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DESIGN INTERVENTIONS AND HERITAGE REVITALIZATION IN HISTORIC URBAN PARKS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SUZHOU DONGYUAN PARK AND SHANGHAI PEACE PARK

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Abstract

In the process of urban renewal in China, the redevelopment of historic urban parks concerns not only the enhancement of public space quality but also the preservation and regeneration of historical and cultural heritage. However, existing studies have primarily focused on the post-renewal spatial form and landscape effects, with limited exploration of how design interventions specifically influence the processes and outcomes of heritage revitalization. This paper takes Suzhou Dongyuan Park and Shanghai Peace Park, two representative historic urban parks in the Yangtze River Delta region, as case studies. Through field observation, document analysis, and comparative research, it examines the mechanisms by which different design intervention approaches affect the revitalization of heritage values. The findings show that Dongyuan Park's renewal, centred on cultural continuity, strengthens local identity and historical perception by restoring garden patterns and extending traditional spatial imagery. In contrast, Peace Park's renovation, guided by functional activation, enhances public accessibility and vitality through boundary openness and facility reorganization, but to some extent weakens historical narratives and cultural memory. These two approaches represent distinct renewal models: context oriented and function-oriented design interventions. The study argues that the landscape design process serves as a key mediating mechanism in heritage revitalization, balancing the tension between historicity and contemporaneity. The research provides process-based insights and practical references for the future design and management of historic urban parks.

Keywords: Historic Urban Parks, Design Intervention, Heritage Revitalization, Suzhou Dongyuan Park, Shanghai Peace Park

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INTRODUCTION

Amid the accelerating pace of global urbanization and the growing demand for sustainable transformation, the renewal and regeneration of historic urban parks have become a crucial topic in urban heritage conservation and public space governance. These parks serve not only as vital components of the urban ecological and recreational system, but also as key carriers of historical memory, collective emotions, and cultural identity (Ripp et al., 2025) .

Since the introduction of UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) framework in 2011, urban heritage conservation has shifted from static preservation toward dynamic integration, emphasizing coordination between heritage conservation and urban development (UNESCO, 2011; Cunha Ferreira et al., 2023). Within this perspective, historic urban parks are understood as dynamic cultural landscapes that mediate between past and present, where heritage value is continuously rearticulated through spatial continuity, place identity, public life, and user experience shaped by urban design principles (Rodwell, 2022; Liang et al., 2023; Hashim et al., 2025).

As Chinese cities enter a phase of urban regeneration focusing on existing built-up areas (so-called "stock renewal"), the revitalization of historic urban parks has become an integral component of broader urban renewal agendas. In practice, however, achieving a balance between modern functional improvement and the continuity of historical and cultural values has emerged as a central challenge for both design and management (Zhao et al., 2023). Studies on urban regeneration and public space have highlighted the importance of governance mechanisms, community participation, and multi-dimensional design considerations in sustaining public space transformation (Lim et al., 2024; Sabri & Ponrahono, 2024). Against this background, some projects emphasize openness and accessibility through spatial reconfiguration and facility upgrading (Zhu, 2023), whereas others prioritize cultural identity by restoring traditional layouts, landscape imagery, and local memory. These varied approaches reflect the multiplicity of design strategies adopted in the renewal of historic urban parks.

In this context, exploring how design interventions can mediate the balance between "historicity and contemporaneity" has become a key topic in understanding the mechanisms of revitalizing China's historic urban park heritage. This involves not only spatial and functional renewal, but also the reproduction of heritage value through design processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Historic Urban Parks and Heritage Revitalization

As an integral component of the urban cultural landscape, historic urban parks not only embody the spatial patterns and aesthetic traditions of specific historical

periods but also bear witness to the evolution of urban social life (ICOMOS-IFLA, 2017). International scholarship generally regards them as multifaceted heritage systems that integrate ecological, social, and cultural functions, emphasizing the regeneration of heritage and the reproduction of values within the broader context of urban renewal (Graham, Ashworth, & Tunbridge, 2016). From this perspective, the conservation of parks extends beyond morphological restoration to focus on the continuity of cultural processes and social practices (Ginzarly et al., 2024).

Within the Chinese academic discourse, relevant research has primarily focused on topics such as “historic park renewal,” “urban renewal and cultural heritage continuity,” and “renovation and redesign of old parks” (Ma et al., 2024). Chinese studies largely focus on balancing historical preservation with contemporary functional demands, yet remain predominantly outcome-oriented, with most analyses centred on spatial form and design results rather than on how the renewal process itself shapes the generation and expression of heritage values (Lian et al., 2024; Li, 2024; Wang et al., 2023).

