
A Study on the Visual Symbol Construction of Elephant Slides from the Nostalgic Perspective and Their Aesthetic Education Value in Contemporary Public Space

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Abstract: As a public recreational facility that gained widespread popularity in China from the mid-to-late 20th century, the elephant slide serves as a carrier of collective childhood memories for several generations. Its visual image embodies profound nostalgic sentiments and cultural connotations, while simultaneously undertaking a significant aesthetic education function in contemporary public spaces. Taking the nostalgic perspective as the starting point, this paper employs relevant theories including visual semiotics, public aesthetic education theory, and cultural studies to systematically analyze the constituent elements, construction logic, and communication paths of the visual symbols of elephant slides. It further explores their aesthetic education value in contemporary public spaces and investigates practical approaches to integrating nostalgic symbols with public aesthetic education, thereby providing theoretical references and practical implications for improving the contemporary public aesthetic education system, inheriting urban memories, and promoting the innovative development of public art.

Keywords: Nostalgic Perspective; Elephant Slide; Visual Symbol; Public Space; Aesthetic Education Value

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1. Research Background

First, this paper enriches the application of visual semiotics in the research of public facilities. Taking the elephant slide as a specific carrier, it systematically analyzes the composition, construction logic and communication rules of visual symbols from the nostalgic perspective, and improves the application scenarios of visual symbol theory in the field of public space; second, it expands the research boundary of public aesthetic education theory, combines nostalgic emotions with public aesthetic education, explores the aesthetic education value of nostalgic symbols in public space, and injects new perspectives and contents into the public aesthetic education theory; third, it fills the research gap of “visual symbols— aesthetic education value” in the research on elephant slides, sorts out the transformation path of elephant slides from memory symbols to aesthetic education carriers, constructs an analytical framework for the aesthetic education value of public facilities from the nostalgic perspective, and provides theoretical reference for subsequent related research^[1].

In addition, the practical significance is mainly reflected in four aspects: first, it provides reference for the transformation and upgrading of contemporary public spaces. By exploring the visual symbol value and aesthetic education function of elephant slides, it provides ideas for the landscape design and facility renewal of public spaces such as urban parks, communities and kindergartens, and realizes the organic integration of urban memory with modern aesthetics and practical functions; second, it provides a new path for the practical implementation of public aesthetic education. Relying on the elephant slide, a visual symbol familiar to the public, it creates down-to-earth and warm public aesthetic education scenarios, integrates aesthetic education into daily life, and improves the national aesthetic literacy; third, it provides a new carrier for the inheritance and activation of urban memory. By protecting, restoring and innovating the visual image of elephant slides, the symbols carrying the memory of the times are revitalized in contemporary public spaces, enhancing citizens' sense of urban identity and belonging; fourth, it provides reference for the innovative development of public art. Drawing on the construction experience of the visual symbols of elephant slides, it promotes public art works to be closer to the public and life, and realizes the in-depth integration of art with public spaces and public emotions^[2].

2. Definition of the Core Concept of Nostalgia

The term “nostalgia” originated from ancient Greek, composed of two roots meaning “returning home” and “pain”. Initially, it referred to the longing and sorrow of people who were away from their hometown for their hometown. With the development of society, the connotation of nostalgia has been continuously enriched, and it has gradually evolved into people's longing and affection for the people, things, objects and scenes of the past. It is a complex emotional experience with emotional, memorial and cultural attributes. The nostalgic perspective refers to examining and analyzing the cultural connotation, emotional value and communication rules of the research object from the perspective of nostalgic emotions, focusing on the connection between nostalgic emotions and the research object, and exploring the value and significance of nostalgic symbols in contemporary society. The nostalgic perspective mainly focuses on people's nostalgia for childhood memories and era scenes, taking the elephant slide, a carrier of collective childhood memories, as the core, and analyzes how nostalgic emotions affect the construction and communication of the visual symbols of elephant slides, as well as how nostalgic symbols exert their aesthetic education functions in contemporary public spaces to achieve the unity of emotional value and aesthetic education value^[3].

The visual symbol of the elephant slide refers to the connotations such as childhood memories, nostalgic emotions and era culture carried by the elephant slide through its external visual forms such as shape, color, material and detailed decoration. Its signifier is the physical form of the elephant slide, and its signified is people's longing for childhood, yearning for innocence and emotion for the changes of the times, which is a visual expression of nostalgic emotions and cultural connotations. Public space aesthetic education refers to a form of aesthetic education that conveys aesthetic knowledge, cultivates aesthetic ability and improves aesthetic literacy to the public through carriers such as public art, public facilities and landscape design in public spaces such as parks, communities, streets and squares, which has the characteristics of publicity, openness, daily life and imperceptibility. Public space aesthetic education breaks the limitations of professional aesthetic education venues, integrates aesthetic education into daily life, and allows the public to feel, understand and create beauty in leisure and entertainment and daily travel. It is an important way to improve national aesthetic literacy, build cultural confidence and promote social civilization progress. Public space aesthetic education mainly focuses on the elephant slide, a public recreational facility, and explores how it, as a carrier of visual symbols, exerts its aesthetic education functions in contemporary public spaces, and cultivates the public's aesthetic cognition, emotional literacy and cultural identity through visual experience and emotional resonance, so as to realize the in-depth integration of aesthetic education with public spaces and daily life^[4].

