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Alternative Design Activism: A New Agenda Towards Anti-Gentrification Landscape Praxis

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ABSTRACT

Although design research and practice in landscape architecture have increasingly engaged with issues related to gentrification, theoretical discussions at the ontological level—concerning how design itself intervenes in and shapes such spatial processes—remain limited. As a result, the role of design is often underrepresented in related narratives. This article develops its analysis mainly along three dimensions. First, it examines the dialectical relationship between the intrinsic value of design and the regulation of spatial circulation. Second, it explores how alternative economic networks embedded in design can enable community-based value production. Third, it analyzes how institutional instruments, such as community land trusts, can influence spatial production processes. Based on this, the article constructs a spatially centered analytical framework integrating economy, space, and institutionalization. This framework addresses the tension between development-oriented urban regeneration and broader social considerations, and discusses the potential role of landscape design in mediating such processes. From the perspective of design activism as an embedded and collaborative practice within social networks, the study further proposes an alternative model of landscape activism. Through literature review and case analysis, the research focuses on three key aspects. First, the circulation of spatial and aesthetic values within communities can partially recalibrate capital-driven models of spatial production. Second, design can support the emergence of diverse economic forms, fostering locally grounded alternatives through community collaboration. Third, design can facilitate localized institutional spatial innovation, contributing to the formation of relatively stable spatial production mechanisms. These processes are synthesized into three analytical dimensions—circulation, alternative, and sustainability—offering a structured perspective on the role of design in addressing complex urban transformations.

KEYWORDS

Social Design; Anti-Gentrification Design; Activism Theory; Alternative Urbanism; Community Design; Alternative Landscape; Publicness

HIGHLIGHTS

- Examines design in spatial production from an ontological perspective, addressing gaps in its theoretical treatment
- Develops an economy–space–institutionalization framework to explain design's role in circulation mode and institutional dynamics
- Proposes an activism model based on circulation of community currency, alternative, and sustainability for urban transformation

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1 Introduction

As the process of rapid urbanization gradually recedes and urban regeneration becomes increasingly oriented toward incremental interventions, gentrification① has emerged as a key issue for design practice[1]. Landscape architecture has long taken social impact as a central objective[2–5]. However, at the level of spatial aesthetics, which constitutes the core of design itself, it remains unclear how design can mediate processes of economic growth and capital accumulation, and to what extent it can resist or delay gentrification[6–7]. Although this topic has been widely examined in policy research, a systematic theoretical discussion from a design perspective is still lacking.

Capital-driven spatial restructuring functions as a double-edged process. It promotes urban development while at the same time intensifying social inequality[8–9]. In this context, it is still uncertain how landscape architecture should define its contribution, especially within the binary dilemma of "gentrification or decline"[10–11]. It is also necessary to further examine how design may play a role in anti-gentrification processes[6–7].

Existing policy-oriented research often overlooks the anti-gentrification potential embedded in specific design practices[12–14]. This has led to conclusions that advocate doing less design or even avoiding design altogether[12,15], and has gradually contributed to what is described as a "design original sin" discourse[16–18]. It is therefore necessary to reconsider the role of design in anti-gentrification from the perspective of the economic, spatial, and institutional relations of space production[19].

2 Alternative Spaces and a Post-Capitalist Design Framework

2.1 The Stagnation of Anti-gentrification Research Calls for Activism-Oriented Support

Although many studies on gentrification adopt a critical stance aligned with anti-gentrification, they remain limited in guiding concrete design activism. Ruth Glass once observed that, since the term "gentrification" was first introduced in 1964, research aimed at anti-gentrification at one point accounted for 73% of the urban studies literature; by 2001, however, this line of inquiry had declined significantly.[20–21] One reason is that, over long time spans and at the macro level, gentrification tends to exhibit a degree of irreversibility.

