

From Theory to Design: Theoretical Construction of Scene Theory for Cultural Tourism Blocks and Dialogue with Related Theories

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of urban cultural tourism consumption upgrading, Scene Theory builds a practical analytical framework for spatial optimization based on amenities and their three primaries plus fifteen sub-value dimensions. This paper elaborates the theory's core connotation, components and value system, and explains how matched amenities and value dimensions produce spatial cultural meaning. It further compares Scene Theory with four mainstream spatial theories—Place Theory, Experience Economy Theory, Spatial Production Theory and Placemaking Theory—to analyze their divergences in research perspectives, logic and practical applications, as well as their shared ground and complementary merits. The research finds that unlike traditional spatial theories, Scene Theory boasts strong design operability, fulfills economic, cultural, social, and emotional demands of cultural tourism blocks, and enables comprehensive spatial quality assessment.

Keywords: Scene theory; Amenities; Value dimensions; Comparison of spatial theories

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1. Core connotation and analytical dimensions of scene theory

As a medium carrying cultural temperament and aesthetic connotation, a scene grants unique spatial implications via its embedded cultural temperament, aesthetic characteristics, and value orientations. Far more than a simple gathering of physical spatial carriers, scenes act as tangible manifestations of diverse cultures, value systems and daily lifestyles. Central to Scene Theory is the collaborative matching of amenities. Diverse venues including book cafes, art theatres and public galleries can be organically matched to construct complete scenes; the unified cultural undertones contained within these matched facilities jointly shape a consistent cultural atmosphere and immersive sensory experience guided by unified value dimensions. After perceiving such cultural implications, visitors will alter their personal cognition and daily behavioral patterns, thereby exerting subtle influences on the whole social life system. Two core logics underpin the connotation of scenes: holistic thinking and interactive connection among all constituent spatial elements.

The concept of amenities was initially put forward within economic research domains and has long remained a vague, multi-definitional term. Closely bound up with consumer behaviors, this concept mainly describes the immaterial sense of satisfaction brought by goods and service experiences, which cannot be quantified through standard measurement methods.

Such characteristics distinguish amenities sharply from productive capital that directly creates market economic gains. Under this conceptual framework, opera houses, urban parks, fishing scenic spots, and dance clubs are all categorized as typical amenity resources.

As the basic building blocks and value bearers of scenes, amenities occupy a core theoretical position in Scene Theory. This term covers all tangible infrastructures, themed activities, and supporting services capable of supplying cultural consumption chances, leisure recreation experiences, and aesthetic appreciation feelings. Beyond their practical functional attributes, these facilities also operate as symbolic carriers loaded with rich cultural implications. The value information conveyed by amenities hinges on their collocation modes instead of separate individual existence. To take typical urban blocks as examples: districts filled with chain coffee brands, multiplex cinemas and fast fashion retail shops reflect modern consumer logic featuring commercialization, globalization and instrumental rationality. In comparison, blocks with time-honored teahouses, antique retail stores and local traditional snack stalls reflect grassroots life values highlighted by tradition, local regional characteristics and warm interpersonal communication. This analytical perspective coincides with Cultural Identity and Place Identity theories in cultural research, proving that scenes transcend pure physical spaces and function as important venues generating diverse cultural connotations. The core theoretical judgment of Scene Theory lies in the limited interpretive value of individual amenities, whose cultural meanings only take shape within specific collocation relations. The so-called Combinatorial Effect raised by Scene Theory indicates that separated single amenities have weak independent cultural value and fail to build complete scene spaces independently. Only through combinations (interactions between facilities, activities and crowds) can a holistic scene take shape, whose overall value far exceeds the sum of its individual parts. For example, a cultural district integrating cafes, bookstores, art galleries and public art installations generates far greater appeal than the simple addition of separate facilities. Such combinations create a synergistic effect of amenities, namely the value of amenity assemblages. In cultural tourism blocks, amenities include but are not limited to specialty restaurants, cafes, bookstores, galleries, museums, theaters, live music venues, design stores, intangible cultural heritage workshops, public artworks, and festival events. As carriers of both “objective structures” (tangible physical entities) and “subjective perceptions” (value expressions), amenities lay the foundation for scene analysis.

