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Practice of Regional-characteristic-oriented Environmental Landscape Design: A Case Study of the River Island in Nawei Village, Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County

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Abstract The ecological overload and cultural convergence triggered by globalization have made regional landscape a key path to sustaining the diversity of human society. The river island of Nawei Village in Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County, Gansu Province, is located in an alpine ethnic settlement area and possesses both a distinctive natural island form and Tibetan and Tu cultural resources; nevertheless, it faces the dilemma of being "idle for half a year" caused by a cold period lasting as long as 300 days, as well as the risk of weakening cultural identity. Taking the environmental landscape design practice of this river island as an example, this paper proposes a design strategy that integrates climate adaptability with cultural continuity: a "round outside and square inside" double-layer envelope structure together with a water heat-circulation system is adopted to meet the demand for all-season use; the "pupil of the fairy's eye" is taken as the prototype of landscape narrative, organically integrating Tibetan architectural forms with the natural morphology of the island; and the variable interface of "storing in winter and releasing in summer" together with a concentric-circle ecological planting pattern is used to coordinate the relationship between artificial intervention and natural rhythms. This strategy transforms harsh natural constraints into unique spatial resources, realizes the shift of design paradigm from "formal symbol extraction" to "translation of survival wisdom", and provides a practical model of universal value for cultural tourism development in alpine ethnic regions and for global marginal cultural areas resisting cultural homogenization.

Keywords Regional characteristics, Environmental landscape design, Cultural identity, Ecological resilience, River island of Nawei Village

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Human living environments are facing two major challenges. On the one hand, the shortage of natural resources, environmental pollution and global warming caused by global economic development have given rise to severe ecological and environmental problems; on the other hand, the popularization of the Internet and excessive global integration have accelerated the penetration of dominant cultures into vulnerable ones, leading to the homogenization and uniformity of the human social environment. The former has contributed to the far-reaching strategic theory of "sustainable development", while the latter has stimulated the regional consciousness of countries around the world on the basis of their own identity characteristics, in an attempt to construct and enhance their national or regional identity so as to resist the cultural penetration and assimilation crisis brought about by globalization. Regionality has thus become one of the most powerful and most convenient means of sustaining the diversified development of the human social environment.

Since modern times, China has likewise experienced the ecological and environmental problems and the homogenization brought by economic globalization, with landscape construction following a single stereotyped pattern. Although Gansu Province, located in the inland northwest and far from the political and economic center, has also been affected by this trend, the overall degree of impact has been relatively small. In particular, in the remote ethnic minority settlements within the province, a large number of landscapes with regional characteristics have been preserved in a relatively complete manner. These regional characteristic landscapes, especially cultural landscapes, have today become important resources for attracting visitors in local cultural tourism development.

Gansu is both a multi-ethnic province where China's farming civilization and nomadic civilization converged, and one of the birthplaces of Chinese culture. Numerous distinctive regional cultural landscapes are distributed within its territory. After the reform and opening up, thanks to its special geographical location—far from China's political, economic and cultural centers—the regional cultural landscapes within its territory were to a large extent protected from the destructive tide of economic development and thus obtained a certain degree of protection. In recent years, with the in-depth advancement of China's Western Development strategy, the continuous extension of transportation construction, and the vigorous development of the cultural tourism industry, the unique regional cultural landscapes in Gansu Province have been continuously explored and displayed, shining brilliantly. These landscape resources with local characteristics have become an important link in enhancing the economy of the cultural tourism industry of Gansu.

Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County is not only the most distinctive autonomous county within Gansu Province, but also the first ethnic minority autonomous county in China, as well as an autonomous county with the Tibetan ethnic group as its main body; it possesses abundant regional landscape resources. Today, these unique landscape resources have become an important factor in promoting the vigorous development of the cultural tourism industry of Tianzhu County. Among them, the river island in Nawei Village, by virtue of its unique geographical location and landscape effect, has become an important site for improving the level of local landscape-based cultural tourism.

1 Concepts related to regional cultural landscape

According to Volume 14 of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "region" refers to a cohesive area whose geographical and human environments are homogeneous[1]. The 1997 abridged edition of the *Chinese Great Dictionary* (*Hanyu Da Cidian*) defines "region" as the scope of land or the scope of an area[2]. The Chinese architecture scholar Wu Liangyong points out that a region is an independent geographical, cultural and economic carrier, and that there are deep-seated cultural differences among

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these carriers[3]. Therefore, a region is not only a geographical spatial scope, but also emphasizes the homogeneity, cohesion and the spirit of place embodied in cultural continuity within that spatial scope. It includes both the landscapes formed by the natural geographical environment and the cultural landscapes formed by human production practices. Regionality is thus an inherent attribute of landscape.

