

Protection and Functional Transformation of City Walls from the Perspective of City Image-Making: A Comparative Study of the Nanjing City Wall and the York City Walls

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Abstract

With the acceleration of globalization and the increasing homogenization of urban spaces, how to form a distinctive city image and local identity has gradually become a concern in urban development. Ancient city walls originally served a clear military defense function, but with changes in urban structure and social needs, their function has gradually changed. Many of the city walls that have survived to this day are no longer just city boundaries, but have been reintegrated into contemporary urban life, becoming important carriers of public space, historical landscapes, and local cultural expression. This paper takes Kevin Lynch's theory of city image as its main theoretical basis and draws on relevant research on time perception, place identity and city branding. It conducts a cross-cultural comparative study on the Nanjing City Wall and the York City Walls from three aspects: spatial form and image perception, functional transformation and spatial regeneration, and symbolic expression and image recognition. By comparing the spatial forms, functional uses, and roles in city image-making of the city walls of the two cities, this article further examines the characteristics of city wall heritage protection and reuse in different cultural contexts, aiming to provide insights for the revitalization of similar heritage spaces in historical cities.

Keywords

city image-making, Nanjing City Wall, York City Walls, cross-cultural comparison

1. Introduction

After decades of rapid urbanization, many cities have achieved significant economic growth and undergone extensive spatial transformation, but they have also gradually encountered problems such as architectural homogenization, the erosion of regional identity, and the weakening of historical connections within the urban fabric. As the flows of people, capital, and tourism between cities intensify, how to distinguish a city from its competitors and cultivate a distinctive city image has become an increasingly important issue in urban planning and governance [1]. Compared to short-lived festivals and iconic modern buildings, historical and cultural heritage better reflects the long-standing local characteristics of a city. The historical narratives, collective memories, and sense of identity associated with such heritage play a lasting role in sustaining a city's identity and preserving its distinctive character.

Among various historical and cultural heritages, ancient city walls possess distinctive spatial characteristics. Historically, they served to define urban boundaries, provide military defense, and regulate access to and movement within cities. In the modern era, however, advances in military technology, changes in transportation, and urban population growth gradually diminished their defensive significance. At the same time, city walls increasingly came into conflict with the demands of road construction and urban expansion. Consequently, in the process of modernization in many cities, ancient city walls were once regarded as obstacles affecting traffic and urban development, and were thus demolished to varying degrees.

York in England and Nanjing in China are two notable examples of cities with well-preserved historic city walls. York City Walls are among the longest and best-preserved medieval city walls still standing in England, while Nanjing City Wall is the largest surviving city wall of an ancient Chinese capital. In both cities, the preservation of city walls has been integrated with the development of public spaces, cultural interpretation, and tourism, making them important components of each city's urban image. In 2016, Nanjing and York officially became sister cities [2], which laid the foundation for exchanges between the two cities in the protection of historical heritage and urban governance. Based on Kevin Lynch's theory of city image, this paper compares Nanjing and York to analyze the different characteristics of historical city walls in terms of functional transformation and city image-making, as well as the cultural differences behind them.

2. Literature Review

In 1960, Kevin Lynch proposed in *The Image of the City* that cities are not only composed of physical space, but also exist in people's perception, recognition and memory of cities. To explain how people form a holistic understanding of a city, Lynch proposed concepts such as "legibility" and "imageability," and summarized environmental imagery into three aspects: identity, structure, and meaning. In specific spatial perception, Lynch further categorized city imagery into five basic elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks [3]. Traditional city walls have a clear linear and dividing function, and can therefore be regarded as typical "edge" elements. However, with urban development and changes in the function of city walls, their role in people's perception of the city may also change. They are no longer just a boundary between the inside and outside of the city, but gradually become pedestrian spaces, public places, or representative urban landscapes.

Following the publication of *The Image of the City*, Lynch and other scholars further expanded the discussion on the relationship between urban space and urban image from the perspectives of time perception, local identity, and city marketing. In terms of time perception, Lynch further focused on the relationship between urban environment and historical memory in *What Time is This Place*. He believes that urban space not only has a physical form in reality, but also carries people's feelings about the past and the changes of time [4]. Ancient city walls, old streets, and other historical relics therefore play an important role in connecting the city's past and present. Regarding local identity, scholars such as Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph emphasize that space can only form a sense of belonging "place" when it is connected with people's life experiences, emotions and memories [5,6]. From this perspective, the historical city walls have gradually transformed from defensive structures into a part of public activities and daily life, which also means that their social significance and role in local identity have changed. Lynch's theory also influenced the later development of city marketing [7] and city branding. Historic heritage, with its distinctive local character, plays an important role in shaping a city's cultural image and differentiating it from other cities.

