

'Living Form'

Scenarios in the Context of the **Hangzhou** Asian Games



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#urban imagery
#mega-sport events
#urban culture

Abstract

This article focuses on the expression of a city's 'living form' of Hangzhou during the Asian Games. Drawing on practical experience participating in the preparations for the Asian Games, and employing methods such as text analysis, case studies, and participatory observation, the author analyzes how the Hangzhou Asian Games leveraged local characteristics to connect the city with individuals, and the local with the global.

The specific paths for the Hangzhou Asian Games' 'living form' urban image are:

1. From text to representation: integrating 'living form' symbols into urban space;
2. From viewing to experience: creating a 'living form' atmosphere for the event experience;
3. From events to culture: fostering a 'living form' identity within urban culture.

Constructing this expression of the 'living form' of the Asian Games city not only summarizes the Hangzhou Asian Games experience but also offers new insights into the interaction between future mega sporting events and urban culture.

The world's attention was drawn to China through the successful hosting of the 19th Asian The successful hosting of the 19th Hangzhou Asian Games has focused the world's attention on China. This not only provides an excellent opportunity to promote the image of China and Hangzhou internationally, but also serves as a grand event for the exchange and integration of China's fine traditional culture with cultures from around the world. Hangzhou's evolution from a "functional city" to a "cultural city" and then to a "city with distinctive image" is a reality [1]. The Hangzhou Asian Games are an excellent opportunity to understand and experience a city's local culture. They also mark a crucial moment for Hangzhou to establish itself as an "international" city, comprehensively showcase its urban landscape, and promote its culture on multiple levels.

1. What is the urban "living form"

Drawing on David Harvey's [2] observations on the era of mass communication, this study notes that contemporary urban imagery, shaped by the compression of time and integration of space, often conforms to generic patterns, resulting in homogenized urban atmospheres and the erosion of local distinctiveness. Since the 1970s, scholarly attention to the relationship between people and place has steadily increased, recognizing the city as a central site of everyday life and a crucial dimension for tracing the origins of urban characteristics. In the context of large-scale international events, Hangzhou's strategy of "promoting the city through sports" seeks not only to enhance global visibility and prestige but also to ensure that the city remains a warm, livable space, rich in local vitality and everyday charm. Against this backdrop, the present study introduces the concept of "living form" to frame the interplay between urban space and quotidian experience.

The concept of "living form" originates from David Seamon's notion of the "lifeworld", a core concept in humanistic geography. It challenges the long-standing neglect of living forms in aesthetics and refers to the "everyday, taken-for-granted patterns and environments," that is, an "aesthetics centered on life" [3]. The "everyday life" can serve as the foundation for both the historical and contemporary activities of a city, endowing the city with rich meanings [4]. If a city

is understood as a space where individuals carry out daily activities, build community identities, and situate their bodies and minds, then the city's living form focuses on the daily accumulation of local culture, embodying the exchanges and interactions between the material and the spiritual, the urban and the individual, and the local and the global.

In the process of modern sports development in China, due to their characteristics of group interaction, emotional resonance, and cohesive power, sports have naturally aligned with the festive and celebratory atmosphere, quickly integrating into the daily lives of the Chinese public and serving as a timely tool to showcase urban distinctiveness and vitality. From the perspective of the living form, local culture subtly yet profoundly permeates everyday life. This not only concerns the construction of physical space but also relates to the atmosphere and emotional connections that people perceive and experience within that space.

Based on the aesthetic context of the "living form", this study explores the symbiotic relationship between the Asian Games and urban image, demonstrating how a city, within a specific historical and social context, constructs the everyday spatial settings of local life. This includes presenting the city's image as a host of the event — imbued with local characteristics and aesthetic concepts — through visual imagery, public art, cultural atmosphere, and other means.

2. The Discourse of Hangzhou Asian Games

Mega sporting events such as the Olympic Games and the Asian Games have transcended the boundaries of "pure athletic competition" and have gradually evolved into global media events of cultural exchange. After a thirty-three-year interval, Hangzhou has become the third Chinese city to host the Asian Games. By constructing an urban "living form" that reflects its distinctive *modus vivendi*, Hangzhou articulates its unique interpretation of this international event. This process extends the narrative from sport to the city itself, ultimately returning to the fundamental spatial practices centered on social actors.

