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A STUDY ON THE TYPES OF INTERACTION MECHANISMS BETWEEN PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND SPATIAL DESIGN IN THE MICRO-RENEWAL OF PUBLIC SPACES IN OLD RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

As urban renewal in China shifts from large-scale demolition and reconstruction to small-scale and incremental micro-renewal approaches, the regeneration of public spaces in old residential communities has become a crucial issue for optimizing urban stock and promoting social sustainability. In recent years, public participation has been widely encouraged at both policy and practice levels, yet the degree of synergy between public participation and spatial design varies significantly across different projects. This study adopts the Expression–Translation–Response–Feedback (ETRF) process logic, widely taken for granted in both theoretical discussions and practical operations, as an analytical framework to examine how public demands are conveyed, translated, and responded to within design and governance processes. Based on a comparative study of six representative old residential communities in Shanghai (Hongxu, Shanbei, Xiuyuan, Sanlinyuan, Boyi, and Bosan), five types of interactive mechanisms are identified: highly collaborative, balanced collaborative, partial feedback, representative collaborative, and technology-dominated types. Furthermore, a collaboration–disruption continuum is proposed. The findings indicate that institutionalized participation channels and the depth of design translation jointly influence the level of collaboration, while social trust and feedback continuity affect the long-term viability of the mechanisms. Theoretically, this study provides an analytical path for understanding different types of interactive mechanisms; practically, it offers type-based references and optimization strategies for participatory renewal in the fields of landscape architecture and community planning.

Keywords: Public spaces in old residential communities, Micro-renewal, Public participation, Spatial design, Interaction mechanism

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INTRODUCTION

As urban development enters the stage of stock renewal, high-density cities have increasingly shifted from large-scale demolition toward small-scale and incremental micro-renewal (Wu et al., 2023). In this context, the renewal of public spaces in old residential communities has become an important means of improving livability and social cohesion. Nevertheless, many communities continue to face aging facilities, underused spaces, and fragmented management (He et al., 2025). Recent policies, such as “Complete Community Construction” and “Community Micro-Renewal,” therefore emphasize public participation to promote a transition from physical upgrading to social co-construction.

Despite this emphasis, collaboration outcomes vary substantially across projects (Innes & Booher, 2018; Sun et al., 2022; Watson, 2014). While some initiatives achieve effective coordination between public participation and spatial design, others remain dominated by formalistic participation or technical decision-making, resulting in weak integration of public demands. This discrepancy raises a key question: why do projects operating under similar participatory frameworks produce markedly different collaborative outcomes and resident perceptions?

Existing studies conceptualize public participation through collaborative rationality and responsive design, highlighting communication, adaptation, and alignment between social needs and spatial responses (Carmona, 2019; Dovey & Pafka, 2020; Innes & Booher, 2018; Yang, Bose, & Horrigan, 2025). However, prior research has largely focused on participation levels or procedural arrangements, with limited attention to how public demands are translated into design responses and how feedback is perceived and sustained in practice (Watson, 2014; Yang et al., 2025). Moreover, participatory processes are frequently shaped by institutional constraints, resource dependency, and trust relations (Li, Zhang, & Zhu, 2023; Marzukhi et al., 2022; Watson, 2014; Xue, Wang, & Li, 2021; Zanudin et al., 2024), which help account for persistent gaps between official participation narratives and residents’ lived experiences in renewal practices.

Across related fields, elements such as expression, translation, response, and feedback are repeatedly discussed in a fragmented manner, often focusing on specific stages or actors, while their sequential and processual relationships remain largely implicit. Building on this observation, this study adopts the Expression–Translation–Response–Feedback (ETRF) process logic as an analytical lens for examining interaction patterns between public participation and spatial design. Rather than serving as a normative process model, the ETRF framework provides a structured lens for examining interaction patterns between public participation and spatial design. Using six micro-renewal cases in Shanghai’s old residential communities, this study conducts a comparative

analysis to identify interaction mechanism types and to construct a collaboration–disruption continuum.