“Value Dimensions” refer to abstract values, lifestyle orientations, and emotional atmospheres conveyed by amenity combinations within a scene. Terry N. Clark’s research team decomposed people’s multidimensional subjective value perceptions into three overarching dimensions with fifteen subordinate indicators, creating a standardized measurement scale to judge the cultural disposition embedded within urban scenes. Serving as the quantitative analysis tool of Scene Theory, the Value Dimensions system enables standardized assessment of spatial scene merits by adopting graded evaluation approaches such as expert subjective scoring, which builds a complete analytical paradigm to quantify the intrinsic value of scenes. This evaluation framework consists of three core first-level indicators: Authenticity, Dramatic Performance, and Legitimacy, matched with fifteen supporting secondary dimensions, respectively. To elaborate, the Authenticity index is designed to assess how genuine and indigenous a spatial scene appears; the dimension of Drama lays stress on the expressive and performative attributes of space, while Legitimacy is used to evaluate the extent of public social acceptance toward certain scene characteristics. (Table 1).

Table 1. Three Primary Dimensions and Fifteen Sub-dimensions of Scene Theory

Legitimacy	Theatricality	Authenticity
Tradition	Neighborliness	Locality
Self-expression	Formality	Ethnicity
Utilitarianism	Glamour	State
Charisma	Exhibitionism	Corporateness
Egalitarianism	Transgression	Rationality

Data source: Content extracted from the theory of scenes

As an integrated spatial outcome shaped by amenity facilities and value dimension systems, a scene acts as a dynamic carrier where cultural connotations are continuously generated. From the structural perspective, different collocation modes of amenities will derive and disseminate exclusive sets of value orientations. In terms of operation logic, distinctive value atmospheres draw groups of people to gather within such spatial scenes. When participants take part in consumption activities, public events and interpersonal communication, they interact with various amenity resources to perceive and re-create the embedded value connotations, which eventually cultivates residents' and visitors' emotional bonds with the locale as well as a strong sense of local belonging.

2. Comparative analysis of related theories

Within research on cultural tourism spaces, four theories maintain close connections with Scene Theory: Place Theory, Experience Economy Theory, Spatial Production Theory and Placemaking Theory. All focus on the value and experiential attributes of space, forming complementary relationships with Scene Theory while exhibiting marked disparities in core perspectives, research priorities and analytical logic. Clarifying the distinctions and connections between Scene Theory and these related theories helps define the theoretical positioning of this study and avoid theoretical confusion. Meanwhile, absorbing the strengths of each theory improves the analytical framework of this research, whose ultimate goal is to generate operable spatial optimization design strategies. Therefore, the comparative analysis of related theories serves as theoretical screening and integration to construct an analytical tool applicable to design research ^[1].

2.1. Comparison with place theory: From emotional interpretation to physical operationalization

Place Theory focuses on human-place emotional bonds, explaining how people endow neutral space with attachment and identity via personal experience and symbolic meaning. Its core research covers place attachment, identity and memory, which shape people's psychological perception of locations.

Scene Theory overlaps with Place Theory in valuing space's emotional and social functions, and its emotional value dimensions correspond to place attachment and identity. Still, they differ in three key aspects. Place Theory starts from subjective human-place feelings to interpret the origin of place meaning, but its abstract concepts cannot be easily translated into concrete design strategies for commercial layouts, buildings, and public facilities. Scene Theory takes physical amenities as the core carrier, converting intangible spatial atmosphere into collocations of venues and multi-dimensional value indicators, forming a usable "physical environment-behavior-value" analytical chain that balances all types of spatial values. In application, Place Theory mainly interprets public sentiment in urban renewal and historic preservation, while Scene Theory serves consumption space evaluation and optimization by deploying targeted amenities to cultivate distinctive spatial temperament and provide actionable design guidance ^[2].

2.2. Comparison with experience economy theory: From commercial strategy to spatial carrier concretization

Proposed by Pine and Gilmore, Experience Economy Theory holds that economic development has evolved through four stages: agrarian economy, industrial economy, service economy, and experience economy. Consumers' demands have shifted from material satisfaction and service enjoyment to emotional experience and self-actualization, and enterprises' core competitiveness lies in delivering unique, memorable experiences to consumers. Its core research covers four experience archetypes: entertainment, education, escape, and aesthetics, alongside methodologies for experience design ^[3].