While both international and Chinese studies acknowledge the importance of historic urban park revitalization, limited attention has been paid to how design mediates the generation and expression of heritage values within the renewal process. Existing scholarship conceptualizes heritage value as a multidimensional and dynamic construct, shaped through social practices and collective memory rather than static preservation. This perspective underpins the examination of design intervention as a mediating mechanism in this study.

Research on Design Intervention in the Context of Urban Park Renewal

With the shift in urban renewal paradigms, design has increasingly been recognized as a key driver shaping social and cultural systems. The term design intervention emerged prominently in design activism and design for social innovation, denoting strategic and spatial actions through which designers engage existing systems to catalyze new values and behavioral patterns (Markussen, 2013; Manzini, 2015). Within landscape and heritage studies, this notion has been mobilized to explain how design helps negotiate a balance between historicity and contemporaneity in the interplay between conservation and renewal (Ripp et al., 2025).

Existing research generally recognizes that design interventions not only alter the material fabric but, more importantly, shape public perception and the reproduction of heritage values (Ginzarly et al., 2024). Through the reorganization of space, the reshaping of experiences, and the fostering of social participation, design transforms heritage from a static historical object into a dynamic cultural practice. This perspective has driven a shift in heritage research from outcome-oriented analysis toward process-oriented inquiry.

In China, research on design intervention in urban park renewal remains limited, with studies largely focusing on spatial composition and technical solutions (Wen et al., 2023), while paying insufficient attention to how design actions mediate the generation of heritage values within renewal processes.

Theoretical Implications and Research Gaps

In summary, existing research reveals three major gaps: a prevailing focus on spatial outcomes with limited attention to design processes and value reproduction; insufficient empirical examination of historic urban parks as a distinct heritage category; and the absence of conceptually interpretable frameworks within Chinese scholarship on design processes.

Addressing these gaps, this study adopts a process-oriented perspective and proposes a two-layer analytical framework—*Design Intervention and Heritage Value Presentation*—to examine how design interventions mediate the manifestation of heritage values. Through a comparative analysis of Suzhou Dongyuan Park and Shanghai Peace Park, the study explores differentiated outcomes and shared mechanisms of design-led heritage revitalization.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts an interpretive comparative case study approach to explore the underlying logic linking design actions to the regeneration of heritage values in the renewal of historic urban parks, through the lens of design intervention. Drawing on a comprehensive analysis of multi-source data, it conducts an in-depth examination of two representative cases to reveal how design intervention operates at the project level.

Specifically, the research design of this study comprised four main steps: (1) Defining the research questions and analytical logic; (2) Selecting two representative historic urban parks as case studies: Suzhou Dongyuan Park and Shanghai Peace Park in the Yangtze River Delta region; (3) Collecting multi-source data, including field observations, informal conversations with park users, and documentary materials; (4) Conducting a comparative analysis of the identified types of design interventions, manifestations of landscape change, and pathways of heritage value regeneration in the two cases. Multiple data sources were cross-referenced to enhance interpretive robustness.

Case Selection

Figure 1 shows the locations of Suzhou Dongyuan Park and Shanghai Peace Park, the two case study parks in the Yangtze River Delta region of China.

The selection criteria were as follows: (1) Each park possesses notable historical and cultural significance, exemplifying the typical attributes of a

historic urban park; (2) Both have undergone recent processes of renovation or revitalization, providing representative examples of design intervention and heritage revitalization; (3) Their geographical proximity within the same urban agglomeration (the Yangtze River Delta) helps to minimize potential variations arising from differences in regional culture and policy environments, thereby providing a comparable context for examining different design interventions in historic urban park renewal. Together, these characteristics make the two parks appropriate case studies for exploring the relationship between design intervention and heritage revitalization under a shared regional context.

