

Analysis of the Spatial Characteristics of Commercial Streets in China's Southern Cities:

A Case of Three Commercial Streets in Suzhou

(The Spatial Characteristics of Commercial Streets in China's Southern Cities)

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1. Introduction

1.1 *Urban Identity Crisis*

In the context of globalization, information transmission and cultural dissemination have been quickening their speed. Starting from the modernism in 1920s, they have exerted significant influence to the architecture, landscape and urban construction of various countries and localities. Concise and easy-duplicated geometric shape, building material with high productivity and modulation, and the rapid assembled construction mode enabled the cities at different localities have similar features, but city characteristics was weakened with each passing day. In 1999, the Union Internationale des Architectes (UIA) showed its concern to the dilemma faced by cultural and regional characteristics in the Beijing Chapter, afterwards which the issue of city characteristics led to more and more concerns and practices.

In the past decades, China's urban construction has experienced a rapid development stage of growing out of nothing, whereas in recent years the resource restriction, changes of industrial types, and the increase of the people's cultural quality called for transition of the city. In future competition and development, cities need to find their positions, highlight prominent features and form differences, so as to win a better development space.

At present, many cities in China have recognized the importance of city characteristics, yet when it comes to materialized space there may exists some bias, resulting in improper construction activities such as removing real historic relics while building *fake antique* and blindly building small towns with exotic atmosphere. These activities not only create unpleasant physical environment, but also waste and damage resources. To this situation, the author upholds that Suzhou has something worthwhile to contribute the shaping of city characteristics. Through field investigation and research analysis in the characteristic commercial street in Suzhou, it can be seen that urban characteristic commercial streets of high quality plays positive roles to various aspects of the city, and deserves being studied.

1.2 *The Concept of Urban Characteristic Space*

The differences between *city feature* and *city characteristics* are quite obvious. *City feature* emphasizes the internal and external expression of the cities, rather than the distinctiveness. Every city has its own style and features, regardless of good or bad. The expression of *thousand cities with one feature* is often seen in Chinese media, which refers the fact that the features of many cities are roughly the same; but *city characteristics* emphasizes internal and external differences of the cities, and the environment corresponding to the distinctiveness of the city, including natural environment, cultural environment and social environment.

The city's materialized space is an important carrier of city characteristics, and specific city characteristics can be recognized by using the urban space. To put it simply, *urban*

characteristic space is the space that can reflect city characteristics. To grasp the urban characteristic space, there is not only the need to take a look at the *surface* of the distinctiveness, but also the need to look at the *inside* of natural, cultural and social environment reflected from behind. Thus, urban characteristic space shall be the urban public space which can harmoniously coexist with natural environment, and reflect the characteristics of local culture and the history.

1.3 Characteristic Commercial Streets in Suzhou

Suzhou is one of the first-batch historic cities, and is also a modern city with fast economic development. In recent years, many urban characteristic spaces have been emerged in various places in Suzhou. Among the urban characteristic spaces of various types, characteristic commercial street is not only an important place to serve the general public and pool talents, but also a platform to display the essence of urban construction and the epitome of urban development, exerting important influence in urban development.

As a representative urban characteristic space, the characteristic commercial street functions as the parlor and business card for a city. The three characteristic commercial streets in Suzhou—Ping Jiang Road, Shan Tang Street and Li Gong Di are widely known. From 2009 to 2010, with their own prominent features, these three commercial streets were rated as *National Street*, with great importance of demonstration. With different resource endowments, the three commercial streets choose different path of development, which can be summarized and compared as follows (Table 1).

Table 1 Comparison on developing modes of Ping Jiang Road, Shan Tang Street and Li Gong Di

Classification	Characteristic commercial street	Type of planning and redevelopment
Historical block + Creative culture	Ping Jiang Road	Protectively renovating and transforming the historical and cultural block, protecting and retaining the characteristic style and features, and inviting outside investments step by step
Historical block + Scenic spot	Shan Tang Street	Protectively restoring and transforming the historical and cultural block, protecting and reshaping the characteristic style and features, and inviting outside investments one-time
Natural landscape + Characteristic commercial activities	Li Gong Di	Developing commercial real estate of the scenic spot, reestablishing and reshaping the characteristic landscape, style and features, and inviting outside investments one-time

2. Spatial Attributes of Urban Characteristic Commercial Street

By studying the three characteristic commercial streets in Suzhou, the paper summarizes four spatial attributes of the urban characteristic commercial street.