The spatial context of the Asian Games city's "living form" constitutes the collective human activities that unfold within the intersection of event

and place. It is grounded in the synthesis of both material space and spiritual culture. This context encompasses, on the one hand, the physical and relational dimensions associated with bodily movement and tangible environments — the “Field”; and on the other hand, the intangible dimensions such as the Games’ ideology, cultural symbolism, ambient atmosphere, and subjective experience — the “Atmosphere”.

At the same time, the spatial context of the Asian Games city’s “living form” operates as a differentiated and complex system. It extends across multiple scales: the **macro-level** of collective social spirit and the **micro-level** of individual experience, bodily practice, and spatial perception. The core actors within this framework include delegations and staff members, spectators, and local residents. Through multidimensional participation and interaction, these actors collectively contribute to the diversified construction of the Asian Games’ urban spatial context.

2.1. The “Field” dimension

The material space of the Asian Games context is closely intertwined with local life, forming an integral part of residents’ emotional attachment and a key component of local cultural memory. The aesthetic material dimension of the Asian Games encompasses event-related spaces and sports venues, as well as iconic architectural sites and the broader urban landscape — constituting the spatial expression of the Asian Games context.

As Italo Calvino noted in *Invisible Cities*, “The city does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets... leaving traces”. As the host city of the Asian Games, Hangzhou carries abundant “traces” waiting to be rediscovered. Through the reinforcement of urban landmarks, the articulation of concrete physical scenes, and the interconnection of urban infrastructures such as transportation networks

and neighborhood landscapes, the city consolidates its spatial clusters and integrates the gateways of host and co-host cities. Dedicated Asian Games routes link major venues, the Athletes’ Village, official hotels, and torch relay sites, thereby realizing the spatial imagery of “one radiant core, four coordinated clusters, multiple shining nodes, and a brilliant city-wide landscape”¹. This spatial strategy not only constructs the aesthetic identity of the Games but also facilitates urban synergy and regional renewal.

Specifically, at the **macro level of material space**, the spatial composition of the Asian Games revolves around the core event zone — the Olympic Sports Center and the Athletes’ Village. Through the integration of Asian Games-themed sculptures, urban furniture, and visual posters, the city establishes a rhythmic spatial identity that embodies the strongest visual language of the Games, presenting a modern scene of the “Chinese window” to the world.

Secondly, corresponding to Hangzhou’s major cultural landmarks — such as the Qiantang River, West Lake, the Grand Canal, and the historic city core — four distinct spatial clusters are formed. Complemented by scattered natural landscapes and sports venues around the metropolitan periphery, these clusters evoke the poetic imagery of the Jiangnan region and the contemporary vitality of Zhejiang. Asian Games — themed sculptures are strategically installed near highway gateways, landscaped parks, and landmark architectural complexes, reinforcing the city’s aesthetic coherence.

¹“One Radiant Core, Four Coordinated Clusters, Multiple Shining Points, and a Brilliant Citywide Experience” refers to the overall spatial strategy of the Hangzhou Asian Games urban image landscape — centering on the main urban core, coordinating four sub-district clusters, highlighting multiple visual nodes, and achieving citywide aesthetic integration.

Finally, the **urban transportation system**, functioning as the city's lifeline, interconnects the various components of the Asian Games' material space. Acting as a spatiotemporal chain, it links the event's core zones, the thematic clusters, and the city gateways through interchanges, hubs, and arterial routes. This network resonates with the city's natural features — its rivers, lakes, and streams — allowing the free circulation of people and materials while simultaneously fulfilling the mobility needs of delegations, staff, spectators, and residents. In doing so, it sustains the daily rhythms of urban production and living, and vividly performs the Asian Games atmosphere within the city's material spatial fabric.

At the **micro-level**, the design of the Asian Games and the city's image incorporates a rich array of Hangzhou's iconic symbols, not only enriching the visual identity system of the event but also effectively reinforcing the city's cultural memory points. In particular, during the city's preparations for the Games, the "Crafted Enhancement of Hangzhou" project implemented four thematic scenic lines — *Beautiful Home*, *Smooth Mobility*, *Hangzhou Charm in Streets*, and *Flowers Across Hangzhou*. These lines, encompassing landscape installations, nighttime lighting, and atmospheric decorations, were strategically arranged along key routes and areas in accordance with the city's overall spatial planning. By integrating the event's media representation with urban transportation, civic appearance, and neighborhood landscapes, this initiative promoted the harmonious renewal of the city's material space. In doing so, the aesthetic experience of the sporting event was seamlessly intertwined with the everyday "living form" of Hangzhou, leaving a valuable Asian Games legacy for the city.