Thus, regional cultural landscapes possess overall consistency as well as heterogeneous diversity arising from human subjective agency[4]. This is because the regionality of cultural landscapes, on the one hand, has relatively stable characteristics owing to their natural attributes, and on the other hand, exhibits fluctuating heterogeneity because of the subjective agency of human activities. The regionality of landscape is mainly and closely related to the natural environment, the human environment and the human activities within a given area. On this basis, the environmental landscape design of the river island in Nawei Village, Tianzhu County, also follows several major principles, namely the natural environment, the human environment and the laws of historical activities of local people.

2 Overview of Nawei Village in Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County

Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County is located at the junction of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the Loess Plateau and the Inner Mongolia Plateau, with an altitude of 2,040–4,874 m (Fig.1). The county possesses dense forests and open forest meadows, with a cold climate, cool and short summers, long springs, autumns and winters, and cold and dry winters, but with a relatively large number of sunny days throughout the year. Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County has long been known as the gateway to the eastern section of the Hexi Corridor in Gansu Province. It is adjacent to Qinghai and situated at a key node of the ancient Silk Road. There are 28 ethnic groups in the autonomous county; apart from the Tibetan people, the Tu ethnic group and other ethnic groups also live here in an intermingled manner, with the Tu people mainly concentrated in this area. Since the Tu people as a whole believe in Tibetan Buddhism, their beliefs and living habits are quite similar to those of the Tibetan people; therefore, their architectural environment and landscape pattern are also influenced by those of the Tibetan people, showing strong regional characteristics[5].

The Tu people live in valleys and settle where water and grass are available; their dwellings are always built against mountains and beside water, with high enclosing walls forming courtyards that ensure both warmth and safety. Flower beds are set in the courtyard, and the main room faces the gate, where spirit tablets are enshrined and offerings are placed. On the right side of the building there is usually a Buddhist chapel for scripture recitation, which also serves as a storage room. To the left and right of the gatehouse are respectively built the kitchen, granary, toilet and livestock shed. The layout of their architectural environment bears similarities to the Han Chinese quadrangle dwellings, but the formation of the Tu architectural environment is mainly influenced by their religious beliefs, geographical location, climate and landform.

Nawei Village is subordinate to Tiantang Temple, a sacred site of Tibetan Buddhism, with a long history of Tibetan culture that has profoundly influenced local culture. The river island is located on the north bank of the Datong River in Nawei Village; it is a small island in the Datong River, surrounded by unique natural landscapes and rich vegetation (Fig.2). The climate here is relatively cold and humid, with typical plateau wetland characteristics. A variety of rare plants and birds are also distributed on the island, making it a natural ecological reserve as well. In summary, the environmental landscape design of the river island in Nawei Village mainly embodies local wisdom and is developed around four major design strategies: sustainable development, ethnic characteristics, integration with nature, and public participation.

3 Environmental landscape design of the river island in Nawei Village

The river island in Nawei Village is a public space within the village. The island is mainly planted with nurseries of economic plants such as pines and cypresses, and apricot, peach and pear trees are distributed around it. There are villagers specially responsible for managing the island, and an iron-chain suspension bridge connects the island with the village road outside. Looking around the island, the scenery is beautiful and pleasant, making it very suitable for tourism landscape development. Since the island is not large in area, the main body of the landscape on the river island is a relatively large landscape building. This building is mainly used to receive tourists; its style is dominated by a tourism homestay style that reflects local ethnic characteristics, and it also serves as a venue for daily public affairs in the village. The landscape environment design around the building is likewise adapted to local conditions and developed around the style of the main building, embodying local customs while integrating into the natural environment. Therefore, taking into account the geographical location, natural environment, and human and social factors of the river island in Nawei Village, its environmental landscape design aims to preserve regional culture, enhance local identity, and shape spaces with regional characteristics that develop in harmony with nature, so as to ultimately achieve sustainable development and create a beautiful scenic place that highlights local culture and is habitable, viewable and visitable[6].

3.1 Sustainable design of the architectural environment landscape of the river island

Tianzhu County is dominated by a continental plateau climate, with long winters and no summers, brief springs and autumns, and winters lasting about 300 days; the annual average temperature is only 0.3 °C. Without the support of modern technology, apart from a small number of indigenous residents, people usually enter this area to carry out activities only in summer, that is, after May, and by October it is already deserted. In recent years, in order to develop tourism, increase the income of indigenous residents and enhance local economic vitality, various ethnic activities have been launched one after another, but with mediocre results. The main reason lies in the constraints brought by the natural geographical climate—activity restrictions lasting half a year. To solve this problem and enhance the environmental vitality and sustainable development level of this place, it is necessary to design a large building space and the corresponding environmental landscape that can be used for living activities all year round. This building space must also meet the needs of thermal insulation and ventilation for as long as half a year, ensuring that the occupants inside the building have scenery to view and space for activities, and can move around relatively freely.