2.1 Publicity

Publicity is a prerequisite of realizing characteristic spatial functions. As an important part of the urban public spatial system, urban characteristic commercial street is the space with convenient access and free activities. Thus, it's often in inner part of urban functions, with more concentrated cultures, frequent commercial activities and unique landscapes.

The three characteristic commercial streets selected in the paper are all of this kind. Ping Jiang Road is adjacent to the municipal commercial center of GuanQian Street; Shan Tang Street is located outside the old town of ChangMen and adjacent to the lower-level

commercial center of ShiLu Pedestrian Street; and Li Gong Di is located at the northwest of Jinji Lake of the Industrial Park, belonging to an important part of Central Business District Around the Lake, and adjacent to the Huxi CBD. The three characteristic commercial streets all enjoy convenient transportation, especially public transportation, which ensures better publicity.

2.2 Difference

The *difference* of urban characteristic commercial street can be reflected in the following two aspects.

The first aspect is the difference compared with other space. Characteristic commercial street often has one or more unique spatial and functional elements, e.g. natural landscape, historical site or unique functions (like pedestrian-friendly, concentration of specific commercial activities, etc). In addition, the space of characteristic commercial street often has high artistic and aesthetic values.

The second aspect is the difference compared with other geological space. The big geological difference can be the East and the West, the northern China and Southern China, Southwestern China and Southern part of China, etc.; the small geological difference can even be *ten miles cover different style, and hundred miles cover different customs*. The different geological urban space may also have varied features due to the differences in cultural background, geography and weather. Previously, geological different is natural, and only the wave of globalization reduced the geological difference. Now, we need to consciously protect geological difference.

From these three characteristic commercial streets, it can be seen that Ping Jiang Road and Shan Tang Street have profound historical background, with intact spatial pattern, relatively unified architectural features, numerous historic relics with historic preservation, and prominent historical resources compared with ordinary urban places (Figure 1). Although Li Gong Di has less prominent historical origin compared with the first two commercial streets, it is situated at the lakeside of Jinji Lake, as the only long beach of the lake, with broadened horizon, ripples, beautiful scenery, and unique natural resources.



Figure 1: Distribution map of historical and cultural heritage in Pingjiang Historical and Cultural Block

Figure courtesy: <http://www.suzhou.gov.cn/>

2.3 Reflection

The *reflection* of urban characteristic commercial street is mainly shown in the three aspects. The first aspect is the representation of natural environment, i.e. the reflection of space to such natural features as landform and hydrology. The second aspect is the representation of historical culture, i.e. the reflection of space to regional cultural background and local historic culture. The third aspect is the representation of the characteristics of times, i.e. the reflection of space to modern functions, modern technologies and creative thinking.

If the urban commercial street can reflect one of the above aspects, it will be excellent. And if it can reflect these three aspects at the same time, it will be perfect. The three characteristic commercial streets in Suzhou reflect the three aspects at varied degrees.

So far, Pingjiang Historical and Cultural Block is an area with utmost integrity in Suzhou ancient town. Compared with the Pingjiang Map (Figure 2) at Song Dynasty, the Block basically follows the layout since Tang and Song Dynasties, with the corresponding names of most of the streets, watercourse and bridges. The historical features of the Block, with such historical relics as moat, wall, watercourse, bridge, street, dwellings, gardens, club house, temple, ancient well, ancient trees and memorial archway, all reflect the characteristics and values of Suzhou ancient city, especially the urban pattern of *double chessboard* with land and water, which is specifically reflected in Pingjiang historical block, and referred as the epitome of Suzhou ancient town. The modern cultural-recreation-oriented investment attraction enabled the old street to show fashionable and modern features.