2.2. The "Atmosphere" dimension

The Hangzhou Asian Games have driven a reconstruction of the spiritual and cultural dimensions of the city's living form. This spatial-cultural reshaping is realized through the multidimensional dissemination of event symbols, encompassing the sporting spirit of the Games, local cultural practices, and intangible expressions of regional customs. It creates a shared symbolic space for city residents as well as international audiences, thereby constructing an urban spiritual community and fostering a collective imagination of the city's image.

In the process of reshaping the Asian Games context, urban symbols guide the public's perception of the city as a whole, facilitating an understanding of its culture and the formation of collective memory. Emerging from the subtle manifestations of local charm and cultural traits, the symbolic imagery of the Hangzhou Games is deeply rooted in the cosmological philosophy of *Tianren heyi*² (天人合一, "harmony between humanity and nature"), reflecting a profound concern for the natural environment and positioning the host city as an articulate subject [5]. For example, the core graphic *Runze*³ (润泽) integrates the elegance of West Lake, the meandering Grand Canal, and the surging Qiantang River, encapsulating the traditional and modern sentiments of Jiangnan [6]. The

²*Tianren heyi* is one of the fundamental concepts in Eastern philosophy and aesthetics. *Tianren heyi* posits that "nature" and "human" are not opposing entities but interconnected and mutually responsive aspects of an organic whole. It embodies an ideal state in which the subject achieves inner resonance and aesthetic unity with nature and life itself, reflecting the pursuit of balance, harmony, and spiritual correspondence between humanity and the universe.

³The core graphic of the Hangzhou Asian Games, titled *Runze* (literally meaning "moisture" or "nourishment"), embodies profound cultural symbolism rooted in traditional Chinese aesthetics. The term "Runze" evokes the imagery of water — an enduring metaphor in Eastern philosophy representing wisdom, inclusiveness, and vitality. As a city renowned for its waterways and poetic landscapes, Hangzhou's identity is intrinsically shaped by water.

Games emblem *Chaoyong*⁴ (潮涌) evokes the dancing tides of the Qiantang River, symbolizing the enduring aspirations of the new era Asian Games spirit. During the opening ceremony, the tidal waters of the Qiantang River were vividly interpreted as “the rising tide of Asia,” embedding collective memories of Hangzhou’s distinctive local culture among all participants.

The spiritual and cultural creation of the Asian Games context relies heavily on endowing

⁴The emblem of the 19th Asian Games Hangzhou, titled *Chaoyong* (literally meaning “Tides Surging”), draws inspiration from the spectacular tidal bore of the Qiantang River — one of nature’s most dynamic phenomena, long celebrated as “the greatest tide in the world.” The term *Chao* (tide) symbolizes inclusiveness, vitality, and progress, while *Yong* (surge) conveys momentum, dynamism, and the spirit of striving forward. Together, *Chaoyong* encapsulates the resilient and enterprising character of Hangzhou, a city that continues to innovate and advance amid the tides of modernity.

the city with symbolic significance, representing the host city’s cultural imagery during the event and extending the public’s imaginative engagement with the urban space within the broader Games context.

3. The Expression Pathways of Hangzhou’s Urban Living Form for the Asian Games

Mega international sporting events have a clearly defined temporal span; however, a city’s image, as a crucial component of its urban life course, is gradually constructed through ongoing evolution and development. The role of event media extends beyond bringing sports gatherings into urban space — it also leverages local cultural resources, positioning the city as a “cultural container” that emphasizes regional identity [7] and