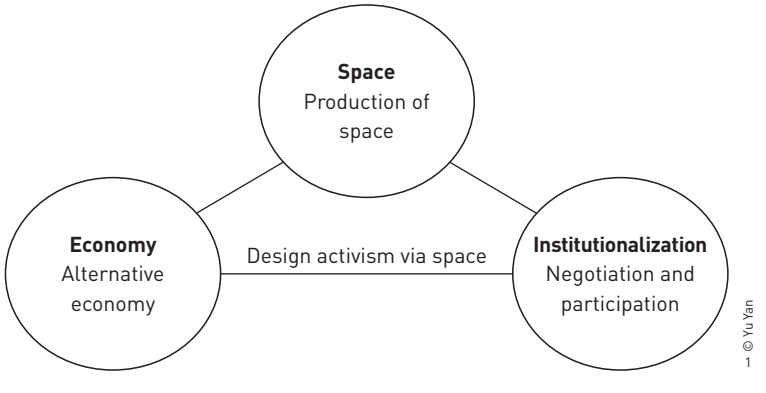
For the design disciplines, however, activism-oriented research focuses more on how design practice can be embedded within existing economic systems at a local scale, and how it can construct value mechanisms that benefit communities. In this way, it may help prevent local neighborhoods from being rapidly and completely transformed into commodified Internet celebrity spaces through gentrification. For example, Nancy H. Kwak points out that abstract critical perspectives grounded in everyday life[22] tend to be limited in scope. Anti-gentrification activism therefore requires more operational frameworks to translate critique into concrete practice.

2.2 Alternative Prototypes: Circulatory Spaces Represented by "Cooperatives" and "the Home"

2.2.1 An Alternative Design Approach to the Economic, Spatial, and Institutional Nexus

Matthew Wizinsky argues that the key for design to engage with anti-gentrification lies in moving beyond its instrumental role within existing development systems[23]. More specifically, this can be achieved through a strategy of "exit," which seeks to construct an alternative narrative of spatial production. This narrative involves three interrelated dimensions of design, namely consumption, institutional arrangements, and community collectives. Together, they correspond to the triadic logic of economy, space, and institutionalization (Fig. 1). The mutual reinforcement among these three dimensions of capital-driven spatial production has long been overlooked in conventional landscape education. Yet in areas

Fig. 1 Spatial triadic relationships in design-driven interventions.



① Gentrification refers to the transformation of urban neighborhoods that were originally lower-income or in decline. Through investment, redevelopment, and upgrading, these areas attract higher-income groups, which leads to rising property values and the displacement of existing residents. Anti-gentrification refers to interventions that seek to regulate or mitigate this process through policy, design, and social action.

such as incremental regeneration, community building, and the conservation of historic neighborhoods, they constitute essential aspects that design practice cannot avoid. For example, cooperative economies can be understood as an alternative organizational form distinct from dominant market mechanisms. They operate as "exceptional" spaces at the community level, while also embodying a hybrid economic model that emphasizes diversity, balance, and decentralization. Rather than confronting dominant systems at a systemic level, this approach works through localized contexts to establish mechanisms of adjustment, thereby avoiding overly generalized forms of critique. At its core is the distinction between the logic of price and the logic of value[23], with the latter providing a critical entry point for community-based design interventions.

2.2.2 The Home: Balancing the Decline and Gentrification of Community Commercial Streets

Wizinsky further emphasizes that within the binary structure of decline and gentrification, small-scale, diverse, and collaborative practices of "exit" play an important balancing role[23]. This perspective moves beyond a simple oppositional framework and instead turns toward more flexible and transitional pathways. As Tom Slater argues, gentrification and urban decline are not mutually exclusive conditions[24]. Rather, it is necessary to begin from the question of circulation and explore possible pathways for community activism.