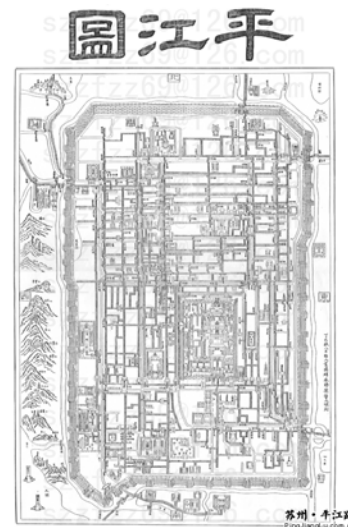


Figure 2: Pingjiang ancient map



Figure courtesy: <http://www.pingjianglu.com.cn/>

Shan Tang Street was established in 825, with a history of 1282 years. It is adjacent to the ancient town of Suzhou, with Chang Men mentioned in the novel of Dream of Red Mansions in its east, and *the First Scenic Spot of Wuzhong Tiger Hill* in its west. It was build when the poet Bai Juyi served as the feudal provincial governor in Suzhou, and in history it has many shops, gardens and villas, with a thousand of dwellings by the riverside and gaily-painted pleasure-boat and playing and singing throughout the four seasons. Hilly Pond in former Times is the best place for residents of Suzhou to enjoy outskirts recreation, with rich and colorful material relics and precious historical origin. Till now, it's still featured by Suzhou specialties and old and famous shops, and receives warm welcome from the tourists.

Li Gong Di is the only long beach of Jinji Lake in Suzhou, which is the biggest lake of inner city, with a length of 1400 meters. During the Guangxu years, it was build by the then county magistrate Li Chaoqiong, who organized the people to build the long beach and planted the willows at the beach to consolidate the dike. This long beach was called Li Gong Di by the later generations, and became the excellent spot of Jinji Lake. Now, through three-phased development, it has formed the commercial features by taking catering of various style, characteristic bars and cultural industries as the main part (Table 2).

Table 2 Comparison of featured resources of Ping Jiang Road, Shan Tang Street and Li Gong Di

	Natural resources	History-related resources	Planning and positioning	Graphical representation
Ping Jiang Road	The outer city river has few effects on the view, the inner part is the small scale river system in chessboard type, but the water quality is found bad during the survey.	It has profound historical origin, intact pattern, with many famous people and former residences of celebrities, and rich history-related resources	Rationally utilizes the historical and cultural resources of the block, develops the tertiary industry with cultural connotation and high quality, and makes it to be urban vitality belt with unique cultural landscape	

<p>Shan Tang Street</p>	<p>Land and water running parallel, with Tiger Hill in the west. Natural resources are excellent, but the water quality of core commercial section is bad.</p>	<p>Having a long standing reputation in history, with numerous allusions, historical sites along the way, and rich history-related resources</p>	<p>As the epitome of old Suzhou, window of Wu Culture, street in heaven ; having unique <i>water street of ancient city</i></p>	
<p>Li Gong Di</p>	<p>The only long beach of Jinji Lake, with water fronts at both sizes, landscape is beautiful, natural resources are rich</p>	<p>Has certain historical legend and allusion, but with no historical relics, history-related resources are relatively in sufficient</p>	<p>International-featured commercial water street, integrated with featured catering, sightseeing, recreation and culture ; recreation bars, entertainment, dynamic area ; pro-water Street Mall</p>	

2.4 Artistry

As a carrier of widest public activities, urban characteristic commercial street needs to satisfy the public aesthetic requirements, enabling the people to have physical and mental pleasure and gain resonance and inspiration towards aesthetics. Wide and in-depth public participation is the effective channel to solve the public aesthetics. In addition, the artistry of urban characteristic commercial street has the property of participation. Along with the time and the participation of the users, urban space will accumulate more artistic connotation.