3. Analysis of the Construction of Elephant Slide Visual Symbols from the Nostalgic Perspective

The construction of the elephant slide visual symbol is the unity of the composition of visual forms and the bearing of emotions and culture. Its constituent elements mainly include the shape, color, and material at the signifier level, as well as the nostalgic emotions, cultural connotations, and era memories at the signified level. These elements are interrelated and interact with each other, jointly forming the unique visual symbol system of the elephant slide.

Shape is the core signifier element of the elephant slide visual symbol, and its core feature is “iconicity”. Taking the elephant as the prototype, it creates a naive, kind and natural visual form through design techniques such as simplification and exaggeration. The shape of traditional elephant slides mostly adopts rounded lines, with the elephant’s head, body, trunk, ears and other parts clearly visible. The trunk serves as the slideway, the body as the climbing platform, and the ears as decorative elements. The overall shape is simple and elegant, full of childlike interest, which meets the aesthetic and recreational needs of children^[5].

Color is also an important signifier element of the elephant slide visual symbol. Its selection is closely related to the era background and aesthetic needs, and at the same time carries certain emotional connotations. The colors of traditional elephant slides are mostly simple and natural tones, such as gray, off-white, light brown, etc., mostly using the natural color of materials such as terrazzo and cement, reflecting the simple and unadorned aesthetic of the era and adapting to the social and economic conditions at that time. With the development of the times, the colors of contemporary elephant slides have gradually enriched, with bright and lively tones such as blue, yellow, and green appearing. They not only retain the nostalgia of traditional elephant slides, but also integrate modern aesthetic elements, meeting the aesthetic needs of audiences of different age groups.

In addition, material is an important carrier of the elephant slide visual symbol. Its texture and touch directly affect the audience’s experience and emotional resonance, and also reflect the technological level of the era. Traditional elephant slides are mostly made of materials such as terrazzo, cement, and granite. These materials are hard and durable. After long-term use and weathering, they will form unique mottled textures, carrying the traces of the era and becoming an important carrier of nostalgic emotions. Elephant slides made of terrazzo will absorb a lot of the sun’s temperature, and the touch will vary with the seasons - sitting on it to slide on a sunny day, the buttocks will be burned by the heat; sliding on a cloudy day, the buttocks will be very cold. This unique touch has become an important part of many people’s childhood memories. In terms of material selection, contemporary elephant slides not only retain the nostalgia of traditional materials, but also integrate modern environmentally friendly and safe materials, such as environmentally friendly soft plastic and anti-corrosion wood, which take into account practicality, safety and aesthetics.

4. Art Therapy with Chinese Cultural Characteristics

Nostalgic emotion constitutes the most essential connotation of the visual symbol of the elephant slide and serves as the key to its ability to evoke emotional resonance among the public. For those born in the 1980s, 1990s, and even the 2000s, the elephant slide represents an integral part of childhood and serves as a vessel for fond memories of playing with peers and spending time with parents. Its visual imagery can instantly evoke nostalgia for one’s childhood and a longing for innocence, thereby alleviating the pressures and anxieties of contemporary life while providing emotional comfort. Many “elephant seekers” have noted that the process of searching for elephant slides feels like a form of “childhood compensation”—each slide discovered resembles the recovery of a fragment of childhood. This emotional experience embodies the nostalgic significance embedded in the visual symbol of the elephant slide.

Epochal culture represents another important connotation of the visual symbol of the elephant slide. Its visual form, material selection, and design style are closely tied to specific historical contexts, reflecting the cultural characteristics and social values of the era. In the mid-to-late twentieth century, China was in the early stages of economic development, and public recreational facilities were relatively scarce. With its simple design, practicality, and low cost, the elephant slide

became a prominent feature of urban public spaces. Its unadorned form and durable materials embodied the social values of the time, characterized by thrift, practicality, and utility. In contrast, contemporary elephant slide designs incorporate modern concepts such as environmental sustainability, safety, and age-inclusiveness, reflecting contemporary principles of human-centered and ecologically friendly development. At the same time, they integrate traditional cultural elements—such as motifs from Dunhuang murals and traditional artifacts—thereby assuming the mission of cultural inheritance and conveying the allure of traditional culture.

