionalism should become the ideological core of public space mural creation**

Firstly, public space works usually derived from regional culture. Public art requires local features. Regionalism does not only study the development of Chongqing traditional Ba Yu culture and immigration culture in-depth, but also explores and summarizes the geographical features of Chongqing. It is the guiding ideology of public space art creation in Chongqing. However, public space murals created under the traditional regionalism are lack of refined regional elements and

reflection on the impacts of globalization. Critical regionalism is the extension and development of traditional regionalism; it absorbs new technology and concepts, and concerns culture and environment in social reality. Critical regionalism employs an open, compatible way to decompose and extract regionalism and realism, and ultimately find a balanced and open method to show the characteristics of the times.

Secondly, an important element of critical regionalism is the relationship between "space and form". It is the core content of critical regionalism. The "space and form" concept emphasizes specific factors related to the place, such as terrain, light, air, material, culture and technology. Under the influence of modernism and the modeling development of public space in Chongqing, many public space has been labeled as "no difference". In this situation, regional and cultural elements must be embedded in mural works of public space. Based on critical inheritance of regional culture, mural paintings reflect regional culture through design forms, and serve as the media performance and material carrier of local culture; the design of mural paintings must be rooted in the environment. The "space and form" relationship must be combined with critical regionalism. In terms of place spirit construction, regional and cultural spirit of Chongqing can be taken as the objects of expression. Artistic conception of these objects can be obtained through metaphor and modern mural design methods. When designing murals, the sense of touch is as important as vision; other sensory experiences such as hearing and smelling can also be employed, so as to create mural works that embodied with the spirit of Chongqing and provide public citizens with psychological resonance and sense of belonging.

Thirdly, critical regionalism has open, diversified and symbiotic characteristics; it uses dynamic values to evaluate the sustainable development. The creation of mural paintings in public space should follow the idea of critical regionalism, carry forward the features of regional culture, protect the essence of traditional culture, pay attention to the needs of modern people, and seek for the balance between traditional regionalism and globalization. Public space murals created under the guidance of critical regionalism can be seen as the development and protection of traditional regional culture and material civilization, and the abandon of traditional regionalism expressions such as "mechanically copy" and "take-in". The designing philosophy pays attention to the extraction of emotional elements, and strengthening the emotional appeal of people in public spaces. The application of critical regionalism in architecture and landscape design has been advocated and applied to practical projects. Murals, especially public space mural paintings, have close relationship with architecture and landscape. Changing from regionalism to critical regionalism is the historic demand of public space murals.

## **6. Conclusions**

The critique attitude of critical regionalism advocates re-design and re-explain of public space art works. In this rapidly changing city of Chongqing, critical regionalism is a more positive and objective attitude which is in line with modern aesthetic and value standards. The construction of city culture and public space in Chongqing cannot be accomplished without the respect for regional culture. Meanwhile, from the perspective of globalization, a more open and objective attitude towards regional culture is needed to achieve the balance between traditional regional culture and globalization, and to create public space mural paintings embedded with features of Chongqing.

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