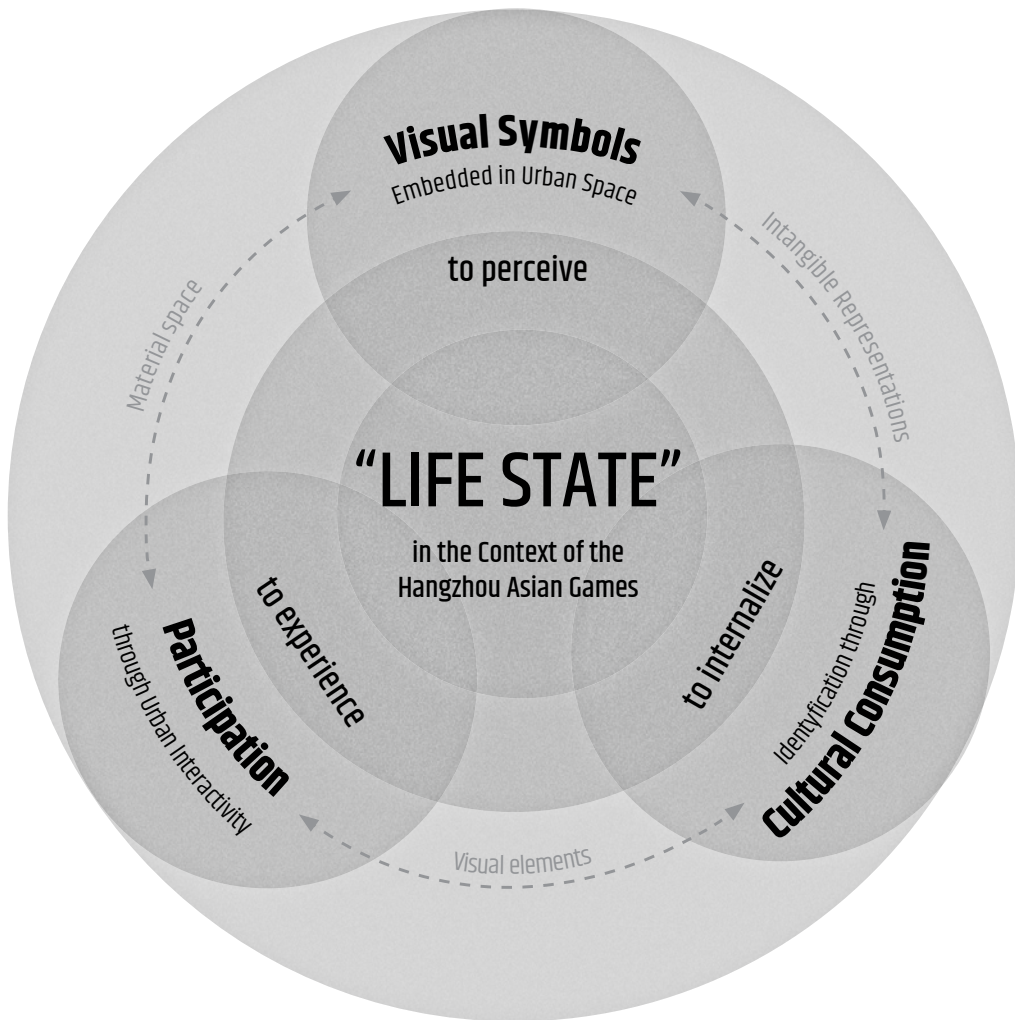


Fig. 1 Expressing Urban Life-State via the Hangzhou Asian Games.

Source: own study.

Classification of Symbolic Urban Landscapes of the Hangzhou Asian Games

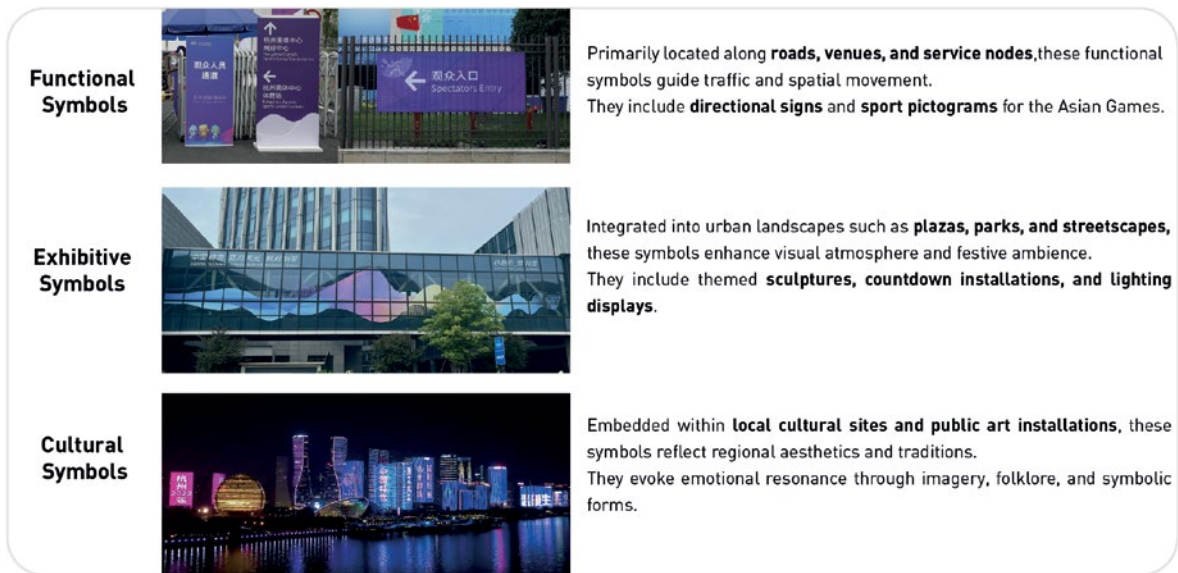


Fig. 2 Classification of Urban Symbolic Landscapes of the Hangzhou Asian Games.
Source: own study.