During the protection and renovation, Pingjiang Historical and Cultural Block insists on the four principles of *authenticity, integrity, interpretability, and sustainability*, trying to respect the original historical environment and retain structure frame and restore the interior and exterior to retain the historical rudiment of renovation. At present, the constructions of both sizes of Ping Jiang Road have proper scale, unified architectural style and the antique flavor of architectural material and detail, forming sound historical architecture feature (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Ping Jiang Road Photos

During the protection and renovation period, Shan Tang Street adopts the principle of *rescue comes first and taking protection as the main purpose and restoring the old as the old* to renovate the constructions along the Shan Tang Street. The survey found out that compared with Ping Jiang Road, the constructions of Shan Tang Street have some changes before and after the renovation, in order to satisfy the demand of commercial development and tourism development. Yet, at present, the overall construction still has strong historical features, with unified style and sound features(Figure 4).



Figure 4: Shan Tang Street Photos

Before development and construction, Li Gong Di has not so many historical relics. During the planning and design of first phase, it introduced classical and traditional architectural space symbols by learning from the traditional construction and environment shaping methods, and applied modern means to express, forming the modern Suzhou-style construction featured by whitewashed wall and black tiles and small bridge over flowing stream; the construction style of second phase is the same as that of the first phase, with construction style, color and material more modernized and having traditional features; the third phase adopts modern European style construction feature, to satisfy the requirement of comprehensive environment feature (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Li Gong Di Photos

3. Values and Significance of Urban Characteristic Commercial Street

The four spatial attributes of the urban characteristic commercial street determine the most essential part of city space. These locations are always the most concentrated and advanced place of various urban economic, social and cultural activities. The values and significance of the urban characteristic commercial street are all-around.

3.1 Economic Aspect : Source for Raising and Stimulating City Vitality

The significance of urban characteristic commercial street to urban economy can be reflected in two aspects. Firstly it can strengthen a city's competitiveness. Given the attractiveness and cohesion resulted from the featured advantages that are suitable for commerce and tourism, the characteristic commercial street becomes favorable capital of urban competition. At the same time, the characteristic commercial street is always the carrier of such emerging economies as urban tourism economy and creative economy. Take Tianzifang old block for instance, it attracts a great many of creative talents and creative activities.

Secondly it stimulates regional development potential. By its own development, urban characteristic commercial street can play the role of catalytic agent, activating the potential of surrounding blocks and cities from point to area, becoming the business card of the city and putting forward the development of the whole regional economic development of the city. Since the southern cities of China have rich water resources, enhancing the city vitality and reviving urban economy by renovating water front districts means to utilize the advantage of easy formation of the characteristic commercial street in the water front districts.

Before the development, the three characteristic commercial streets at Suzhou have all carried out commercial planning and design, invited outside investments according to the development orientation, and formulated relevant investment attraction threshold. Along the commercial streets there are basically commercial and cultural facilities (Figure 6). By comparative research, it found that all of the three commercial streets have concentrated and featured commercial activities, although the types of commercial activities and concentration degree are varied (Table 3).