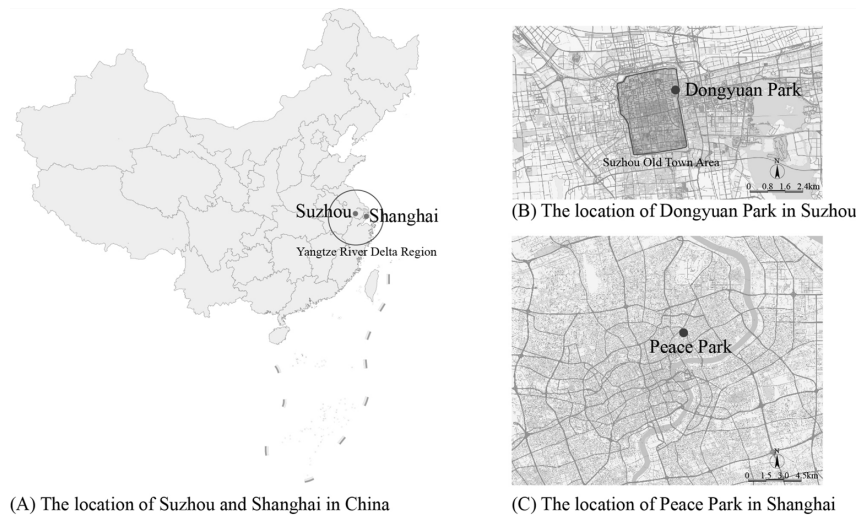


Figure 1: Locations of Dongyuan Park (Suzhou) and Peace Park (Shanghai) in the Yangtze River Delta Region

Source: Base map adapted from a commercially licensed Chinese vector map, modified by the author for academic use

Case 1: Suzhou Dongyuan Park

Suzhou Dongyuan Park is located in Suzhou's Old Town (Figure 2). As an early public park, it incorporates Suzhou's local garden traditions. The park underwent a renewal beginning in 2017, followed by a smaller-scale adjustment completed in 2024.



Figure 2: Location and spatial context of Dongyuan Park, Suzhou
Source: Google Earth, 2025. Annotated and modified by the author for research use.

Case 2: Shanghai Peace Park

Shanghai Peace Park is located in Hongkou District, Shanghai (Figure 3). Established in 1958, Peace Park is a historic urban park within Shanghai's inner ring area. The park underwent a major landscape renewal in 2022.



Figure 3: Location and spatial context of Peace Park, Shanghai
Source: Google Earth, 2025. Annotated and modified by the author for research use.

Data Sources and Collection

Field observations were conducted from March to August 2025 to examine spatial configuration, functional use, and user activities in the two parks. Observations focused on key elements related to design intervention, including spatial structure, circulation, functional nodes, and landscape features. Field notes and photographs were used to capture representative spatial conditions and patterns of use.

User perceptions were explored through informal, open-ended conversations with park users and nearby residents during field visits. These conversations aimed to understand users' experiences of spatial change, sense of place, and daily use patterns. Key impressions were noted and synthesized to support interpretive analysis.

Documentary materials, including official planning documents, design reports, and relevant academic literature, were used to contextualize observed changes and identify intended design strategies.

Field notes and photographs were reviewed iteratively to identify recurring patterns of spatial change and user behaviours, which informed the subsequent analytical categorization.

Analytical Framework

Design interventions were identified through interpretive analysis of field observations, documentary materials, and user perceptions. Observable changes in spatial patterns, functional organization, and landscape imagery before and after renewal were treated as empirical indicators of underlying design actions.

Based on this identification process, this study establishes an analytical framework entitled “*Design Intervention–Heritage Value Manifestation*” (Figure 4). The framework adopts a process-oriented perspective to examine how design actions in historic urban park renewal influence heritage value manifestation.