Circulation within a community places greater emphasis on values rooted in social relations and gift exchange, rather than relying solely on price mechanisms. In this sense, the idea of "family-run street commerce" proposed by Jane Jacobs in *The Economy of Cities*[13] can be understood as an important spatial prototype for anti-gentrification. The vitality of such streets fundamentally emerges from the combination of the home and small-scale economies. This concept is further developed by Michael Mehaffy, who presents it through a structural diagram as a pathway that moves beyond the dual tensions of decline versus development and capital dominance versus diversified community structures (Fig. 2)[25–26]. On the one hand, the focus of design shifts toward generating diversity through community collaboration. On the other hand, the local embeddedness of community space acts as a filter for commercial flows. For instance, certain landscapes primarily attract visitors who are interested in local everyday life, allowing these spaces to remain in an intermediate state between gentrification and decline. "The home" and "street life" can therefore be interpreted as regulatory mechanisms against overdevelopment, corresponding to the "stop" node shown in Fig. 2. This provides a

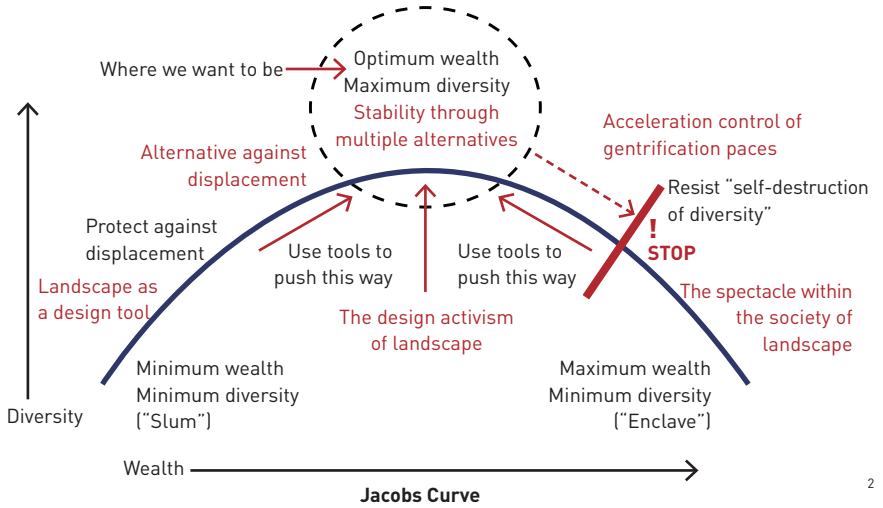


Fig. 2 The "decline-gentrification" value range in the Jacobs Curve (black) and its alternative interpretation in landscape design (red).

concrete design interpretation for community-oriented practices such as placemaking and community-based landscape design, as indicated by the red annotations in Fig. 2. In this process, the community landscape, understood as a local subsystem within the broader landscape of spectacle[27], inevitably involves the dynamics of spatial production in its design.

2.2.3 Circulation: Understanding Space as a System of Diverse Economic Value Flows

In summary, from a macro perspective, the commodification of community economies and their associated landscapes primarily occur through processes of circulation and exchange. These processes function as diversified, downstream structures within the broader economic system. From a micro perspective, however, non-instrumental forms of exchange and circulation mechanisms based on community credit or localized currencies can help regulate excessive flows. They reflect a place-based mode of value assessment and circulation, for example, through the decommodification of Internet celebrity consumption patterns, and can thus, to some extent, slow down or even resist the expansion of gentrification. Accordingly, the key task of community landscape design lies in fostering a form of community economy that moves beyond the logic of the "Internet celebrity economy." Its place-based nature depends on avoiding overconsumption and standardized reproduction. On this basis, it becomes necessary to draw analogies between relevant theoretical prototypes and spatial prototypes, and to further develop a framework that can support design practice.