Existing comparative studies of Chinese and European walled cities have primarily focused on urban morphology, historical development, and heritage conservation. Conzen et al., through a comparison of Pingyao in China and Como in Italy, employed the fringe-belt approach to examine how different historical and geographical processes shaped traditional urban forms and their subsequent transformation [8]. Wang et al. investigated 48 walled cities in Europe and China, classifying them into four groups according to their spatial characteristics and urban forms, and proposing corresponding conservation strategies [9]. Chen and Gazzola, in their comparative study of the Nanjing and Rome city walls, examined their historical evolution, relationships with the surrounding urban fabric, conservation and restoration practices, and urban planning approaches [10]. Together, these studies provide valuable insights into the spatial characteristics, historical development, and conservation of city walls in different cultural contexts.

However, existing comparative studies have paid relatively limited attention to how historic city walls contribute to contemporary city image-making through their functional transformation and changing symbolic

meanings. While previous research has largely emphasized urban morphology, physical conservation, and planning practices, the relationship between the contemporary use of city walls, spatial perception, and urban identity remains less systematically explored. Building on Kevin Lynch's theory of city image, this study compares the Nanjing City Wall and the York City Walls to examine how historic defensive boundaries have acquired new roles as paths, public spaces, and landmarks, and how these transformations contribute to the formation of distinctive urban images. By connecting the functional reuse of city walls with their spatial and symbolic significance, this research extends existing China–Europe comparative studies beyond physical conservation and urban morphology, highlighting the role of city wall heritage in shaping contemporary urban identity and city image.

3. Functional Transformation and Spatial Reconstruction of the City Walls in Nanjing and York

From the perspective of city image, the spatial role of city walls in ancient and modern cities has changed significantly. In ancient times, city walls primarily served as the “edge” of a city, undertaking functions such as defense, separation, and management. In modern times, as their original functions gradually disappeared, the city walls of Nanjing and York were given new uses, and their spatial function gradually changed from a single “edge” to multiple elements such as “path,” “node,” and “landmark.” However, due to differences in city size, spatial structure, and historical background, there are significant differences in the specific ways the city walls of the two places are used and the extent of their renovation.

3.1 Comparison of Original Spatial Form and Defensive Features

The initial planning methods and geographical environments of the two city walls had a significant impact on their subsequent functional transformation and spatial utilization.

York City Walls can be traced back to a Roman legionary fortress in 71 AD. They were subsequently built during the Anglo-Saxon, Viking, and Norman periods, and gradually took on their basic structure in the Middle Ages. Most of the existing city walls were built on early earthen embankments and were mainly constructed using magnesian limestone [11-14]. In terms of spatial form, the York City Walls are relatively compact, forming a relatively complete ring structure around the city's historic core area. The city walls stretch for about 2 miles and connect important spaces such as York Minster, the River Ouse, and the medieval district. Because of the relatively small size of the city and the relatively concentrated enclosed area of the city walls, this form is conducive to the formation of clear city boundaries and a strong sense of unity. However, with the development of modern cities, city walls also imposed certain restrictions on traffic organization and the outward expansion of cities.

In contrast, although the Nanjing City Wall can be traced back to Yuecheng and Jinlingyi in the 5th century BC, the main body of the existing wall is the capital city wall built by Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty, between 1366 and 1386 with the full support of the country [15]. In terms of construction philosophy, the Nanjing City Wall completely broke the traditional Chinese capital city's square and symmetrical rules and regulations, and instead followed the principles of “taking advantage of the time and place” and the art of geomancy, fully enclosing the natural landscape [16]. The city wall is 35.267 kilometers long (more than 25 kilometers of which are still intact), and its outer city wall has a circumference of up to 60 kilometers, making it the largest brick and stone city wall system in the world at that time. In terms of spatial form, it is winding and irregularly distributed. It is bordered by Qingliang Mountain and Stone City to the west, controls the outer Qinhuai River to the south, borders the foot of Zijin Mountain to the east, and surrounds Lion Mountain and Jiming Mountain to the north, with Xuanwu Lake as its natural northern moat [15]. The city wall is tall and thick (14-21 meters high and 10-18 meters wide at the base), and is divided into three independent functional areas: the palace area, the military defense area, and the commercial and residential area.