Childhood memory and collective identity constitute another significant connotation of the visual symbol of the elephant slide. Audience needs represent the operational logic underlying the construction of this visual symbol. As a feature of public spaces, the elephant slide's visual symbolism must address the needs of its audience—including recreational, aesthetic, and emotional needs—in order to realize its value. From the perspective of nostalgia, the audience for the elephant slide primarily includes children and adults. Children are primarily concerned with its recreational function and visual appeal, with aesthetic preferences tending toward lively, endearing, and simple forms. Adults, by contrast, focus more on the nostalgic emotion and cultural connotations evoked by the slide, with aesthetic preferences leaning toward simple, warm, and memorable visual forms. Therefore, the construction of the elephant slide's visual symbolism must precisely align with the needs of different audience groups—preserving childlike appeal to meet children's recreational needs while incorporating nostalgic elements and cultural connotations to satisfy adults' emotional and aesthetic needs. For instance, the elephant slides at Xiaoxiang Amusement Park in Zhengzhou People's Park are divided into a core play area, a toddler interactive zone, and a leisure activity area. This layout not only meets children's needs for adventure and exploration across age groups but also evokes nostalgia in adults through the use of low-saturation color schemes and classic elephant-shaped designs, achieving precise alignment with the needs of diverse audiences. Similarly, the elephant slide along Beixiaohe in Beijing is suitable for both children's play and adult experiences such as photography and social check-ins, allowing citizens of different ages to rediscover their childlike joy. This approach implements age-inclusive design and achieves comprehensive coverage of audience needs.

5. The Communication Path of the Visual Symbol of the Elephant Slide from the Perspective of Nostalgia

The communication paths of the visual symbol of the elephant slide mainly consist of two forms: offline communication and online communication. These two forms complement and reinforce each other, enabling the widespread dissemination and deep penetration of the visual symbol.

Offline communication represents the most fundamental and direct path for disseminating the visual symbol of the elephant slide. It primarily relies on scenario-based interactions within public spaces to facilitate the transmission of the visual symbol and the conveyance of emotion. Elephant slides are mainly located in public spaces such as parks, communities, and kindergartens. These spaces serve as important venues for citizens' leisure, recreation, and daily travel, providing natural scenographic advantages for the dissemination of the visual symbol.

First, communication occurs through physical display and experiential interaction. As physical installations, the visual form of elephant slides is directly presented in public spaces. Through viewing, touching, and using the slides, audiences intuitively perceive their visual appeal and emotional connotations, forming cognitive impressions and memories associated with the visual symbol. For example, when people encounter an elephant slide in a park, they actively observe its shape and color and experience the pleasure of sliding. During this process, childhood memories are evoked and nostalgic feelings are experienced, while simultaneously being shared with those around them. Second, communication is achieved through scenographic construction and emotional resonance. By designing the spatial environment in which the elephant slide is situated—integrating it with surrounding landscapes and facilities—designers create atmospheres imbued with nostalgia, eliciting emotional resonance from audiences.

With the advancement of new media technologies, online communication has become a vital path for the

dissemination of the visual symbol of the elephant slide. Utilizing platforms such as short-video apps, social media, Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), and Weibo, this mode enables the fragmented dissemination and widespread diffusion of the visual symbol, further amplifying its influence. The elephant slide in Lunchangli, Jiangmen, gained rapid popularity due to its charming and playful design, becoming a new hotspot for young people to take photos and check in. Through such acts of visitation and documentation, the transmission of the visual symbol and the associated emotions is accomplished.

A third mode involves dissemination via short-video platforms. Many users record short videos showcasing the visual imagery and experiential use of elephant slides and upload them to platforms such as Douyin (TikTok) and Kuaishou. Accompanied by nostalgic music and captions, these videos convey nostalgic emotions and attract the attention and resonance of other users. For instance, “elephant seekers” share their journeys of locating elephant slides, along with photos and videos, on online platforms, recounting their childhood memories and emotional experiences. These posts draw considerable attention and interaction from netizens, many of whom leave comments sharing their own stories about elephant slides, thereby generating widespread communication effects. Similarly, vintage film photography enthusiasts in Guangzhou use elephant slides as photographic subjects and share their works online. The low-fidelity, grainy texture of film photography evokes a nostalgic atmosphere, resonating with the aesthetics of “Chinese dreamcore” and eliciting broad emotional responses from online audiences.

Through the integrated offline–online communication, offline experiences and check-in activities provide content for online dissemination, while online sharing in turn attracts more people to engage in offline experiences. This creates a virtuous cycle of offline experience, online communication, and renewed offline engagement, further reinforcing the communication effectiveness of the visual symbol of the elephant slide and enabling the broader transmission of nostalgic emotions and cultural connotations.