To this end, the architectural landscape design must technically adopt a double-layer wall design and a double-layer glass wall design so as to facilitate heat preservation. The spatial scale between the inner and outer walls is widened to form a thermal insulation layer and a human activity layer (Fig.3). Specifically, the thermal insulation of the double-layer wall adopts the measure of layered treatment of the double-layer wall, forming an exterior wall—air interlayer—

interior wall system, so as to achieve the purpose of thermal insulation and energy saving (Fig.4). In terms of form, the outer circle derives from the local Tibetan tent, while the inner square derives from the architectural form of the local Tu and Tibetan dwellings (Fig.5). The interior of the building is hollow, which not only conforms to the spatial mode of traditional Tibetan architecture, but also forms the alternating circulation of indoor and outdoor airflows. Conceptually, the combination of square and circle mainly embodies the wisdom of traditional Chinese culture—"round heaven and square earth" (Fig.6). The spatial layout and form of square and circle not only present the beauty of the spatial form of the architectural landscape, but also express the beauty of artistic conception in the pursuit of harmony and unity with the universe, as well as the aesthetic disposition that emphasizes harmony and unity with the environment of heaven and earth. Finally, at the level of daily life, the combined design of double-layer walls, glass exterior walls and the square-circle form can ensure that occupants can live, view and tour in all four seasons, enabling the architectural landscape environment to achieve sustainable development.



Fig.1 Location of the river island in Nawei Village, Tianzhu Autonomous County, Gansu Province



Fig.2 The river island in Nawei Village and its current conditions

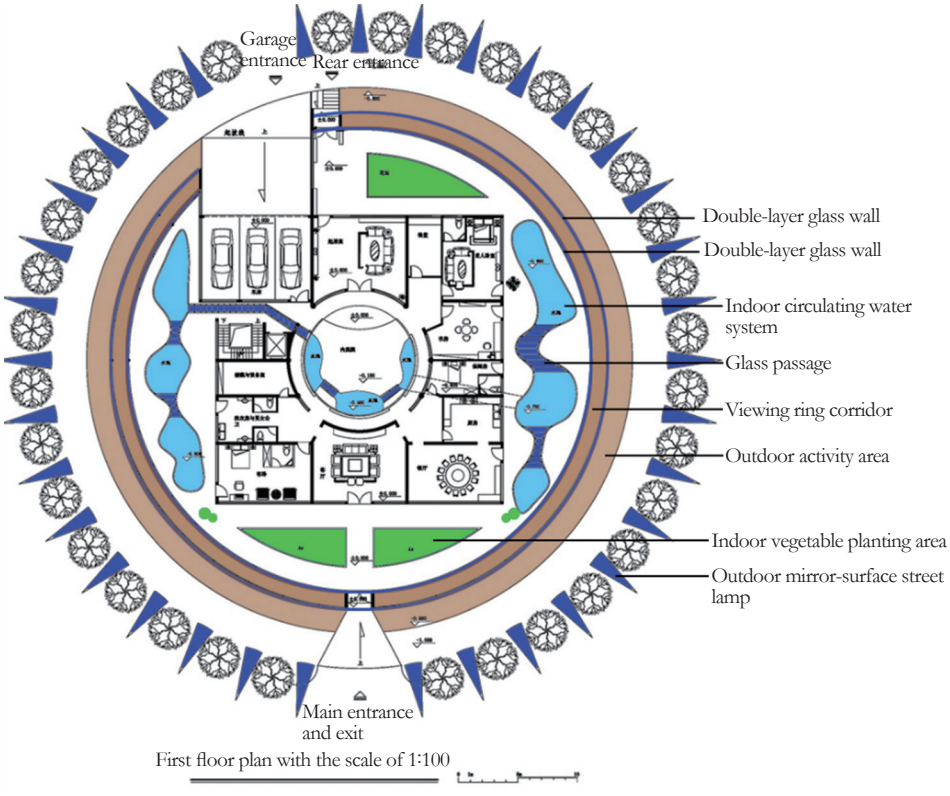


Fig.3 First–floor plan of the architectural design

In addition, in terms of water landscape design, the designers adapted to local conditions by introducing upstream river water into the main body of the building through a concealed channel, forming an internal circulating branch stream, which then flows out through a downstream concealed channel and returns to the river course. The internal river of the building operates in coordination with the winter warm-water pipeline, which can solve the problem of freezing of the internal channel caused by the cold winter. The river inside the building is not only a living water landscape providing recreation, but also helps to meet the daily water needs inside the building. In this way, whether in winter or summer, water use inside the building is not restricted by seasonal changes, achieving energy conservation and emission reduction, a virtuous cycle and sustainable development. At the same time, fresh outdoor air can also enter the building interior through the water channel, and then, driven by the temperature difference between the inside and outside, be released from the opening at the top of the building, achieving an effect of natural circulation. In addition, on the south side of the building, the natural terrain height difference is used to introduce the water of the Datong River into the site, creating a stepped cascading waterfall. The cascade can either enter the building through the concealed channel or flow naturally in front of the building, forming a series of cascading water landscapes. The water depth of the cascade is controlled at 30−50 cm, which is conducive to water play in summer and skating in winter. Finally, the cascading water flows through the terrain height difference into the low-lying area at the edge of the site and then flows back into the Datong River, completing a closed loop (Fig.7).