3 A Three-Dimensional Landscape Framework for Examining Community Circulation Prototypes

3.1 Dimension I: The Home and Street Commerce—Limited Circulation, and Its Community Economy

From the perspective of cultural production and consumption, community-based artistic practices in urban studies have long been regarded as an important pathway for responding to gentrification. Seon Young Lee and Yoonai Han point out that cultural practitioners possess particular advantages in spatial intervention when addressing gentrification[28]. Hyunjoon Shin, in his discussion of global gentrification, introduces the concept of "alternative urbanism" to describe spatial practices embedded in everyday life in East Asian contexts such as the Republic of Korea. He further analyzes, from an economic perspective, how aesthetic and cultural spaces function in responding to gentrification[29–30].

Compared with other practice-oriented approaches that also emphasize diversity and hybridity, the notion of "the alternative" differs from mainstream design concepts such as community building, placemaking, tactical urbanism, and informality. Its theoretical foundation is more strongly grounded in the logic of spatial value. Matthew Frederick suggests that alternative approaches across economy, space, and institutionalization[19,31] are closely related to home-based business models. He further proposes the idea of "bringing urbanism home"[32]. This perspective resonates with the spatial–economic prototype discussed by Jane Jacobs[12–13]. In this model, family-run shops visible along streets, embedded in everyday life, generate a distinctive form of diversity and publicness[9,14].

3.2 Dimension II: The Cooperative as a Platform—Alternative Spaces

In the context of spatial and urban studies, the notion of "the alternative" is often used to describe spatial practices that diverge from dominant development pathways. Manuel Castells, in *Aftermath: The Cultures of the Economic Crisis*[33], discusses a range of spatial practices associated with "alternative economies" in northern Spain, including co-housing, cooperative agriculture, and cooperative landscapes. Drawing on the concept of "There Is No Alternative"[34], Gabriel Rockhill argues that, as a single development trajectory becomes increasingly reinforced, it is crucial to explore other possible paths. This highlights the value of seeking a "third way" within the broader logic of neoliberal capitalism, where alternatives are often perceived as unavailable. Deirdre A. Oakley further defines the concept of alternative economies in community regeneration from the perspective of urban sociology[35].

Within the literature on landscape, planning, and architectural theories, these ideas have developed into a relatively systematic body of work (Table 1)[36–40]. They increasingly function as a dual platform that connects theoretical discussion with design activism, while also offering corresponding frameworks for evaluation and reflection. Existing studies suggest that "the alternative" does not simply refer to balancing binary conditions such as development and decline. Rather, it points toward differentiated pathways of spatial production and modes of economic and spatial organization that depart from dominant models (Fig. 3). Kojin Karatani uses the concept of "community currency" to illustrate the economic attributes of individuals, communities, and space. He proposes

Table 1: The evolution of the concept of "alternatives" in landscape, planning, and architectural theoretical literature

Year	Key concepts	Author(s)	Role	What is being replaced by an alternative	How design produces alternatives
2009	Insurgent architecture, guerrilla architecture	Robert Corser, Nils Gore	Designer	· Replaces traditional pedagogy that focuses primarily on material space with action-oriented, critical, and culturally engaged forms of negotiation and collaboration · Replaces conventional planning meetings with more dialogic forms of engagement	· Compared with mainstream architectural practice, "alternative" is not limited to producing art installations or interior design elements · Emphasizes moments of pause and intervention, and uses design to articulate both critiques of social reality and speculative visions of future possibilities
2009	Alternative architecture	James Wines	Designer	· Replaces the dominant single model of architectural practice under conditions of global economic decline · Replaces previous value systems with those centered on economy and frugality	· Challenges mainstream and orthodox approaches, while maintaining the aesthetic autonomy of artistic practice

(Continued)

Table 1: The evolution of the concept of "alternatives" in landscape, planning, and architectural theoretical literature (Continued)