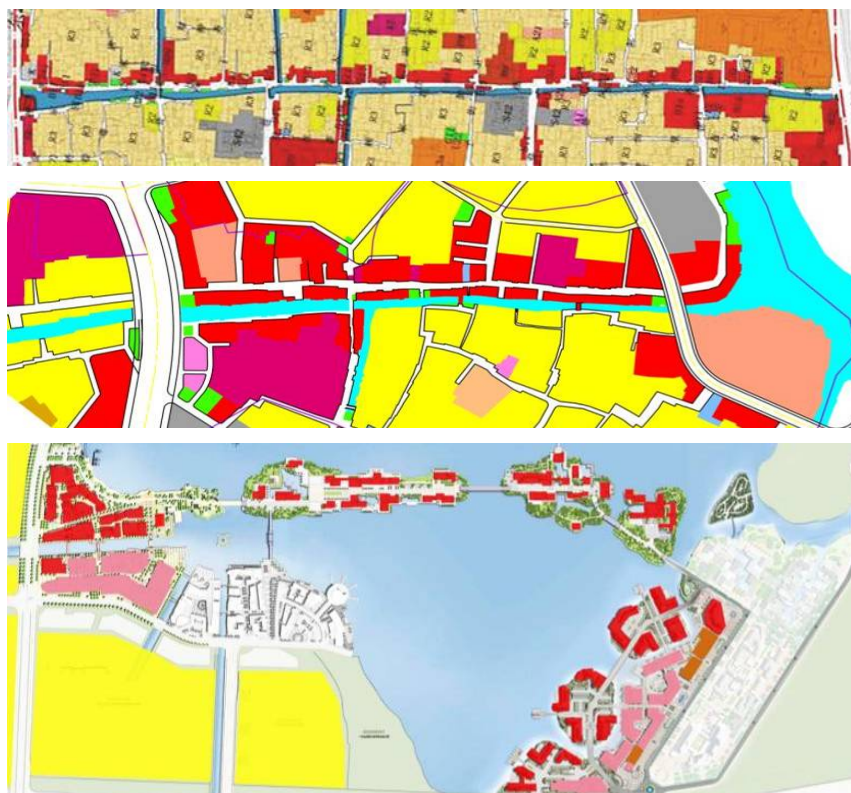


Figure 6: Chart on current land usage of Ping Jiang Road, Shan Tang Street and Li Gong Di

Figure courtesy: <http://www.suzhou.gov.cn/>

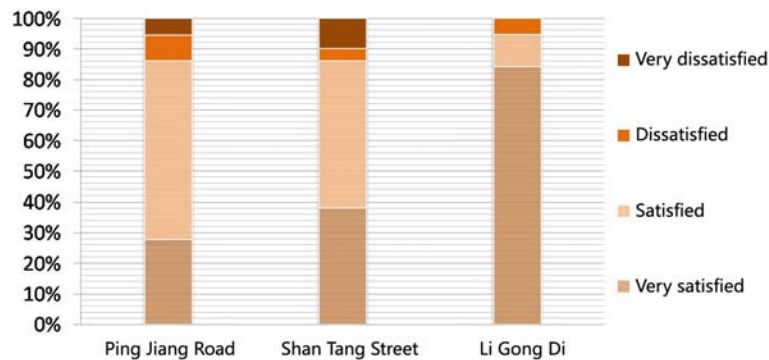
Table 3 Comparison of commercial activities of Ping Jiang Road, Shan Tang Street and Li Gong Di

	Ping Jiang Road	Shan Tang Street	Li Gong Di
Component ratio			

In terms of commercial activities, in Ping Jiang Road and Shan Tang Street, the commercial retail takes 54% and 64% respectively, followed by catering industry and cultural facilities, in Li Gong Di the catering industry takes 63%, then commercial retail with 12%, and cultural facility 12%. In terms of the scale, the commercial space of the three characteristic commercial streets have reached the scale of district-level commercial center, and become important component of urban public commercial service system.

At present, the three commercial streets operate smoothly, with sound revenue and relatively high satisfaction of the operators, all above 85% (Table 4). Furthermore, since Ping Jiang Road is located at the old town of Suzhou, it has close relationship with the residents of surrounding communities. 44% of the residents of surrounding communities of Ping Jiang Road upheld that the development of Ping Jiang Road increased employment opportunities of the residents, 37% upheld that their income has been increased. Thus, the urban characteristic space represented by the characteristic commercial street can promote the economic development of surrounding areas to a certain extent.

Table 4 comparison chart of operators' satisfaction



3.2 Social Aspect: Public Place for Concentrating and Recognizing Collective Memory

As public space, the urban characteristic commercial street is an important place for citizens and tourists to have public activities and exchanges. During the long process of being material carrier of social activities, it fully represents the social relations and ethical order of the times, with sense of belonging and identity to the city. To China, a country with rapid urbanization, the characteristic commercial street has been a patch of pure land to stick to urban collective memory.

The elegant and amiable sceneries, quiet and comfortable atmosphere and the varied recreational commercial activities enabled the three characteristic commercial streets in Suzhou to be not only bustling and busy streets, but also places for recreation and get-together. According to the survey questionnaire to Ping Jiang Road and Shan Tang Street, "love of historical and slow life style" is the main reason for the residents to choose here.