3.2 Environmental landscape design for enhancing local ethnic cultural identity and sense of belonging

In terms of human factors, although this place is mainly inhabited by the Tu people, the Tu people generally belong to Tibetan culture, and their architectural style is very similar to that of Tibetan architecture. Therefore, the landscape building at the center of the river island adopts the locally common "square" Tibetan architectural style and the "round" Tibetan tent style in its external form, and organically combines the two (Fig.8). The inner building is "square" and the outer building is "round".

In terms of geography and nature, the river island is subordinate to Tiantang Temple and is located in the middle of a certain section of the

Datong River. For the whole of Nawei Village, it is tucked away in a corner, seldom visited, quiet and mysterious, like a land of idyllic beauty. The overall shape of the river island is like the eye of a lonely fairy, yet lacking a bright pupil. Therefore, the overall environmental landscape design of the river island follows the trend: taking the eye as the form, the round building as the pupil that brings the design to life, and the introduced river water as the strings of tears flowing in the eye. Specifically, at the center of the river island, a building image is constructed in accordance with local conditions, with the eye image as the basic form of the environmental landscape design and with round glass as the main material, so as to symbolize the pupil of the fairy, forming a mutual echo between the interior of the island and the water body of the Datong River outside. The water of the Datong River is introduced into the island, crossing the exterior and interior of the building layer upon layer. These water bodies running through the island symbolize the tears rolling down from the lonely fairy (Fig.9). The overall environmental landscape design of the island is adapted to local conditions everywhere, and is carried out in combination with the local natural climate and terrain conditions.

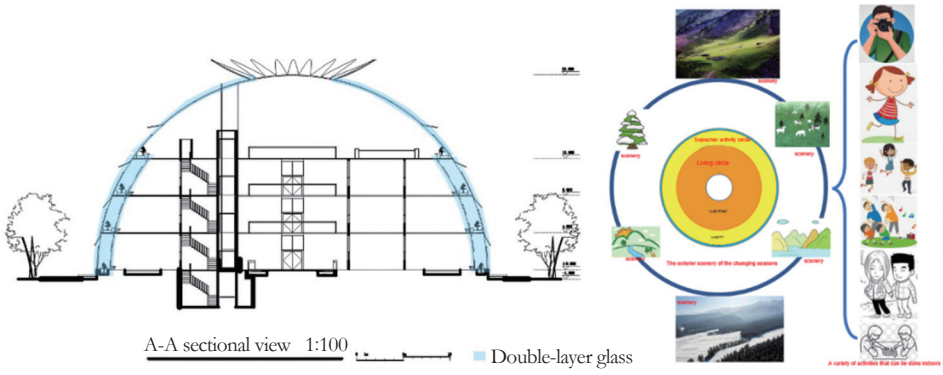


Fig.4 Design of the double-layer wall and the exterior glass wall, and schematic diagram of sustainability



Fig.5 Concept of the "round heaven and square earth" thought

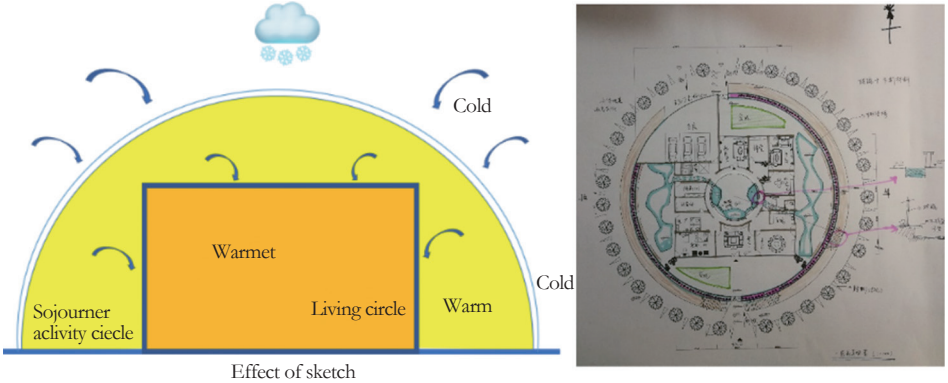


Fig.6 Integration of the double-layer wall model and the cosmology of "round heaven and square earth"