The contribution of this study is twofold. Theoretically, this study uses the ETRF process logic as an analytical basis to develop a type-oriented research pathway for identifying interaction mechanisms, thereby extending comparative research on public participation–spatial design interactions (Kamalipour & Dovey, 2020). Practically, it offers comparative insights into collaboration patterns across old residential communities, providing references for community governance, planning practice, and landscape architecture renewal (Li et al., 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

As urban renewal enters the stage of stock transformation, micro-renewal of public spaces in old residential communities has become an important direction in China's urban governance (Wu et al., 2023). Beyond physical renovation, micro-renewal involves processes of social collaboration and design interaction (Yue, Lin, & Gong, 2021). Public participation has therefore been widely emphasized in planning, landscape architecture, and urban design as a mechanism for promoting sustainability and spatial equity (Yang et al., 2025). However, collaborative effectiveness varies substantially across projects, and disconnections between public expression and design response remain common, highlighting the need for a mechanism-oriented and type-sensitive analytical approach.

Public Participation and Collaborative Governance

The theoretical roots of public participation are commonly traced to Arnstein's (1969) ladder, which conceptualizes participation through power redistribution. Innes and Booher (2018) further advanced collaborative rationality, emphasizing diversity, interdependence, and authentic dialogue as conditions for effective collaboration. Watson (2014) distinguished collaboration from co-production, noting differences in initiation mechanisms and power structures, thereby revealing persistent gaps between formal participation and substantive collaboration.

Institutional Mechanisms and Interaction Differences

Collaborative governance theory highlights that participation outcomes depend not only on institutional design but also on trust, negotiation, and joint learning (Innes & Booher, 2018). Carmona (2019) emphasized that sustainable public space governance requires continuous coordination among planning, design, and management, with public participation playing a central role.

Using the SFIC model, Yao and Li (2024) identified administrative dependence and symbolic participation as key barriers to collaborative evolution. Empirical studies further show that institutionalized participation does not necessarily generate genuine collaboration: gaps between procedural participation and substantive response persist (Hamideh, 2020; Zanudin et al., 2022), while cognitive and trust mismatches between residents and officials remain evident in practice (Cheng & Xu, 2021). These findings suggest that interaction differences are not only institutional but also socially perceived and spatially manifested (Chen, 2025; Li et al., 2023).

Design Response and Spatial Translation

In landscape architecture and urban design research, design is increasingly understood as a medium for social negotiation, where responsiveness reflects the capacity to translate public demands into spatial form (Chen, 2025; Yang et al., 2025). Kamalipour and Dovey (2020) demonstrated that spatial form emerges from negotiated rules and rights, offering an important analogy for understanding how public expression is translated and materialized through design processes.

Empirical studies indicate that weak linkage between participation and design response often results in low space utilization despite physical improvement (Yue et al., 2021). Similarly, insufficient feedback and management integration can undermine residents' sense of identity and long-term engagement (Li et al., 2023). Chen (2025) emphasizes that designers should shift from being "technical experts" to "social collaborators" in order to enhance the social adaptability of design schemes.

Research Gaps and Theoretical Positioning

In the Chinese context, studies show that although institutional arrangements such as community planner systems have increased participation visibility, actual interactions remain constrained by administrative logic and resource dependence (Xue et al., 2021). Comparative research has further identified hierarchical differences in participation depth and sustainability across co-creation models (Li et al., 2023).

Overall, three gaps remain in existing studies. First, most research focuses on isolated stages or actors, lacking a process-oriented mechanism analysis that explains the phenomenon of "participation without collaboration" (Watson, 2014; Xue et al., 2021). Second, type-based comparative research remains limited, particularly in revealing how institutional channels, design translation, and social trust interact to shape collaborative outcomes (Li et al., 2023; Yao & Li, 2024). Third, in landscape architecture and urban design,

operational frameworks linking participation mechanisms with spatial adaptability and user experience remain insufficiently developed (Chen, 2025).

Drawing on the above review, existing studies show persistent gaps in explaining how public demands are translated into spatial design responses and sustained through feedback mechanisms in micro-renewal practices. In particular, process-oriented and type-based analyses that link institutional arrangements, design translation, and residents' lived perceptions remain underdeveloped. These gaps call for an analytical perspective capable of systematically examining interaction patterns between public participation and spatial design across different renewal contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research aims to identify different types of interaction mechanisms between public participation and spatial design in the micro-renewal of public spaces in old residential communities. Based on the Expression–Translation–Response–Feedback (ETRF) analytical framework, a comparative study of six representative cases was conducted. A qualitative approach was adopted, combining textual materials, site observations, and interviews to support cross-case comparison of interaction mechanisms.