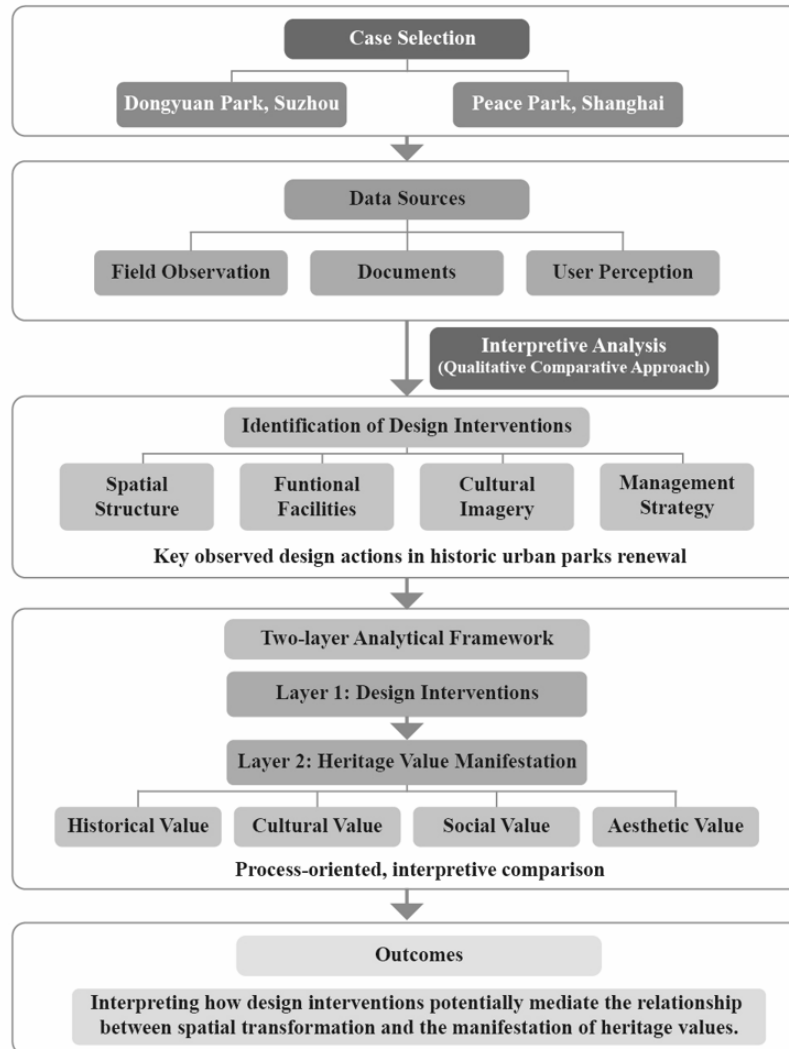


Figure 4: Analytical framework of the study

Source: Drawn by the author.

The framework consists of two analytical layers. The design layer categorizes design interventions into four dimensions: spatial structure, functions and facilities, landscape imagery, and management strategies. The value layer examines how these interventions shape heritage value manifestation across historical, cultural, social, and aesthetic dimensions.

In the analytical process, empirical observations and documentary evidence were first organized according to the four dimensions of design

intervention. Key patterns of spatial change, functional transformation, and landscape modification were then identified for each case. These identified interventions were subsequently interpreted in relation to corresponding heritage value dimensions, allowing the study to trace how specific design actions contribute to the manifestation of different types of heritage values.

Using this two-layer framework, a comparative analysis of Suzhou Dongyuan Park and Shanghai Peace Park was conducted to examine similarities and differences in design intervention approaches and their associated heritage value outcomes. This process enabled the identification of underlying mechanisms linking design intervention to heritage revitalization.

FINDINGS: DESIGN INTERVENTIONS AND HERITAGE REVITALIZATION IN TWO HISTORIC URBAN PARKS

Design Intervention Characteristics of Suzhou Dongyuan Park

Design Intervention

a. Spatial Structure Intervention: The spatial renewal of Dongyuan Park retained the original garden pattern while reorganizing the former zoo area through an open spatial framework informed by traditional Chinese landscape principles. As illustrated in Figure 5, the renovation transformed the zoo area from an enclosed and fragmented layout into a permeable core space structured by an east–west axis, enhancing spatial continuity, orientation, and hierarchy. The original water system was preserved, reinforcing the “water-surrounding-island” landscape pattern.

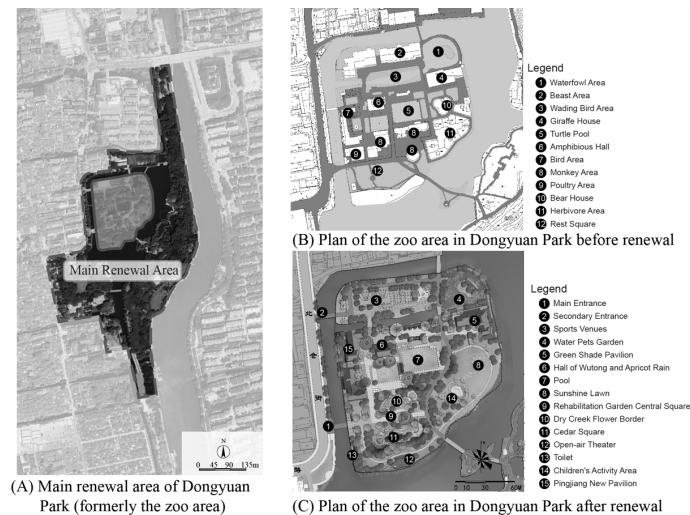


Figure 5: Spatial transformation of Dongyuan Park's former zoo area.
 Source: Drawn by the author based on field survey and design documents.