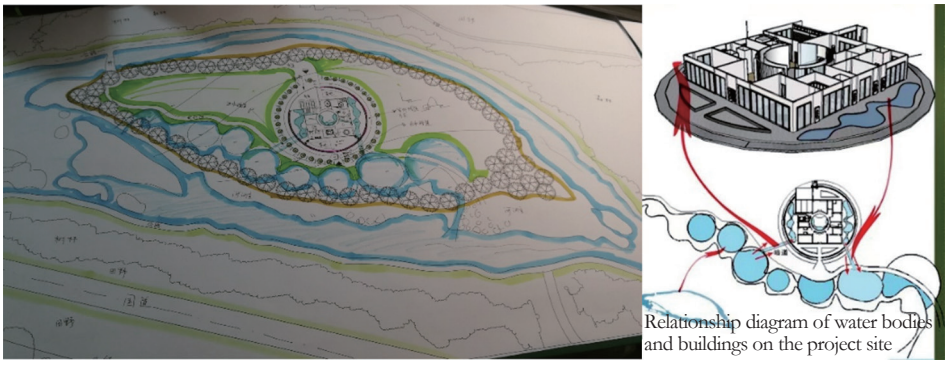


Fig.7 Water system introducing river water into the building site and the building interior

Inside the landscape building, the overall plan still retains the architectural form of the Tu people. The square building is similar to the high enclosing wall of the original Tu dwellings, with an inner courtyard inside, and the flat roof serves as a space for drying, viewing and carrying out related activities. The building has four floors. The space on each floor on the north side of the building, opposite the main gate, is equivalent to the principal room of Tu dwellings and can be used for various public ceremonial activities (Fig.10). Ceremonial furniture and ornaments reflecting Tu culture are displayed in this space; for example, on the first floor a bright red, finely carved wooden cabinet can be placed, with spirit tablets and offerings displayed. The second and third floors are homestay public activity rooms, film screening rooms or meeting rooms. Except for the Buddhist chapel still set up on the right side of the first floor, all the other spaces are homestay spaces in Tu style.

In addition, the courtyard for traditional activities is still retained inside the building. The courtyard is both a place for people to gather and a channel for the circulation and exchange of indoor and outdoor air (Fig.11). Especially in winter, the flow of indoor and outdoor air will quickly carry the carbon dioxide inside the building out through the roof. The transparent roof is like the patio of southern Chinese architecture, which can both bring in daylight and serve as a channel for air circulation in winter. Snowy days present another beautiful scene.

Even on rainy days, the pool inside the courtyard can store water, which then flows out through the concealed channel inside the courtyard into the Datong River. Since the living area of the river island in Nawei Village is remote and isolated, and the power grid is fragile in winter, the heating of the landscape building requires diversified means to maintain heating throughout the year. Therefore, in terms of heat preservation, both traditional heating forms, such as coal stoves, water heating or heated kang beds, and modern electric heating facilities are needed.

A relatively large corridor space is also reserved in the landscape building between the outer "round" and the inner "square" forms (Fig.12). Such corridors are also a feature of Tibetan architecture, mainly facilitating the activities and viewing of people inside the building in cold seasons. In this building, the corridor not only expands the indoor public activity space, but can also serve as a vegetable garden and a drying area outside the courtyard wall of traditional Tu dwellings. The overall inward "gathering" layout of the landscape building also conforms to the traditional family concept of the Tu people. In summary, whether in terms of natural geographical factors or human factors, the overall environmental landscape design of the river island fully reflects the unique local cultural traits, making it easy for people to develop a sense of belonging.

3.3 Environmental landscape design balancing ecological resilience and public vitality

Nawei Village is located on the edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, with an average altitude of 2,246 m and an annual average temperature of only 3.6 ◦C. This harsh climate itself requires the design scheme to respect seasonal laws, balance ecological resilience and public vitality, and integrate with nature without being affected by the seasons and the remote geographical location.

The essence of landscape is the coexistence of humans and nature: it makes human activities a part of the natural ecological landscape, and makes the natural ecological landscape a part of what humans view. The environmental landscape design of the river island, on the one hand, integrates into the local ecological landscape, and on the other hand, makes the natural landscape around the river island an object that people can view at any time.

In terms of design, the all-glass material dissolves the physical boundary between the walls of the landscape building and the external environment, while the circular form enables every direction inside the building to perceive the landscape around the island, such as the flowing river, the mountains and trees, and the pedestrians and related activities along the riverbank, so that the viewer and the viewed dissolve into each other. For example, when the cold season comes, the glass envelope forms a climatic boundary, and people can look around at the winter riverside snowscape indoors; when the warm season arrives, the glass interface of the landscape building can be opened at any time, and the indoor and outdoor spaces are instantly connected. This is also the use of architectural means to delimit activity boundaries for people, so as to protect the surrounding plants from excessive disturbance during the growing season. Moreover, this immediate response of "storing in winter and releasing in summer" transforms the landscape building from a fixed object into an "adjustable climatic interface", making it a landscape installation that "gives way" and "returns" within natural rhythms, greatly enhancing the vitality of the landscape.