Research Design

This study adopts the Expression–Translation–Response–Feedback (ETRF) process logic as a process-based analytical reference for mechanism comparison (Figure 1). The ETRF logic is not proposed as a formal theoretical model but as an analytical abstraction derived from recurring process elements in studies on collaborative governance, participatory planning, and responsive design (Carmona, 2019; Chen, 2025; Innes & Booher, 2018; Li et al., 2023; Watson, 2014). These studies collectively point to recurring processes through which public inputs are expressed, interpreted and translated into spatial interventions, reflected in design responses, and subsequently evaluated through feedback. These four stages are particularly suited to this study because they capture how public inputs move from initial articulation through design interpretation and response to subsequent feedback, providing a consistent analytical basis for comparing how participation–design interactions are sustained, weakened, or disrupted across cases.

Six old residential communities in Shanghai were selected as case studies, and their public participation and spatial design processes were examined in relation to the four ETRF stages. Through comparative analysis, the study identifies recurring patterns of collaboration and disruption. The research follows an analytical sequence of process reference → case-based analysis → pattern

identification → comparative synthesis, emphasizing the inductive identification of interaction mechanism types based on observed process differences.

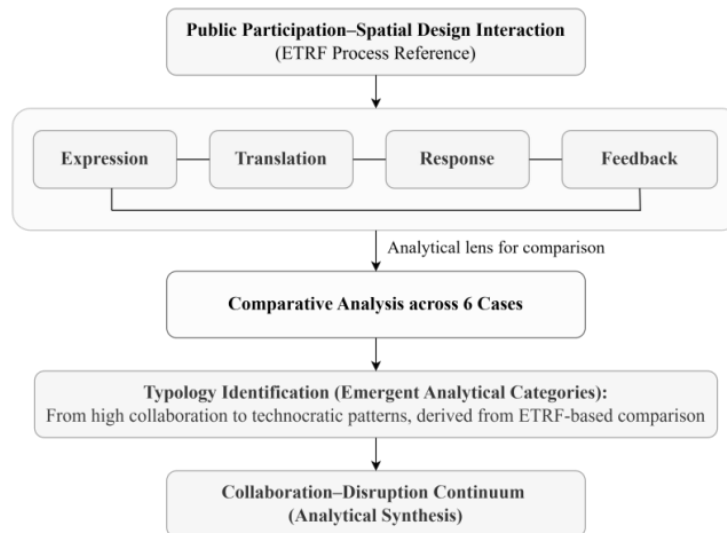


Figure 1: Process-Based Analytical Reference for Case Comparison

This figure illustrates how six cases are compared using the ETRF process reference to summarize interaction patterns and to synthesize a collaboration–disruption continuum.

Source: Created by the Author(2025)

Case Selection

This study examines six old residential communities in Shanghai, all involving small-scale public space micro-renewal within comparable community contexts, which allows for cross-case comparison of interaction mechanisms between public participation and spatial design (see Figure 2).



(a) Hongxu: Renewed habitat garden (b) Shanbei: Renewed children's play area
(c) Boyi: Renewed Sunshine Sports Field

Figure 2: Representative Public Spaces of the Selected Case Communities

Source: Google Images (a); Photographed by the Author (2025) (b, c)

Data Sources and Methods

Three categories of data were used. Public documents—including government announcements, Shanghai Urban Space Art Season reports, and district-level media coverage—were collected to understand project backgrounds and institutional arrangements. Each of the six cases was visited twice, in March and August 2025, to observe spatial use, resident activities, and post-renewal management. Interviews were conducted with 24 participants, comprising 18 residents and six community governance representatives, and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. Resident interviews focused on awareness of participation, participation experiences, and evaluations of renewal outcomes, while interviews with community governance representatives addressed participation procedures, design coordination, and feedback mechanisms.