3.3 Cultural Aspect: Vigor Highland for Inheriting and Developing City Spirit

The famous remark *once I take a look at your city, I will know the pursuit of its people* reveals the material spatial environment of the city actually reflects the internal culture and spirit of the city. The aesthetic taste toward the elements of the space, the attitude towards historical relics, and the considerations of people's usage demand reflect the taste, connotation and

values. As a representative place of the urban space, the characteristic commercial street is the concentration place of the city's culture and spirit.

The three commercial streets in Suzhou have their own features in cultural cultivation. The historical spatial layout and environmental advantages of Ping Jiang Road are very outstanding. Thus, in the continuation of historical culture, it mainly needs to protect the historical environment and cultivate real historical atmosphere, and introduces such cultural facilities as the museum of storytelling and ballad singing in Suzhou dialect and the museum of Kunqu opera(Figure 7).



Figure 7: Museums on the Ping Jiang Road

Shan Tang Street is famous in history, with numerous allusions, hence the exploration and utilization of its cultural connotation is the priority of renewal. The exploration of folk culture mainly needs to actively introduce the local featured handicraft (such as embroidery, Suzhou-style fan, wooden carving, stone pot making, etc), set up restaurants with authentic Suzhou cuisine and the venues for listening to story-telling and ballad singing in Suzhou dialect, and organize the folk activities including celebration of Lantern Festival.


The historical culture of Li Gong Di is the fewest among the three commercial streets, in terms of the continuation of history, it mainly explored and publicized historical stories, established the statue of Li Chaoqiong, set up monument and pavilion, and organized various activities related to the allusions of Li Chaoqiong to add colors to historical and cultural atmosphere.

3.4 Ecological Aspect: Ecological Space for Nourishing and Improving Environment

Many urban characteristic commercial streets are integrated with the natural ecological environment with local feature. Different natural ecological environment not only helped to establish various urban characteristic commercial streets, but also integrated the natural ecological elements to the urban life. It's an important component of urban ecological system. In terms of the big metropolitan with high density, close integration with the ecological featured space of urban daily life is of more outstanding significance.

Since the three characteristic commercial streets are all water front sections of the city, water environment is their important feature. Although the three waters are varied in properties and features, they all play positive roles to the ecological environment of the city (Table 5).

Table 5 Comparative analysis of water environment

	Ping Jiang Road	Shan Tang Street	Li Gong Di
Typical waterscape			
Features of water body	Small-scale net-shaped water body	Small-scale linear Water body	Large-scale faceted water body
Protection situation	Old watercourse is retained and the channels are regularly cleaned out, and the sanitary personnel are responsible for routine cleaning	Watercourse is intact, with waterways running through, and old watercourse has been continued	The lake surface of Jinji Lake and small Jinji Lake is intact and open, with exquisite scenery
Water quality	The waters are linked and run through the downtown, and water quality are ordinary	Affected by the machinery pleasure-boat and the surrounding commerce, the water quality is turbid.	Environmental protection is strict, water coverage is large, and water quality of the lake is fine
Picture			
Social evaluation	Fair	Ordinary	Fine

4. How to Shape Urban Characteristic Commercial Street

4.1 Grasp the Source of Characteristics of the Characteristic Commercial Street

By studying the three characteristic commercial streets in Suzhou, it can be seen that the “features” of the urban characteristic commercial street are reflected in three aspects: natural environment, local culture and herald of history.

4.1.1 Combining with the Natural Environment

Many cities have their own unique natural conditions and geological conditions. These are the bases of forming urban characteristic commercial street. On one hand, natural elements can be applied to form the landscape of the space. For example, the Hongyadong by the river-side of Chongqing River spreads tier upon tier according to the terrain condition, and transfers the terrain features to the features of construction and space. The Southern part of China is another example. It developed arcade-house to fit for the rainy and hot weather.