The public vitality of the environmental landscape design is also reflected in the introduction of the Tongtian River water into the island (Fig.13). As is well known, water is the core medium linking natural processes and human activities. The introduction of river water allows



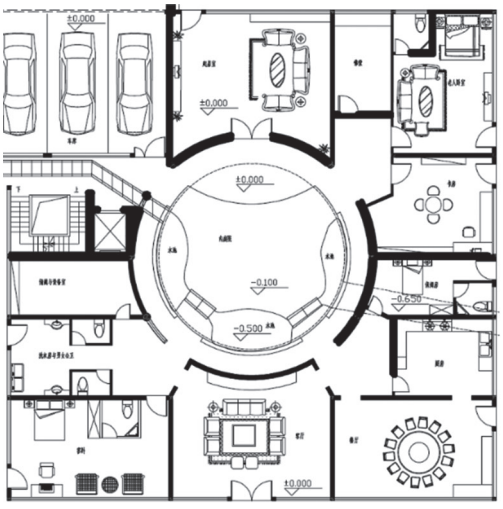
Fig.8 Combination of the square and the circle



Fig.9 Inspiration for the architectural form

tourists to wade and play in the water at any time, and also enables the residents in the building to use water for daily life, irrigation and nourishing the crops on the island. Water comes from the river and returns to the river; such a circular path also gives tourists the most simple educational awareness of saving water and not polluting water resources.

In addition, the integration of humans and nature also requires that the natural terrain and a large amount of vegetation on the island be well preserved. Therefore, in the project design, in response to the feature that the island terrain gradually slopes from east to west, the inlet of the Tongtian River water is set at the high place in the east, flowing westward along the terrain. Since the island is eye-shaped and the central building is the "pupil", this form determines that the landscape layout around the building should follow the spatial logic of concentric-circle gradation (Fig.14). The flower landscape around the building, from the center outward, goes from dense to sparse and from low to high, gradually forming ripples, like spreading water waves. Specifically, the core circle adjacent to the building consists of low ground cover and seasonal flowers, which do not block the view, forming a shallow planting zone for the building; the transition circle is a shrub-grass mixed belt, composed of three to four layers of flowers and shrubs from low to high, including the galsang flower (*Cosmos bipinnatus*), globeflower (*Trollius chinensis*), Chinese iris (Iris lactea), azalea (*Rhododendron* spp.), gentian (*Gentiana* spp.), larkspur (*Delphinium grandiflorum*), shrubby cinquefoil (*Potentilla fruticosa*), marigold (*Tagetes erecta*), and winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*). Flowering shrubs and ornamental grasses alternate with gradually increasing heights, visually forming



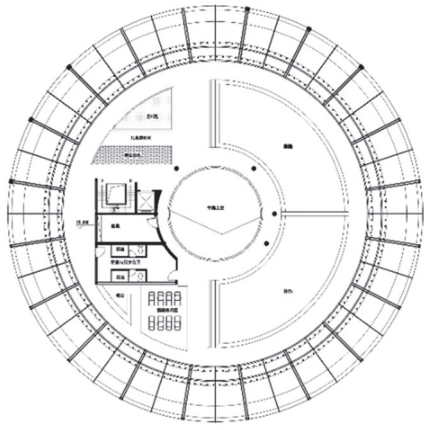
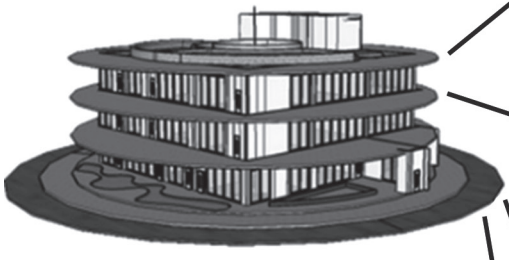


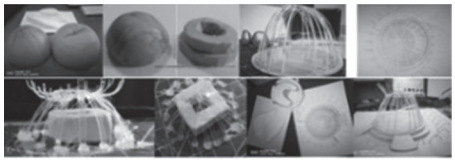
Fig.10 Plans of the first floor and the top floor



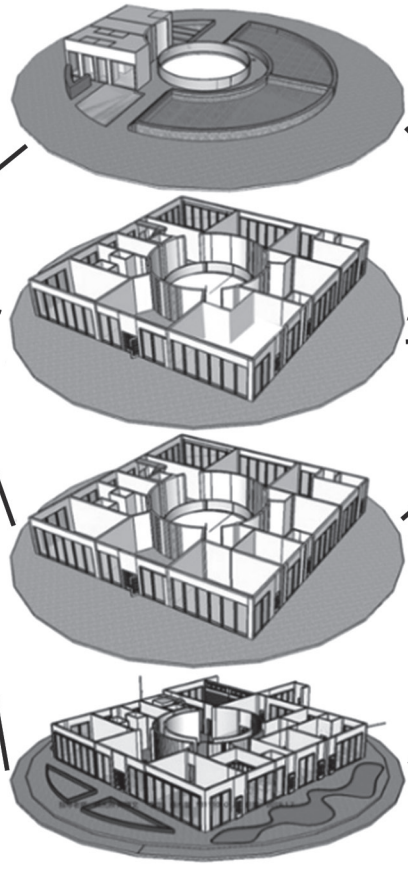
Source of inspiration — the "Eye of Paradise" (Tiantangzhiyan)