serves as a central node for exchanges between individuals and society, as well as between the local and the global [8].

The expression methodology of Hangzhou's urban "living form" treats the Hangzhou Asian Games as a media embedded within urban space, revealing the city's image through its participation in the event. It is read and disseminated as an embodied textual form, demonstrating how the Games function as a medium for articulating and communicating urban identity (Fig. 1).

In this process, the expression of urban image within the context of the Asian Games, driven by the aesthetic framework of the event, is no longer guided solely by the standards of modernization and globalization [9]. Greater emphasis is placed on showcasing the city's regional cultural characteristics and everyday experiences. Guided by the Games' principles of green, frugal, intelligent, and ecological development, Hangzhou achieved an aesthetic integration of past and present as well as cultural mutuality, making the event

not only a stage for athletic competition but also a window through which the city presents its humanistic depth and philosophy of life. From eco-friendly sports venues set amid verdant landscapes, to immersive interactive experiences in historic cultural districts, and to digital cultural dissemination empowered by smart technologies, this continuous series of aesthetic combinations collectively shapes Hangzhou's leisurely, ecological, and livable urban character. Simultaneously, it constructs an urban image exhibition space that both embodies local cultural identity and possesses global communicative power.

3.1. From Text to Representation: "Living" Symbols Integrated into Urban Space

The dissemination of urban image essentially constitutes a process of symbolizing spatial imagery, whereby urban space, as an object of holistic cognition, is continually imbued with meaning and constructed. As W.J.T. Mitchell notes, imagery and language have never been at odds [10]. Particularly in



the context of major sporting events, urban image not only embodies local characteristics but also closely intertwines the atmosphere of the event with the city's identity, endowing the Asian Games host city with distinctive recognizability and generating shared meanings at the level of public perception. Consequently, by employing visual symbols — categorized as functional, display, and cultural symbols — the grand scenes of the Asian Games are represented while simultaneously conveying Hangzhou's urban character and distinctive features. These symbols are integrated into the urban space during the event, forming an indispensable "living" memory of the Hangzhou Asian Games within the public realm (Fig. 2).

Throughout the city, residents and visitors encounter Games-themed murals, "jade Cong" — style lightboxes on elevated bridges, and naked-eye 3D displays integrated into building facades. Meanwhile, themed buses, metro trains, and high-speed rail carriages (Fig. 4 and 5) function as mobile carriers of cultural communication, embedding the Games' presence into daily urban mobility. The strategic integration of such symbols into urban space advances the internationalization of sports events and urban visual design. In this regard, the phenomenon is comparable to the red double-decker bus as an emblem of London; its appearance

during the 2008 Beijing Olympic closing ceremony similarly operated as a conspicuous symbol presenting the distinctive identity of the forthcoming host city to a global audience.

3.2. From Spectatorship to Experience: Cultivating a "Living" Event Atmosphere

For cities hosting major sporting events, the role of event media extends beyond merely bringing sports gatherings into urban space; it also lies in the gradual transformation of the city into an emotionally resonant "place," wherein the relationship between people and place is rooted in the natural environment and constructed through living experiences and everyday practices [11]. The core element of the human-place relationship is interaction. Cities hosting sporting events are no exception: profound event experiences contribute to the formation of collective memory of the host city, establish emotional bonds, and foster deeper value identification with the city, thereby revitalizing its image in public perception.