Analytical Process

A qualitative comparative analysis was conducted in four steps. First, case materials were organized according to the ETRF framework to identify key actors, channels, and interaction forms. Second, cross-case comparison was undertaken using four indicators: depth of expression, degree of design translation, perceptibility of response, and continuity of feedback. Third, interaction mechanism types (e.g., highly collaborative, balanced collaborative, partial feedback, representative collaborative, and technology-dominated) were summarized through horizontal comparison. Finally, by mapping the identified types onto a “collaboration–disruption” continuum, this continuum illustrates evolutionary tendencies in interaction mechanisms, while specific points of disruption require case-based analysis. This process emphasizes comparison between institutional narratives and residents’ everyday experiences to identify gaps between procedural participation and substantive collaboration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Basis for Type Classification and Analytical Logic

Based on site observations, community committee interviews, and resident interviews in six old residential communities in Shanghai (Hongxu, Shanbei, Xiuyuan, Sanlinyuan, Boyi, and Bosan), this study applies the Expression–Translation–Response–Feedback (ETRF) framework to examine interaction mechanisms between public participation and spatial design. Although participatory procedures generally existed at the institutional level, substantial differences were observed in participation depth, design responsiveness, and feedback continuity. While some residents recognized and actively engaged with renewal outcomes, others were unaware of participation channels or expressed distrust.

Table 1: Comparison of Public Participation and Spatial Design Interaction Mechanisms in Six Typical Communities

Residential Community	Expression Mechanism	Translation Mechanism	Response Performance	Feedback Mechanism
Hongxu (Changning District)	Opinion wall, display boards, and residents' deliberation meetings established regular communication among the community committee, designers, and residents	The design team and ecological consultant (TNC) integrated opinions into three zones: conservation, interaction, and education	Formed a "discussion—announcement—execution" loop; facilities and management rules implemented	Feedback collected by the community committee and building representatives; volunteers maintained rotation duties; high resident recognition and frequent use of the Habitat Garden
Shanbei (Huangpu District)	Multiple channels including briefing sessions, WeChat groups, and children's councils	Opinions translated into the Wisteria Pavilion, play area, and under-forest garden	Facilities frequently used, forming both child-friendly and age-friendly adaptability	Maintained by community committees and volunteer networks; some residents mentioned funding and coordination issues
Xiuyuan (Hongkou District)	Combination of WeChat groups, online mini-programs, and opinion boards; residents' opinions were divided	Daily needs translated into the "One-Meter Garden," walking paths, and seating	Everyday functionality achieved, active community interaction; some residents dissatisfied with tree removal	Online feedback active but lacking formal response
Sanlinyuan (Pudong New Area)	Voting, questionnaires, Garden Festival, and co-creation with community planners; some	Opinions translated into the Neighborhood Living Room, Shanghaiese	Self-managed and self-funded by residents; spaces in regular use	Voting and governance groups formed a collaborative network

Residential Community	Expression Mechanism	Translation Mechanism	Response Performance	Feedback Mechanism
	residents unaware of consultation	Culture Plaza, and garden		
Boyi (Pudong New Area)	Joint inspections by subdistrict, community committee, school, and design team; insufficient resident consultation	Demands translated into body-testing paths and double-layer flooring	Original site optimized, facilities improved, high usage frequency	Jointly managed by school and volunteer teams; “FUN Electric Field” data returned for monitoring
Bosan (Pudong New Area)	Joint inspections by subdistrict, community committee, school, and design team; residents and students participated in facility selection and wall painting; insufficient resident consultation	Circulation optimized, new “Pocket Pavilion” and planting garden added	Renewed site became a popular community gathering spot; shared by school and neighborhood	Joint maintenance by volunteers and students; lacking formal feedback platform

Source: Compiled by the Author based on public data, community committee interviews, and random resident interviews (2025)

Table 1 summarizes cross-case variations in interaction mechanisms, forming the basis for the following type classification.

Types of Interactive Mechanisms and Typical Cases

Highly Collaborative Type: Institutional Loop and Multi-Actor Co-Governance

Typical Case: Hongxu Residential Community (Changning District)

Hongxu represents the highly collaborative type, evidenced by multi-channel resident deliberation, the translation of public input into three spatial zones, a “discussion–announcement–execution” loop, and ongoing volunteer-based feedback and maintenance.

Balanced Collaborative Type: Multi-Party Negotiation and Everyday Response

Typical Case: Shanbei Residential Community (Huangpu District)

Shanbei represents the balanced collaborative type, evidenced by multiple participation channels, the translation of resident input into child- and age-friendly spaces, and continuing community and volunteer involvement, although funding and coordination constraints remained.

Partial Feedback Type: Digital Interaction and Localized Response

Typical Case: Xiuyuan Residential Community (Hongkou District)

Xiuyuan represents the partial-feedback type, with active digital and offline input and some needs translated into spatial improvements, but without a stable formal feedback mechanism after renewal.