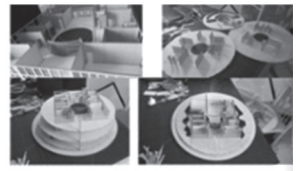


Design notes: Tianzhu (Tibetan Autonomous County), Gansu, is mainly inhabited by the Tu, an ethnic minority that originated from the Tibetan people; their living habits and architectural styles mostly follow Tibetan forms, yet have their own characteristics. Therefore, the architectural design of the building takes the local architectural forms and the Tibetan-tent (yurt) morphology as its design prototypes; combining factors such as the local geography and landform, climatic characteristics, ethnic living customs and humanistic spirit, and taking the shape of the eye as the source of inspiration, the design of the villa building and its surrounding environmental landscape on the river island of the Datong River in Tiantang Town was developed, named the "Eye of Paradise".

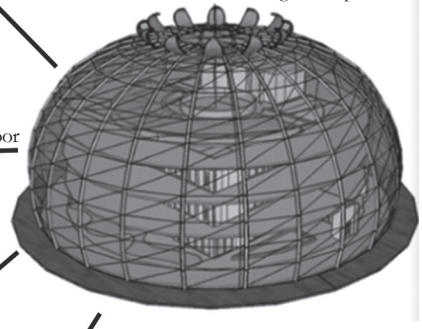


Continuous deliberation and experiments





Model making and exploration



Final model and graphic effect



Location of the landscape building in its environment

Fig.11 Section of the building and air circulation from the courtyard interior to the building top