b. Functional and Facility Intervention: Integrating Ecology and Everyday Life. Following the renovation, Dongyuan Park evolved from a single-purpose recreational space into a multifunctional landscape serving diverse user needs. New play, leisure, sports, and rehabilitation facilities were introduced, while sponge city measures, including rain gardens and bioswales, enhanced stormwater management and ecological resilience.

c. Landscape Imagery Intervention: Cultural Continuity and Place Narrative. Although the zoo area was substantially reorganized, representative historical landscape elements were retained to preserve the park's historic character. Traditional garden-style service buildings were introduced to reinforce the character of Suzhou's classical garden heritage, while the redesigned aquatic pet garden retained elements of the site's former zoo identity.



Figure 6: Functional and cultural interventions in the renewed area of Dongyuan Park.
Source: Photos taken by the author, 2025.

d. Management Strategy Intervention: From Enclosure to “Boundlessness”. Dongyuan Park was historically enclosed by boundary walls that separated it from the surrounding urban space. The 2024 “Boundless Park” renovation removed these walls and renewed the pavement, strengthening physical and visual connections between the park and the surrounding urban fabric.

Heritage Value Presentation

a. Historical Value: Continuity of Spatial Pattern and Regeneration of Memory. The renewal of Dongyuan Park maintains the overall historic garden pattern by preserving the original water system, axial structure, and key landscape elements. The former zoo area has been reorganized through the reintegration of fragmented spaces into the traditional garden framework, incorporating historical features such as ancient trees, stone inscriptions, and the wisteria trellis as material references to urban memory and historical continuity. These interventions reinforce historical value by maintaining the continuity of the park's spatial identity while accommodating contemporary public use. Informal conversations with park users further suggested that the retained landscape elements strengthened their memories of the former park.

b. Cultural Value: Contemporary Interpretation of Traditional Imagery. The renewal of Dongyuan Park reinterprets traditional Suzhou Garden imagery through contemporary architectural expression. Newly added service buildings adopt the form and scale of traditional garden structures while using modern materials, enabling a cultural continuity that connects historic garden aesthetics with contemporary urban life.

c. Social Value: Enhancement of Publicness and Everyday Life. The renewal of Dongyuan Park enhances publicness by increasing openness and functional diversity. The removal of boundary walls strengthens connections with surrounding neighbourhoods, allowing everyday activities to extend into the park. A range of shared spaces, including children's play areas, rehabilitation gardens, and sports facilities, supports diverse user groups and facilitates everyday social interaction. Several nearby residents reported that the open layout and diversified facilities made the park more convenient for daily recreation and social interaction.

d. Aesthetic Value: Reconstruction of Landscape Experience and Renewal of Spatial Aesthetics. The renewal of Dongyuan Park enhances aesthetic experience through the reorganization of spatial structure and landscape hierarchy. Axial vistas and the reconnected water system generate layered visual sequences, while

the integration of traditional garden composition with open contemporary spaces creates a balanced aesthetic combining classical ambience and modern leisure qualities.

The renewal of Dongyuan Park reflects a design logic centred on cultural continuity, reinforcing local identity and heritage value.

Design Intervention Characteristics of Shanghai Peace Park **Design Intervention**

a. **Spatial Structure Intervention: Integrating Patterns and Strengthening Connectivity.** The renewal of Peace Park reorganized its spatial structure through a loop-based circulation system that integrated functional zones while retaining the original topography and water system. Boardwalks and waterfront platforms further strengthened spatial continuity and the relationship between land and water.

b. **Functional and Facility Intervention: Constructing an Integrated Activity System.** The renewal of Peace Park introduced multifunctional facilities for all-age users, including play, fitness, leisure, and cultural spaces, creating a more diverse and inclusive public environment. Rain gardens and bioswales further enhanced ecological performance while supporting everyday park use.