First, the urban interactivity of the Hangzhou Asian Games is manifested in the continuous enhancement of infrastructure, which not only creates a livable environment celebrated as "Most Memorable is Hangzhou" for both domestic and international visitors, but also promotes resi-



Fig. 3 The 19th Hangzhou Asian Games digital torchbearer lighting the flame and the display of electronic fireworks (left); digital torchbearer making a heart gesture at the closing ceremony (right). Source: <https://www.hangzhou2022.cn/En/>.

dents' physical well-being by integrating exercise and fitness into daily life. Embedded sports facilities, such as the Hangzhou Basketball Park beneath the Shide Overpass, illustrate how individual athletic activities activate previously underutilized urban spaces. Second, the Games' digital initiatives are closely intertwined with public participation; through the digital torch relay, the event foregrounds individual engagement within the grand scale of the city-wide Games, extending the dissemination of the Asian Games spirit into various facets of social life. Finally, the concluding torchbearer delivered a unique experience for each participant: the "hybrid digital-physical" ignition ceremony, executed by a "digital torch persona" representing all participants (Fig. 3), departed from the traditional model of a single torchbearer lighting the main cauldron, marking a memorable moment in the history of the Asian Olympic movement.

The integration of Asian Games symbols into the urban landscape not only serves directional and wayfinding func-

tions but also cultivates a distinctive artistic atmosphere during the event. This environment facilitates spectators' rapid immersion in the ceremonial context, enhancing their engagement and evoking both memory and anticipation of the rituals.

3.3. From Sporting Event to Culture: Promoting "Living" Urban Cultural Identity

Urban life serves as a bridge connecting the past, present, and future, functioning as a cultural symbol that traverses time and space [12]. As a city rich in Eastern cultural connotations, Hangzhou leverages international sporting events to

disseminate the refined aesthetics of Eastern living to broader audiences. By hosting events such as the Asian Games and the BWF World Tour Finals, Hangzhou extends the elegance of Eastern lifestyle across wider geographical regions. The transition from sporting events to cultural expression further reinforces public identification with the city's "living" cultural identity.

Although the duration of sporting events is limited, Hangzhou's urban cultural "living" identity extends into diverse Asian Games-themed public spaces, where live broadcasts, knowledge-based interactions, and night markets attract residents and visitors alike. For instance, during the Hangzhou Asian Games, the blooming of osmanthus coincided with the traditional Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, prompting athletes from around the world to "adapt to local customs." Along the romantic West Lake, they experienced the fragrance of osmanthus, participated in tea-drinking and moon-viewing rituals, and engaged with traditional Eastern lifestyles, savoring the unique blend of natural and cultural charm that defines this "paradise on earth."

To enhance cultural engagement, Hangzhou introduced more than ten "Asian Games Urban Culture Routes," designed to leave lasting impressions of the city's cultural essence. In addition, cultural events such as the Asian Games-themed seal engraving exhibition combined art and sports, vividly showcasing the city's distinctive charm: "Chinese characteristics, Zhejiang flair, and Hangzhou elegance." Meanwhile, licensed merchandise spaces integrated local cultural elements, natural landscapes, historical relics, and traditional craftsmanship into Asian Games

souvenirs, extending participants' and spectators' unique experiences in Hangzhou and anchoring their memories and emotions within the city's symbolic framework. Each souvenir embodies the heartfelt affection and attachment of individuals to Hangzhou. This cultural resonance and emotional projection enhance public recognition and identification with Hangzhou's urban culture under the banner of the "New Era, New Asian Games."

4. The Value of Urban "Living" Identity

Although the Asian Games represent a short-term, large-scale opportunity for concentrated display of urban image, as an embedded medium within urban space, the Hangzhou Asian Games exert profound and lasting effects on the construction and reproduction of the city's image. They disseminate distinctive urban imagery while endowing the city with greater inclusivity and cultural vitality. As the geographer Duan Yifu observes, "Plants have roots, while humans have feet and thoughts. With the development of mobility and electronic communication, local experiences are increasingly opening up to the world."

In brief, the expression of the Asian Games city's "living" identity emphasizes linking extraordinary sporting events with everyday urban experiences, creating a personalized "field of memory" for each spectator [13]. This approach surpasses textbook-style, rigid representations, embedding the aesthetics of the Asian Games into the city's "living" environment, renewing spectators' unique local experiences and urban perceptions, and gradually forming a humanized pathway for urban expression. The grand narrative of major

sporting events' impact on Hangzhou's urban form extends into opportunities for the public to integrate their own experiences during the Games into the construction of the city's image. This dynamic drives the evolution of urban image dissemination from a detached, macro-level concept toward an intimate, everyday "living" identity.

Constructing a "living" aesthetic pathway for the Asian Games not only summarizes the expe-

riential achievements of the Hangzhou Games but also provides new perspectives for future interactions between large-scale sporting events and urban culture. ■

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