Representative Collaborative Type: Limited Expression and Procedural Participation

Typical Case: Sanlinyuan Residential Community (Pudong New Area)

Sanlinyuan represents the representative collaborative type, evidenced by formal voting, questionnaires, and co-creation activities, while participation operated mainly through representatives and some residents remained unaware of the consultation process.

Technology-Dominated Type: Professional Logic and Limited Public Influence

Typical Cases: Boyi and Bosan Residential Communities (Pudong New Area)

Boyi and Bosan represent the technology-dominated type, where professional and technical priorities shaped spatial improvements, while resident influence remained limited and formal feedback mechanisms were weak.

The five mechanism types are comparatively synthesized across the four ETRF dimensions in Table 2.

Table 2: Typology Matrix of Interaction Mechanisms

Mechanism Type	Case	Expression	Translation	Response	Feedback
Highly collaborative	Hongxu	Diverse, sustained input	Deep design translation	Clear design response	Ongoing feedback
Balanced collaborative	Shanbei	Diverse public input	Effective translation	Clear design response	Stable feedback

Mechanism Type	Case	Expression	Translation	Response	Feedback
Partial feedback	Xiuyuan	Active public input	Partial translation	Local design response	Irregular feedback
Representative collaborative	Sanlin yuan	Representative input	Moderate translation	Formal design response	Limited feedback
Technology-dominated	Boyi; Bosan	Limited public input	Expert-led translation	Functional response	Weak feedback

“Collaboration–Disruption Continuum”

Based on the five mechanism types, this study proposes a “collaboration–disruption continuum” (Figure 3) to illustrate interaction patterns between public participation and spatial design. The horizontal axis represents participation and design response strength, while the vertical axis reflects feedback continuity and social trust.

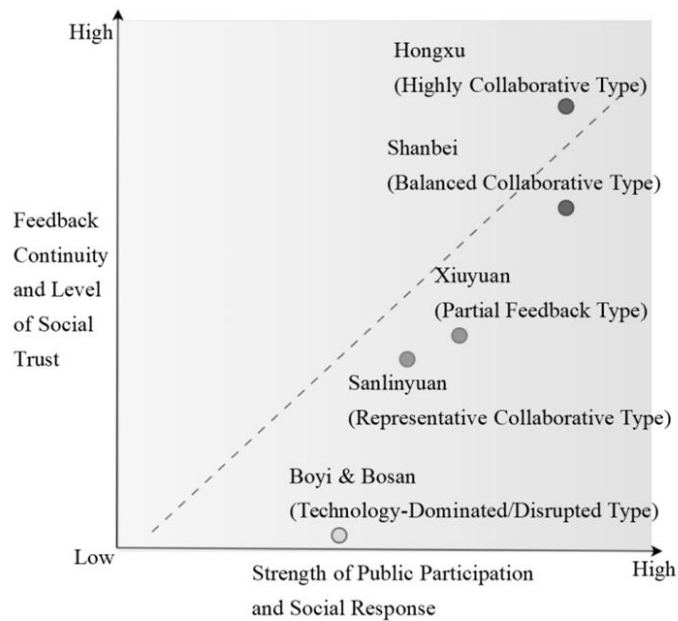


Figure 3: “Collaboration–Disruption Continuum” of the Interaction Between Public Participation and Spatial Design in the Micro-Renewal of Public Spaces in Old Residential Communities

Source: Created by the Author (2025)

The highly collaborative case (Hongxu) demonstrates an integrated configuration of institutional mechanisms, design response, and resident trust, whereas technology-dominated cases (e.g., Boyi, Bosan) show clear disconnections between procedures and public perception. Balanced collaborative, partial feedback, and representative collaborative types occupy intermediate positions, reflecting transitional configurations of collaboration and disruption.

Interactive Differences Between Institutional Collaboration and Social Feedback

Comparative analysis shows that while most projects established participatory procedures, representative participation and weak feedback institutionalization remained common. Design translation varied across cases: some achieved high spatial adaptability, whereas technology-dominated cases prioritized functional efficiency over social meaning. Residents' perceptions ranged from stable engagement to exclusion and distrust. These findings align with existing studies indicating that formal participatory arrangements do not necessarily lead to substantive collaboration, as gaps often persist between institutional procedures and lived experiences (Watson, 2014; Zanudin et al., 2022). They further show that design translation and feedback continuity shape interaction mechanisms beyond institutional arrangements.