Overall, the York City Walls are relatively small in scale and compact in structure, closely connected to the city center, presenting a spatial relationship of “city walls enclosing the city.” The Nanjing City Wall is even larger in scale and makes full use of the natural terrain such as mountains and rivers, forming a spatial pattern that combines the city wall with the urban landscape. The differences between the two in scale, form and

geographical conditions also lead to different characteristics in their functional transformation and utilization in modern cities.

3.2 Differences in Path Reconstruction

In Kevin Lynch's theory of city image, "path" is an important element for people to understand and experience urban space [3]. As the function of the city walls changed, both Nanjing and York used the city walls and surrounding spaces for pedestrian and recreational activities, gradually transforming the city walls, which originally served as barriers, into linear channels connecting urban spaces. However, due to the different spatial conditions and usage needs of the two cities, the functions of the city wall paths also exhibit different characteristics.

The York City Walls have undergone a functional transformation, primarily in terms of pedestrian recreation and city sightseeing. Since the second half of the 19th century, the original patrol passage on the top of the city wall has been gradually transformed into a pedestrian space and opened to the public in 1889 [13]. Today, the York City Wall Trail basically forms a continuous route around the historic city. When walking along the city wall, people can not only observe the structure and masonry methods of the city wall in different historical periods at close range, but also overlook important landscapes such as the medieval quarter, city gardens and York Minster from a higher position. Since the trail is mainly for walking, the overall environment is relatively quiet, which also transforms the city wall from its original defensive facility into an important path for experiencing the city's history and landscape.

Compared with the York City Walls, the Nanjing City Wall is larger in scale and is also divided by modern roads and urban construction. Therefore, its functional conversion adopts the method of segmented opening and surrounding space integration. Some well-preserved city walls, such as Taicheng, Zhonghua Gate and Shence Gate, have opened the top space for citizens to walk and enjoy the scenery. At the same time, relying on the moat, green space and parks along the line, Nanjing has gradually formed a slow-travel system around the city wall. This system connects urban spaces such as Xuanwu Lake, Jiuhua Mountain, Baima Park, Dongshuiguan, Zhonghua Gate, Qingliang Mountain and the outer Qinhuai River, creating a more continuous connection between previously scattered historical sites, natural landscapes and public spaces [17]. As a result, the role of the Nanjing City Wall has gradually shifted from primarily defense and separation to connecting urban landscapes, public activities, and historical and cultural spaces.

3.3 Activation Logic of Nodes and Landmarks

In traditional cities, city gates are important entrances and exits in the city wall system, serving functions such as transportation, defense, and management. In modern times, the city gates of Nanjing and York have gradually become important nodes for the gathering of people, transportation connections and public activities, which also reflect the "node" characteristics mentioned by Lynch [3].

York's four main gates that still exist today, Micklegate Bar, Monk Bar, Bootham Bar, and Walmgate Bar, are not large in size, but are generally well-preserved. Some of the interior spaces of the city gates have been transformed into small museums or exhibition spaces to introduce the city walls and the city's history. At the same time, the area around the city gates has also become an important space for tourists to stay, citizens to rest, and pedestrians to move around, so that these city gates, which originally served defensive and traffic control functions, have gradually taken on the role of public activity nodes.

The city gates of Nanjing are relatively large in scale, and their modern uses are more diverse. Taking the Zhonghua Gate barbican as an example, the existing three barbicans and twenty-seven hidden soldier caves, in addition to being open to the public as historical sites, also serve as exhibition spaces, cultural activities, and public visits, gradually becoming an important historical and cultural space in southern Nanjing. The Nanjing City Wall Museum, located west of Zhonghua Gate, was completed in 2021. The building adopts a semi-sunken design and uses a glass curtain wall to minimize its impact on the city wall landscape. The museum primarily serves functions such as artifact display, historical research, academic exchange, and public education, forming a relatively complete cultural exhibition space together with Zhonghua Gate and the surrounding city walls.

In terms of landmarks, the York City Walls primarily serve as clear visual references within the medieval district through local structures such as the Multangular Tower. The Nanjing City Wall, with its large size and continuous spatial outline, stands in stark contrast to the surrounding landscape and modern urban architecture, thus possessing strong recognizability on a larger urban scale.