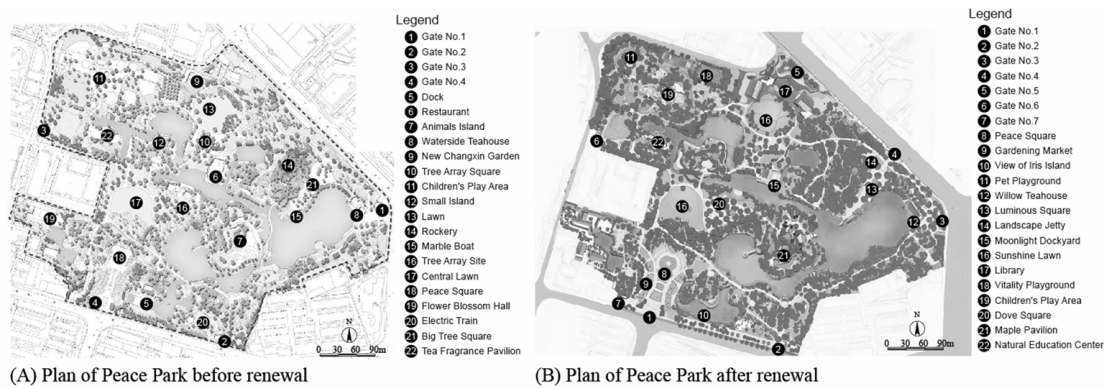


Figure 7: Spatial transformation of the Peace Park.

Source: Adapted and annotated by the author based on planning documents from the Hongkou District Greening Management Affairs Centre (2020)

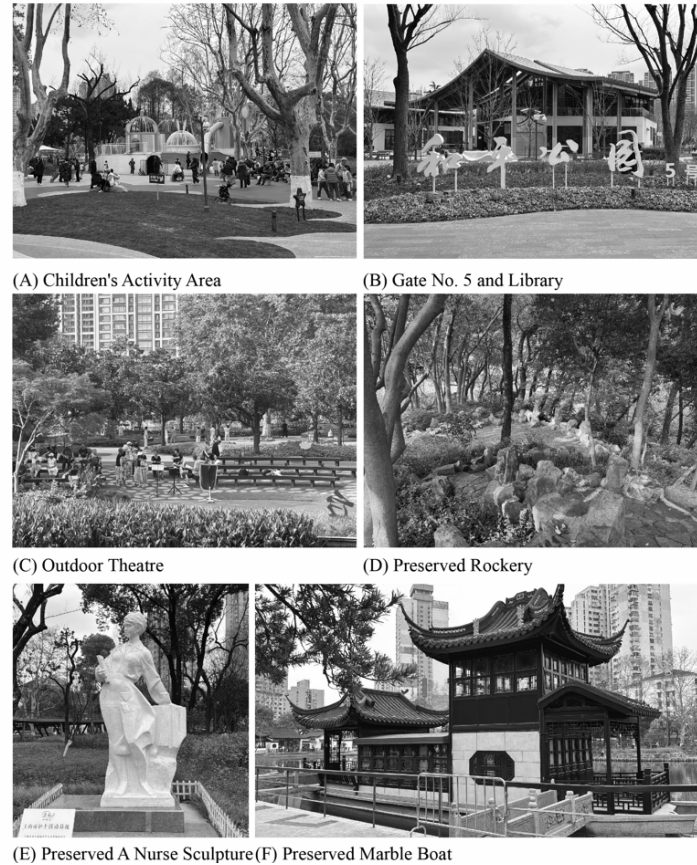


Figure 8: Functional and facility interventions in the renewed Peace Park.

Source: Photos taken by the author, 2025.

c. **Landscape Imagery Intervention: Contemporary Interpretation of Historical Context.** The renewal of Peace Park reinterprets historical landscape imagery by preserving key garden structures and heritage features while introducing contemporary architectural elements with restrained forms and materials. Traditional elements such as pavilions, rockeries, and waterside structures are retained as historical references, while animal sculptures introduced in the former Animal Island area symbolically recall the site's original identity.

d. **Management Strategy Intervention: From Enclosure to Shared Openness.** The renewal of Peace Park is defined by its boundary opening strategy, which serves as the key to achieving urban integration. By removing perimeter walls, expanding entrances, and redesigning the street interfaces, the park establishes a seamless connection with the surrounding urban fabric.

The renewal of Peace Park adopts a “park–community” model that integrates physical openness with community-oriented functions. This integrated approach has transformed the park from an enclosed green enclave into a shared urban public space supporting accessibility, social inclusiveness, and long-term vitality.