Scene Theory maintains an extremely close connection with Experience Economy Theory: its emotional value dimensions align fully with the core propositions of Experience Economy Theory, and both highlight the experiential nature of consumption spaces as a key driver of consumer attraction and spatial competitiveness. Key distinctions lie in three aspects:

First, disparate theoretical categories. Experience Economy Theory belongs to economics, concentrating on the

evolution of economic models and corporate commercial strategies to maximize commercial value through experience design. Scene Theory falls at the intersection of sociology and urban planning, focusing on the coordinated realization of multi-dimensional spatial values (economic, cultural, social and emotional) and regarding space as a medium for social communication and cultural transmission.

Second, contrasting analytical logics. Experience Economy Theory adopts a demand-oriented logic: it derives corporate experience design strategies starting from consumers' experiential needs, with "consumer experience processes" as its analytical unit rather than spatial form itself. It clarifies what types of experiences should be created but fails to systematically elaborate what spatial forms and content combinations can generate such experiences. No systematic framework connects experiential goals such as "escape" or "educational inspiration" to concrete design parameters including block spatial sequences, functional layouts, and mixed commercial densities. Scene Theory follows a supply-demand matching logic: the supply of amenities (scene configuration) matches diverse consumer demands to realize multi-dimensional value output.

Third, distinct research carriers. Experience Economy Theory covers a broad range of consumption scenarios including commercial complexes, theme parks, and cultural tourism projects. Scene Theory takes the spatial unit of "scene" as its core carrier, emphasizing the synergistic effect of amenity combinations and spatial atmosphere, with a more focused research scope.

2.3. Comparison with spatial production theory: Critical framework calibration and constructive translation

Proposed by Henri Lefebvre, Spatial Production Theory defines space as "a product of social practice" and centers on the tripartite dialectic of "spatial practice (perceived space)–representations of space (conceived space)–representational spaces (lived space)". This theory provides a macro framework for understanding interactions between power, capital and society within urban spaces, covering the three dimensions of spatial production and the functional mechanisms of capital and power in shaping space.

Scene Theory and Spatial Production Theory share several premises: both affirm space's social and productive nature, examine interactions between space, society and economy, and align on the notion that space acts as a productive asset to boost economic development via the economic value dimensions of scenes. Three core differences separate them:

First, conflicting theoretical perspectives. Spatial Production Theory adopts a critical sociological lens, revealing how capital and power dominate and control space. It exposes the essence of cultural tourism blocks as urban renewal products intervened by capital, whose physical forms (architectural styles, functional zoning) emerge from games among local governments, capital developers, and residents. For instance, the commercial transformation of historic districts essentially constitutes capital's reconstruction of "representational spaces". This critical perspective provides macro contextual support for design research: optimization design of cultural tourism blocks cannot merely pursue aesthetic transformation of physical forms; researchers must first grasp the power and capital logic behind spatial morphology to avoid disconnecting design strategies from real interest structures. Scene Theory adopts a constructive sociological perspective, exploring how rational spatial allocation (amenity combinations) achieves multi-value win-win outcomes with a practice-oriented focus on design optimization.

Second, different research priorities. Spatial Production Theory analyzes macro mechanisms and social contradictions of spatial production, centering on "how space is shaped by capital". Its analytical focus lies on the macro social production process of space, lacking explanatory power for micro cultural practices and user experiences within cultural tourism blocks—daily user behaviors such as check-in, socializing, and consumption that generate spatial vitality. Its abstract concept of "representational spaces" fails to provide operable design dimensions or guidance for specific spatial design interventions such as street interface renovation and commercial mixing. Scene Theory targets micro spatial allocation and value output, investigating "how to elevate comprehensive spatial value via spatial configuration".

Third, varied application scenarios. Spatial Production Theory is mainly applied to critical analysis of macro spatial

topics including urban renewal and real estate development. Scene Theory is suited for value assessment and optimization design of micro consumption spaces such as cultural tourism and commercial districts, with more concrete application scenarios.