4. The Role of City Walls in City Image and Identity

Functional transformation mainly focuses on how city walls are used in modern cities, while city image shaping involves more about their cultural significance and identity. Both Nanjing and York have protected, displayed and utilized their city wall heritage, making it gradually become part of the city's image and play a role in local identity and external communication.

4.1 Symbol Extraction of City Image-Making

In the process of city image-making, cultural symbols with local characteristics can often enhance the city's recognizability. Both Nanjing and York have linked their city walls with their respective histories and cultures, thus creating different expressions of their city image.

Faced with the spatial changes brought about by modern urban development, York has gradually formed a city image centered on its history and culture. The city walls are not a standalone tourist attraction, but rather together with historical and cultural facilities such as York Minster, York Castle Museum and the Yorkwick Viking Centre [18]. They constitute the city's main cultural landscape. York has further enhanced its overall character as a medieval city by protecting its city walls, historic districts and important sites. In 1968, York was designated a historic preservation area. Since then, the city has also reduced the impact of modern transportation on the ancient city space by restricting motor vehicles from entering some historical urban areas and improving the pedestrian environment. These measures have maintained a relatively complete historical connection between the city walls and the streets, buildings and public spaces, and have also enabled York to gradually develop a city image characterized by historical heritage and a pedestrian experience. This operating model, which treats the entire city as a "living museum," has contributed to York's distinctive cultural tourism identity and strengthened its recognition as a historic heritage destination [19].

Nanjing's city image has a strong historical dimension. The Nanjing City Wall is closely related to the construction of the capital city in the early Ming Dynasty, and it is also connected with historical spaces such as Stone City, Qingliang Mountain, and Qinhuai River. It has long appeared in Nanjing-related literary writings and local memories. Therefore, the city wall is not only a historical relic, but also an important spatial landmark for people to understand the history of Nanjing, the ancient capital. Compared to York's more concentrated medieval city image, Nanjing's city image is more diverse. The city wall, together with natural landscapes such as Zijin Mountain and Xuanwu Lake, forms a distinctive urban space, maintaining a strong connection between historical heritage, natural environment and modern urban life, and further enhancing Nanjing's overall image as a famous historical and cultural city.

In terms of city image-making, York places greater emphasis on the overall integration of historic districts, city walls, and tourism functions, enhancing the city's recognizability through a relatively concentrated historical and cultural image. Nanjing, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on the connection between the city walls and the city's history, landscape, and modern life, resulting in a more diverse cultural expression. Although both use city walls as an important urban symbol, there are significant differences in the focus and methods of image making.

4.2 The Construction of Local Identity

From the perspectives of environmental psychology and local identity, historical heritage can only form a more stable local identity when it enters the daily lives of residents and is continuously used and experienced. Both Nanjing and York have transformed their city walls and surrounding spaces from primarily defensive and administrative facilities into important public spaces for citizens to relax, socialize, and learn about the city's history by opening them up.

In York, the city walls are not only a historical heritage site, but have also gradually become integrated into the daily lives of citizens and local education. British scholar Jane Grenville points out that psychological

factors play an important role in the protection of the built environment, just as much as political or aesthetic issues [20]. Some schools in York also use the city walls and surrounding space for local history education. As historian T. P. Cooper described, teachers would take students to the old moat near the Lord Mayor's Walk and explain historical events such as the Siege of York during the Civil War, so that students could learn about and understand their hometown's history in a specific urban space [13]. This learning approach helps to enhance the younger generation's understanding of York's historical environment and local culture.

In Nanjing, the public function of the city wall is also being continuously enhanced. Ye Zhaoyan, a writer born and raised in Nanjing, has expressed his pride in Nanjing's history and being a Nanjing native in his works many times throughout his more than forty years of writing career [21, 22], including descriptions of the Nanjing City Wall. Today, some sections of the city wall have become public spaces for citizens to exercise, jog and walk in the morning. Some hiking and running activities related to the city wall have further increased citizens' daily contact with this historical heritage [17, 23, 24]. In addition, since 2016, Nanjing has been carrying out the "Hanging Spring Festival Couplets on City Gates" activity during the Spring Festival. By soliciting couplets from the public and hanging them on city gates such as Zhonghua Gate and Xuanwu Gate, a new connection has been created between traditional festivals, calligraphy culture and the city wall space. These activities have also enabled the Nanjing City Wall to become more than just a historical relic to be viewed and protected; they have enabled it to participate more in contemporary urban public cultural life.