Heritage Value Presentation

a. **Historical Value: Preserving Memory and Continuing Spatial Structure.** The renewal of Peace Park preserves historical continuity by retaining the original water system, topography, and key landscape elements. Iconic features such as the stone boat, lakeside pavilion and rockery are reintegrated into the circulation structure, sustaining the site’s traditional mountain–water garden pattern. In reorganized areas, in-situ renewal through axial alignments and circular pathways maintains historical legibility and spatial continuity. Informal conversations with long-term users suggested that the retention of familiar landscape elements helped maintain their sense of connection with the former park.

b. **Cultural Value: Modern Reinterpretation of Urban Memory.** The renewal of Peace Park reinterprets urban cultural memory through a contemporary design language informed by the city’s modern urban context. Cultural interventions such as public sculptures, themed gardens, and night lighting embed cultural expression into everyday use, shifting heritage representation toward experiential and life-oriented engagement.

c. **Social Value: Enhancing Publicness and Inclusiveness.** The renewal of Peace Park enhances social value by integrating multifunctional programs within an open management framework. The park shifts from a closed, single-purpose recreational space to an all-day urban public node that supports diverse user groups and everyday social interaction, reinforcing publicness, inclusiveness, and spatial equity. Several nearby residents reported that the removal of boundary walls and the addition of new public facilities encouraged more frequent daily visits.

d. **Aesthetic Value: Reconstructing the Vitality of Landscape Experience.** The renewal of Peace Park enhances aesthetic experience through improved spatial order and visual coherence. Circular pathways, lake surfaces, and varied topography generate layered visual perspectives, while seasonal planting and lighting introduce temporal variation, contributing to a dynamic urban park landscape.

The renewal of Peace Park reflects a shift toward functional activation and socially driven regeneration.

DISCUSSION

Common Mechanisms: How Design Interventions Drive Heritage Revitalization

Despite differing renewal orientations, both cases show that design interventions promote heritage revitalization through a “space–experience–value” transmission chain. This mechanism is consistent with the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, which emphasizes the dynamic interaction between spatial transformation, social practices, and heritage value reproduction (UNESCO, 2011; Ripp et al., 2025). It also supports the view that heritage is continuously constructed through everyday use and experience rather than statically preserved (Ginzarly et al., 2024). By restructuring spatial patterns and boundaries, design actions generate renewed spatial experiences that encourage everyday use and emotional attachment, aligning with research on public engagement in urban spaces (Lim et al., 2024; Hashim et al., 2025). This study further extends existing research by identifying a process-based mechanism linking spatial change, experiential engagement, and heritage value regeneration, thereby providing a theoretical explanation of how design interventions mediate heritage revitalization in historic urban parks.

Differentiated Focuses: Diverging Points of Value Activation

While both parks promote revitalization through spatial restructuring, they differ in value activation. Dongyuan Park emphasizes cultural continuity, whereas Peace Park prioritizes functional activation. This reflects the tension between conservation-oriented and function-oriented approaches in urban renewal (Wang et al., 2023; Zhu, 2023). Unlike previous studies, this research highlights these approaches as complementary pathways, revealing a dual logic balancing cultural continuity with socially driven regeneration.

Implications

The findings suggest that effective revitalization requires integrating cultural continuity with functional adaptability, reflecting the need to balance historicity and contemporaneity within the HUL perspective (Sabri & Ponrahono, 2024). Future research could extend this process-oriented approach by incorporating a broader range of cases and mixed methods to further explore the dynamics of design-led heritage revitalization across different contexts.

For conservation authorities, heritage conservation objectives should be incorporated into the early stages of park renewal to ensure that historically significant landscape elements and spatial patterns are systematically identified and retained. For park managers, adaptive management strategies should balance heritage conservation with contemporary public use, thereby supporting the long-term sustainability of historic urban parks.

CONCLUSION

This study examines how design interventions contribute to heritage revitalization in historic urban parks through a comparative analysis of Suzhou Dongyuan Park and Shanghai Peace Park. Using a two-layer analytical framework, it identifies two renewal approaches: culturally oriented and function-oriented design interventions.

The findings show that both approaches promote heritage revitalization through spatial restructuring and experiential renewal, linking spatial transformation with user engagement and everyday use. This study develops a process-based analytical framework that explains how design interventions mediate heritage value manifestation through a “space–experience–value” mechanism.

From a practical perspective, the results highlight the need to balance cultural continuity with functional adaptability, ensuring that historic urban parks remain both culturally meaningful and socially active. Future research could expand the range of cases and integrate mixed methods to further explore design-led heritage revitalization across different contexts.

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