4.1.2 Keeping a Foothold at Local Culture

The display of local culture is an important source of spatial feature. Urban space shall consider the existing historical and cultural relics. These relics are non-duplicable precious wealth of the city. They not only provide historical reference, but also facilitate the cultivation and development of city spirit. Thus, protecting and utilizing the existing historical and

cultural relics is an important means to form the characteristic commercial street. For instance, the “Xintiandi” in ShangHai adopts the old house of Shikumen, and introduces the modern functions of the catering, shopping and entertainment to form cultural and recreational center of fashion and recreation. It needs to be noted that the protection and utilization of historical and cultural relics need to safeguard the originality of historical relics, pay attention to the coordination of accessorial building, landscape planting and lightings to fit for the historical landscape, ensure smooth protection and renovation, and control the commercial activities.

4.1.3 Highlighting the Herald of History

The establishment of urban space cannot break away from the history. Of course, it shall reflect the characteristics of the history, and a featured space also needs to respond to the progress of the history. For example, the emerging industries were established to meet with the new requirements of social development, and they have brought new requirements to urban space. The book of *Rise of The Creative Class* indicates that creative class is more keen on the featured urban space with small blocks, small road networks, and small facilities at community level (café, bar, small-scale musical hall, small gallery, etc.). Only by fully understanding the characteristics of new functions, can we accurately reflect the appeal when forming the urban space, thus establishing the characteristics of the space itself.

Take another example, creative thinking is one of the driving forces of constant social progress. Naturally, urban space will have distinct features due to creative thinking and advanced ideas. Nowadays, the ideas on ecology, low-carbon and wisdom are changing today's urban space.

4.2 Establishing Sound Implementation Mechanism

Although urban public space is the main concern of urban design, the urban design results always fail to effectively realize it, and the *features* of characteristic commercial street may be distorted or disappeared. During the protection and renovation process, Ping Jiang Road and Shan Tang Street established separate companies with the financial support of the government, responsible for all the processes from transformation, investment attraction to management and maintenance at later stage. The Harmony Group with state-owned assets is responsible for the development and later-stage management of Li Gong Di. Since the elements of urban characteristic commercial street involves many departments, the establishment of a working mechanism that can coordinate various institutions in a unified manner will better guarantee the implementation of the *features*.

4.3 Receiving the Test of History

Provided that the newly built urban commercial streets grasp the source of “features” and effectively implemented it, they only enable the space to have the possibility of becoming *characteristic commercial street*, or possessing the *basis*. If they want to become featured space in real sense, they need to receive the test of the history, and constantly add rich urban activities. It's just like a museum which needs to constantly enrich the collections over the years. The reason why historical blocks are more easily to become characteristic commercial streets than newly built blocks is that they have abundant traces left from the long-time usage of the space, including renovations, facilities left by people's life exchanges, remnant and archway resulted from certain incidents at various periods, and even the people and events after the space. In this way, they can cultivate the taste of the space.

In addition, the bounty of heaven and earth can also endow the space with some poetic flavor. Wet slab stone path, mottled wall, obsolete doors and windows, or rusty bronze statue

with pigeon feces, glossy rubdown ashlar square, and antiquated red brick wall reflecting the lingering light of the setting sun. The traces of history endow these space with sentiment, enabling the people to feel the poetic flavor of the space.

5. Conclusion

Among the four attributes of *publicity*, *difference*, *reflection* and *artistry* of the urban characteristic commercial street, *reflection* is the soul, revealing not only the geological information of the space, but also the past and present cultural information of the space, and at the same time, representing the future development possibilities of the urban space. Hence, the feature of urban space originates from its natural environment, historical and cultural environment and creative thinking. To the people who are the subject of spatial feeling, apart from comfort and visual aesthetics, it's important to arouse the internal rich emotions. Those traces, details, stories and activities left by the time are the spirit to arouse these feelings, and it's necessary for the space to undergo the severe test of the history.

If urban space is said to be a container carrying urban civilization, what the urban characteristic commercial street carries is the most essential part of urban civilization. It not only represents the essence of urban civilization, but also witnesses the spreading of urban civilization.

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