4.3 International Visibility and Global World Heritage Application Strategies

In terms of applying for World Cultural Heritage status and promoting their international image, both Nanjing and York regard their historic city walls as important cultural resources and are trying to further enhance their historical city image through a systematic review of heritage value and international recognition. However, due to the differences in the composition, spatial form, and protection mechanisms of the heritage in the two places, their paths to applying for World Heritage status also show significant differences.

York was one of the first to attempt to participate in World Heritage nominations based on its urban archaeological remains and historic city area. Around 2010, York conducted relevant application work on underground archaeological remains, and then gradually incorporated the city walls, cathedral, historic districts and underground archaeological layers into a more complete heritage protection system [25]. This shows that York's approach to applying for World Heritage status emphasizes the overall connection between different types of heritage within the historic city, and uses the city's core area as the main unit for protection and display.

The Nanjing City Wall adopted a joint application approach across cities. In 2006, Nanjing joined seven other cities to jointly promote the "Ming and Qing Dynasty City Walls of China" project, which was included in China's tentative list of World Cultural Heritage sites [26]. Unlike York's relatively concentrated historical city district application model, Nanjing's application for World Heritage status emphasizes the overall value of similar city wall heritage across different cities and aims to form a relatively complete system of Ming and Qing dynasty city wall heritage through cross-regional cooperation.

After Nanjing and York established a sister-city relationship in 2016, exchanges between the two places in the protection of historical cities and the utilization of city wall heritage have further increased [2]. Such cross-city collaborations not only help promote the exchange of experiences in areas such as conservation technology, public education, and heritage display, but also provide a practical basis for comparing historical city wall conservation models in different cultural contexts.

5. Conclusion

The remains of the city wall are an important part of historical urban space and local culture. Its contemporary value lies not only in the preservation of its physical form, but also in its continuous connection with urban life, historical memory and local identity. This article takes Kevin Lynch's city image theory as an entry point, and analyzes the spatial role and cultural significance of historical city walls in modern cities by comparing the practices of the Nanjing City Wall and the York City Walls in terms of functional conversion and city image-making.

The study found that with the changes in urban functions and social needs, the original defense and separation functions of the city wall gradually weakened, and its spatial role also changed accordingly. Both

York and Nanjing have incorporated city walls into modern public spaces to varying degrees, allowing them to function as paths, nodes and landmarks. From the perspective of Lynch's city image theory, this means that the city wall is no longer just the "edge" dividing the inside and outside of the city, but begins to participate in the city's pedestrian activities, public interactions, landscape experience and historical display. However, there is no unified way to achieve this change, but is closely related to the spatial structure and historical environment of the city itself.

The York City Walls are small in scale and closely connected with the historical city, so the functional transformation is mainly concentrated on the city wall walk, city gates and surrounding historical districts. Walking, viewing and historical displays constitute the main modes of use, further strengthening York's image as a city characterized by its historic city and medieval heritage. The Nanjing City Wall has a larger spatial scale and forms complex connections with mountains, rivers, lakes and urban green spaces. Therefore, its utilization methods are more reflected in segmented openings, construction of slow traffic systems, and the integration of surrounding historical and ecological spaces. The two different utilization methods show that the functional transformation of the city walls is not only affected by the conditions of the heritage itself, but also restricted by the urban development method and spatial pattern.

This difference is also reflected in city image-making. York mainly strengthens the overall characteristics of the medieval city through city walls, historic districts and other historical heritage. The city walls play more of a role in connecting and displaying the historical city. Nanjing connects the city wall with the history of the ancient capital, the landscape environment, and contemporary public life, making it an important part of the city's historical memory and local identity. From this point of view, the city image value of historical city walls does not only come from the architecture itself, but also depends on how it is connected with local history, natural environment and daily life.

The cases of Nanjing and York show that the protection of historic city walls does not mean preserving them as static monuments separate from the modern city. On the basis of maintaining the historical characteristics of the heritage, through appropriate spatial opening, public use and cultural display, the city walls can continue to participate in contemporary urban life, and in the process continue its historical significance and local identity. At the same time, the comparison between the two cities also shows that the renewal and utilization of historical heritage cannot simply apply a single model, but should adopt corresponding methods based on the city's spatial conditions, historical background and social needs. This is also an important condition for the historical city walls to continue to play its role as urban culture and public space.

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