2.4. Comparison with placemaking theory: Complementarity between process orientation and systematic diagnosis

Placemaking exists as both a theory and practical field, with intellectual origins traceable to Jane Jacobs's advocacy for spontaneous street vitality. Her work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* is widely recognized as the foundational text of modern urban thinking and the placemaking movement. Though she did not coin the term "Placemaking", her ideas form its philosophical bedrock. Jacobs emphasized street life, mixed functions, and small-scale blocks, advocating bottom-up, organic urban development. The theory was further grounded through William H. Whyte's empirical research on social behaviors in public spaces. The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) and its founder Fred Kent developed a systematic methodology centered on community participation and incremental improvement. Its core logic of "public participation + spatial transformation" prioritizes multi-stakeholder collaboration, procedural democracy, and physical environment optimization. Core research topics include placemaking stakeholders (government, enterprises, the public), implementation pathways (spatial renovation, event planning, public participation) and ultimate objectives (enhancing spatial vitality and community cohesion).

Scene Theory shares the closest connection with Placemaking Theory. Both aim to improve the comprehensive value and vitality of space, emphasize the significance of spatial environments as well as human interaction and experience, and feature a strong practical orientation. The amenity allocation in Scene Theory directly corresponds to the spatial renovation and functional format implantation in Placemaking Theory, and the two theories exhibit remarkable complementarity in research paradigms and analytical tools. Nevertheless, they differ in three aspects:

First, their core logics diverge. The core logic of Placemaking Theory is "public participation + spatial renovation", which highlights optimizing the physical environment and functional usability of space through collaborative participation of multiple stakeholders. By contrast, Scene Theory revolves around the logic of "amenity combination + value matching", which focuses on aligning diverse consumer demands via targeted amenity deployment to achieve coordinated output of multi-dimensional values.

Second, they have different research priorities. Placemaking Theory places more stress on the democratic process and multi-stakeholder collaboration of spatial transformation, centering on "how to create vibrant places through multi-party participation". Scene Theory, however, prioritizes spatial value evaluation and optimization strategies, focusing on "how to raise the comprehensive value of space through scene configuration".

Third, they adopt distinct theoretical tools. Placemaking Theory offers a practical methodological system covering public participation, spatial design, and event planning. Scene Theory, by contrast, provides a set of evaluation and analytical tools consisting of a multi-dimensional value system and amenity measurement. It is more applicable to research at the value assessment stage and delivers quantifiable, reusable evaluation and decision-making support for the practical implementation of Placemaking Theory.

From the design-oriented perspective of this research, Placemaking Theory defines the value stance of "why we act" and the participatory process of "how we act", while Scene Theory supplies analytical evidence for "what to implement" and evaluation criteria for "how effective the implementation is". Such complementarity further clarifies the applicable boundary of Scene Theory: this study does not seek to replace the process-oriented logic of placemaking. Instead, it takes the systematic diagnostic capacity of Scene Theory as the core to construct a value evaluation system for cultural tourism blocks and formulate targeted optimization design strategies. It delivers precise strategic references for the subsequent participatory co-construction in placemaking, and together they form an effective closed-loop practical framework for spatial optimization spanning democratic participation, systematic diagnosis, strategy formulation and on-site implementation.

3. Conclusion

Although Scene Theory is interrelated with Place Theory, Experience Economy Theory, Spatial Production Theory and Placemaking Theory, remarkable divergences exist among them in core perspectives, research priorities and application orientations. Compared with the other theories, Scene Theory possesses unique strengths: it establishes an analytical framework of “physical environment–behavioral experience–multi-dimensional value” centered on amenities, which integrates theoretical systematicness and practical operability. Furthermore, its multi-dimensional value system can fully satisfy the core value demands of cultural tourism blocks in economic, cultural, social, and emotional dimensions, offering more precise and comprehensive theoretical support for the value assessment and optimization design of cultural tourism blocks.

Given such unique merits of Scene Theory, this study takes it as the core theoretical framework. Meanwhile, it absorbs rational viewpoints from relevant theories, including the place identity perspective of Place Theory, the experiential design thinking of Experience Economy Theory, and the public participation viewpoint of Placemaking Theory, so as to refine the research system concerning value evaluation and optimization design strategies for cultural tourism blocks.

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