6. The Aesthetic Education Value of the Elephant Slide in Contemporary Public Space from the Perspective of Nostalgia

In contemporary public spaces, the elephant slide functions not merely as a recreational facility but also as an important vehicle for aesthetic education. Its aesthetic educational value is primarily manifested across four dimensions: **aesthetic cognition, emotional cultivation, cultural inheritance, and social cohesion**. Through subtle and sustained influence, it enhances the public’s aesthetic literacy, emotional sensitivity, and cultural identity, thereby facilitating the implementation and development of public aesthetic education.

First, cultivating aesthetic perception. The visual elements of the elephant slide—such as its form, color, and material—possess distinctive aesthetic qualities. Its rounded contours, harmonious color schemes, and warm textures offer the public an immediate aesthetic experience and stimulate their capacity for aesthetic perception. For instance, the understated hues and mottled terrazzo texture of traditional elephant slides evoke a simple, unadorned natural beauty, while the bright colors and intricate details of contemporary elephant slides convey a lively and dynamic modern beauty. Through the acts of viewing and touching the elephant slide, the public can perceive diverse aesthetic styles and thereby enhance their sensitivity to aesthetic qualities.

Second, enhancing aesthetic judgment. The construction of the visual symbol of the elephant slide integrates nostalgic emotions, cultural connotations, and aesthetic concepts. In the process of interpreting this visual symbol, the public must draw upon their own life experiences and aesthetic knowledge to evaluate and interpret its visual form and cultural significance, thereby refining their aesthetic judgment. For example, when comparing traditional and contemporary elephant slides, the public may reflect on the evolution of aesthetic ideals across different eras, assess the merits of various design approaches, and formulate their own aesthetic evaluations. Similarly, when interpreting the cultural meanings embedded in the elephant slide, they may situate these meanings within their historical context, assess their cultural value, and enhance their ability to discern aesthetic quality. Moreover, as a feature of public space, the visual design of the

elephant slide must balance practicality with aesthetic appeal. During their engagement with the slide, the public naturally evaluates the reasonableness and visual appeal of its design, further sharpening their aesthetic judgment.

Finally, stimulating aesthetic creativity. The nostalgic emotions and cultural connotations embodied in the visual symbol of the elephant slide can inspire the public's aesthetic creativity, enabling them to engage in creative expression on the basis of their aesthetic experiences. For instance, many artists have created paintings, sculptures, and short videos inspired by the elephant slide, conveying nostalgic sentiment and aesthetic concepts. Some citizens, while experiencing the slide, capture photographs and videos, engage in creative editing, and share their aesthetic experiences. Designers, too, have drawn upon the visual elements of the elephant slide to create cultural and creative products as well as landscape works, translating aesthetic inspiration into tangible outcomes. Furthermore, the elephant slide provides children with a space for aesthetic creativity. During play, children exercise their imagination, associating and creating narratives around the elephant slide, thereby cultivating their interest and capacity for aesthetic creation and laying the foundation for their future aesthetic development.

7. Conclusion

As a distinctive visual symbol in China's urban public spaces, the elephant slide has undergone a complete transformation in value—from a functional amenity to an emotionally charged symbol. From the perspective of nostalgia, the construction of its visual symbol results from the synergistic interplay of three dimensions: form, material, and ritual. This evolution has passed through three historical stages—functionalism, consumer-oriented transformation, and memory retrieval—marking a rupture and reconstruction of the signifier and the signified. Ultimately, the elephant slide has become a “realm of memory” (*lieu de mémoire*) that carries collective memory and evokes emotional resonance.

In the contemporary context of urban renewal and public aesthetic education, the elephant slide is no longer viewed as an “obsolete relic” but rather as a vehicle of significant aesthetic educational value. Through subtle aesthetic immersion, it fulfills the functions of connecting intergenerational emotions, cultivating place attachment, and conveying cultural connotations, thereby providing an exemplary model for aesthetic education practices in contemporary public spaces.

Future urban renewal efforts should pay greater attention to the emotional resonance and aesthetic educational potential embodied in such “silent objects.” Moving beyond the principles of “functionalism above all” and the homogenization of urban landscapes, renewal practices should focus on preserving and revitalizing collective memory. Visual symbols like the elephant slide, which bear the imprints of their era, should be allowed to serve as “spiritual anchors” within urban public spaces. Moreover, further exploration is needed to integrate nostalgic symbols with public aesthetic education. This involves preserving the authenticity and emotional warmth embedded in traditional symbols while simultaneously adopting innovative modes of presentation to deeply integrate them with contemporary aesthetics and modern life. In doing so, public spaces can be endowed not only with functional utility but also with emotional resonance and aesthetic value, enabling cities to truly become homes imbued with memory, warmth, and beauty—thereby realizing the public aesthetic education goals of “nurturing people through beauty and cultivating them through culture.”

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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