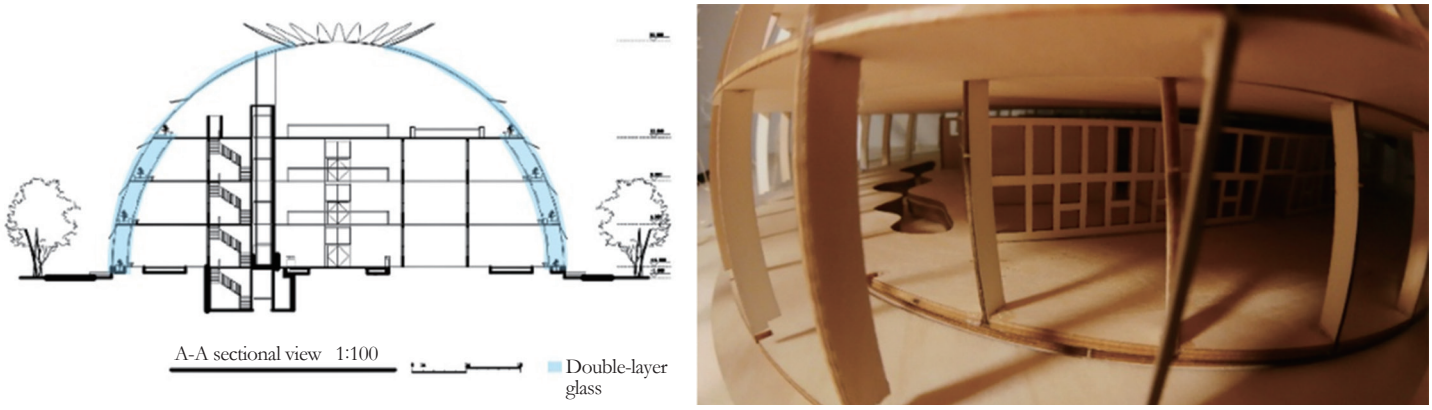


Fig.12 Double–layer glass exterior wall and corridor of the building



Fig.13 Renderings of the environmental landscape design of the river island

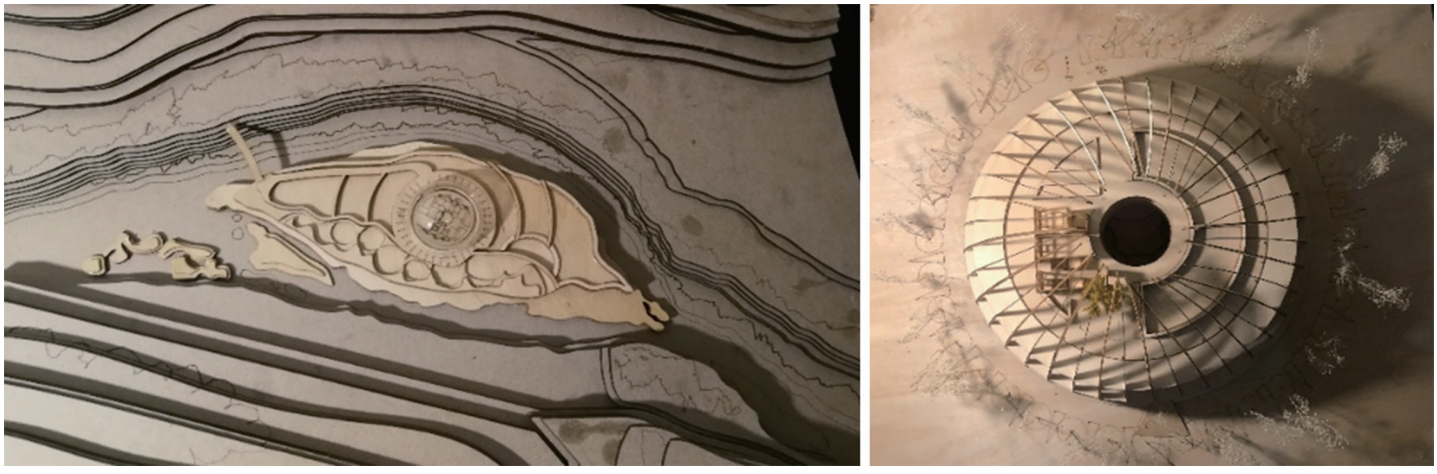


Fig.14 Model of the environmental landscape design of the river island

a blurred boundary from the artificial to the natural; in the outer circle along the island shore, native plants are preserved as much as possible. For example, apricot, pear and peach trees as well as some cold-resistant plants are all fully preserved and organized into landscapes. These trees interweave with wetland plants, forming an ecological ecotone with the river water around the island.

4 Conclusion

The practice of environmental landscape design for the river island in Nawei Village, Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County, is essentially a spatial environmental landscape design practice concerning "how the margin defines the center". Under the sweeping wave of globalization, mainstream design paradigms often smooth out the differences among regions in the name of "universality". This design project takes the opposite approach, transforming the harsh alpine climate and the remote island condition of Nawei Village in Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County from a "development obstacle" of the regional environment into a "design resource" of regional characteristics. The double-layer glass wall design addresses the cold separation of the local physical boundary; the "round heaven and square earth" responds to the cosmological concept of local culture; the circulation of the Tongtian River water forms flowing living water, carrying the wisdom of frugality; and the concentric flower belts around the landscape building guard the ecological rhythm.

The above design strategies jointly point

(To be continued in P15)

bus stops and parking areas, improve sidewalks, street crossing facilities, barrier free passages and night lighting, and reduce the occupation of tactile paving and pedestrian spaces by vehicles[4]. Subsequent updates should also synchronize the configuration of parking spaces with public service facilities, and differentiated management should be implemented based on different scenarios such as commerce, medical treatment, science, education, and culture, and community, to achieve collaborative maintenance by streets, communities, property management, and operational entities.

4 Conclusions

From three dimensions: accessibility, coverage, and convenience, this paper evaluates the spatial matching relationship between non-motorized vehicle parking facilities and public service facilities in the Pingguoyuan rail micro-center. The main conclusions are as follows: firstly, the public service facilities in the study area have obvious circle diffusion characteristics. Among the 1,601 POIs, commercial services dominate, and the facilities at the circle of 500–800 m are the most concentrated. In contrast, the 10 non-motorized vehicle parking spots are mainly concentrated within a range of about 200 m around the station, forming a spatial difference of "public service expansion-parking supply cohesion". Secondly, the accessibility and matching degree between existing parking facilities and transportation, commerce, and leisure facilities are relatively good, but the coverage rates of science, education, and culture, and healthcare facilities within 500 m are only 37.0% and 35.1%, respectively. There is also insufficient local connection in community service facilities, indicating that the parking system is still mainly based on rail transfer. Thirdly, the overall parking capacity can support the existing demand, but the rain shelter, charging, guidance, and parking order still need to be improved. Based on this, a hierarchical system of "rail station level-public service facility level-community level" should be constructed, and the parking layout, facility quality, and slow traffic network should be optimized in coordination. This paper uses point coordinates to measure spatial proximity relationships, but has not yet taken into account real road networks, time-sharing passenger flow, and differences in behavior among different groups. Further testing can be conducted by combining path data and time period surveys.

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to a deeper proposition, namely that the contemporary value of regionality lies neither in the museum-style preservation of traditional culture nor in the helpless distant observation of the natural climate, but in transforming the "local wisdom" embodied in local predicaments into a design grammar oriented toward the future. The environmental landscape design of the river island is no longer merely a single tourist reception place, but a holistic and systematic composite environmental design system of "climate regulator", "culture generator" and "ecological filter". In other words, as humanity pursues high-quality development today, the core competitiveness of regional landscape lies precisely in its creative response to "limiting conditions" or certain predicament states. The practice of environmental landscape design for the river island in Nawei Village, Tiantang Temple, Tianzhu, Gansu shows that when design takes root in the land, climate and ethnic memory beneath our feet, marginal places are fully capable of providing a unique approach, reference and lesson from northwest China for global environmental and cultural crises.

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