Explaining Variations in Collaborative Outcomes

Differences in collaborative outcomes are mainly shaped by three interacting structural factors. Participation often operates through representatives rather than direct expression, leading to a disconnect between institutional participation and residents' perceptions. Technical domination is evident where design processes are driven by professional and safety-oriented logic, with public demands insufficiently reflected. Trust fracture emerges when feedback mechanisms are weak or invisible, leading to limited public recognition despite physical improvements. These findings align with previous research emphasizing the influence of institutional arrangements, power relations, and trust dynamics in shaping participation outcomes (Innes & Booher, 2018; Watson, 2014), while further highlighting the role of design translation as a key mediating mechanism linking participation processes and spatial outcomes. This suggests that collaborative outcomes depend not only on participation structures, but on how effectively public demands are translated and communicated through design processes.

Interpreting the Value of Interaction Mechanisms in Micro-Renewal

An ETRF-based analysis shows that effective interaction mechanisms enhance both spatial adaptability and social attachment. In collaborative cases, the translation of public demands into spatial form strengthens residents' sense of belonging, positioning landscape architecture as a mediator of social relations and supporting continuous design–governance integration and trust rebuilding. These findings align with studies highlighting the role of participatory design and collaborative governance in fostering social cohesion and spatial adaptability (Carmona, 2019), while further emphasizing the importance of feedback continuity and response visibility in linking social engagement with spatial production and sustaining micro-renewal outcomes.

Pathways for Optimizing Interaction Mechanisms from a Landscape Perspective

From a landscape architecture perspective, mechanism optimization can be advanced across three interconnected dimensions. Institutionally, traceable response mechanisms are required to complete the expression–translation–response–feedback loop and ensure that public inputs are visibly acknowledged and incorporated. At the design level, designers should act as social translators, enhancing translation capacity through participatory, adaptive, and context-responsive practices. Socially, sustained collaboration networks linking community planners, volunteer groups, and resident organizations are essential for supporting long-term co-governance and continuous spatial management. These recommendations align with studies emphasizing integrated governance, adaptive design processes, and multi-stakeholder collaboration in public space regeneration (Innes & Booher, 2018; Watson, 2014), while further proposing a type-based understanding of interaction mechanisms, showing how different configurations of participation, design translation, and feedback shape varying collaborative outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Main Findings and Interpretive Value

Based on site observations and multi-source interviews in six old residential communities in Shanghai, this study reveals significant variations in interaction mechanisms between public participation and spatial design in micro-renewal practices. By proposing the collaboration–disruption continuum, the study demonstrates that formal participatory procedures do not necessarily lead to substantive collaboration. Instead, the perceptibility of design responses, the continuity of feedback, and the level of resident trust are decisive in shaping collaborative quality.

From a landscape architecture perspective, effective design translation enables micro-renewal to move beyond physical upgrading toward social mechanism optimization, positioning the interaction between public participation and spatial design as a key pathway for enhancing spatial justice, social resilience, and collaborative governance.

Research Limitations

This study has two main limitations. First, resident perspectives were primarily drawn from participating residents. Although the interaction types were identified through multiple data sources, direct accounts of professional design decision-making were relatively limited, limiting direct insight into how some design choices were made. Second, all six cases are located in Shanghai, and the city's specific governance and micro-renewal context may limit the transferability of the findings to other urban contexts. Future research could incorporate additional professional perspectives and cross-city comparisons to further examine the identified mechanism types.

Future Research Prospects

Mechanism refinement: Future research should examine institutional designs linking expression, response, and feedback. Digital tools: Interactive platforms and visualization can enhance participation quality and feedback transparency. Interdisciplinary integration: Landscape architecture can act as a mediator between social collaboration and spatial production through co-creative practices. Contextual extension: Comparative studies across cities and governance contexts are needed to test the transferability of interaction mechanism types.

Concluding Reflections

The core of micro-renewal in old residential communities lies in reshaping collaborative relations among residents, designers, and governance actors. Stable collaboration depends not on the quantity of participation but on the clarity of design translation, the visibility of responses, and the sustainability of feedback. Landscape architecture thus plays a dual role as a design profession and a mediator of social collaboration, supporting the transition from formal participation to substantive and sustained co-governance. This study shifts the focus from participation procedures to interaction mechanisms, highlighting the role of design translation and feedback as key mediating processes.

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