Year	Key concepts	Author(s)	Role	What is being replaced by an alternative	How design produces alternatives
2011	Slow urbanism, slow city movement, accelerationism capitalism	Ilknur Turkseven Dogrusoy, Ahu Dalgakiran	Designer	· Replaces capitalist modes of life and consumption that prioritize acceleration, as well as forms of urbanization that are excessively fast, unsustainable, and destructive to creativity	· Defines "slow" planning practices as a critique of efficiency-driven development and promotes alternative modes of spatial production
2012	Deep system relations, differentiation and provision, local ecologies, long-term processes	Michael U. Hensel	Designer	· Challenges human-centered approaches and expands beyond the technological spectrum of mechanical systems · Moves beyond the bounded framework of the "anthroposphere" as the primary lens of design thinking	· Reconceptualizes sustainability in architecture and the built environment as a form of social sustainability that differs from conventional models · Advocates participatory and complex systems-oriented performance approaches, emphasizing multi-scalar interactions and long-term processes
2017	Alternative urbanism, utopia of alternative universe, tactical urbanism, neoliberal urban governance, neoliberal urbanism, grass rooted and radical, land trust, alternative economies	Neil Brenner	Designer; sociologist	· Proposes alternative urban visions in response to neoliberal urban governance and market crises · Challenges growth-first and market-driven governance models, as well as forms of urban spatial production detached from collective processes · Seeks to replace patterns of unequal growth	· Advocates urban interventions that are neither modernist centralized planning nor neoliberal governance models · Promotes alternative urban visions that challenge dominant market logics and support more diverse forms of spatial production

NOTE

Source of the information: Refs. [36–40].

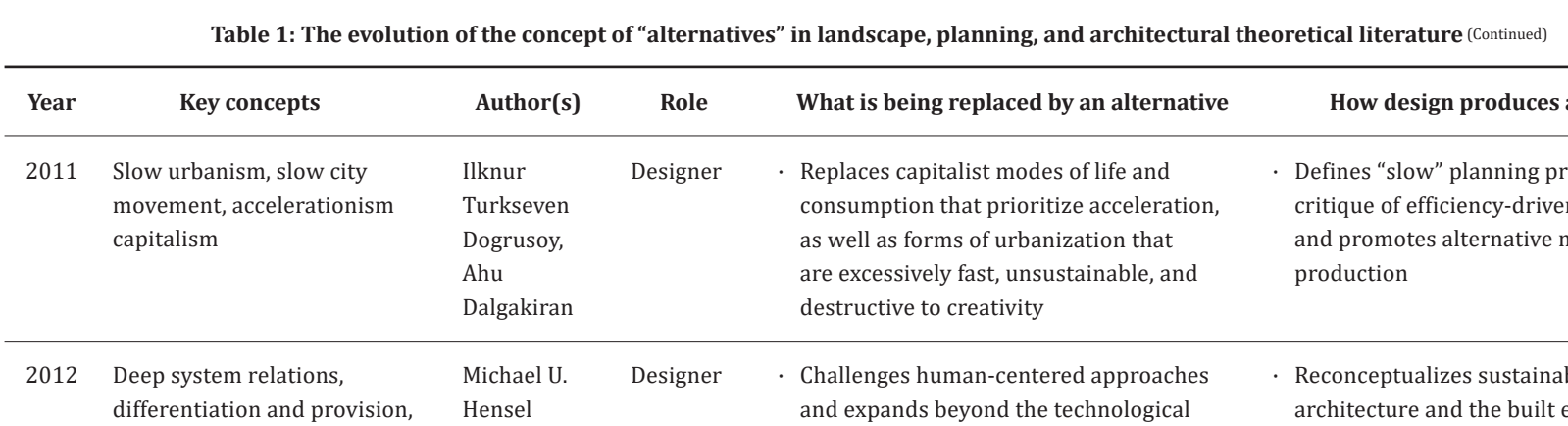


Fig. 3 An alternative spatial production chain: exploring pathways beyond linear renewal trajectories.

"modes of exchange" based on limited circulation to distinguish different pathways in localized practices[41]. Similarly, Marcel Mauss, through the concept of the "gift," explains non-instrumental community prototypes grounded in reciprocity, often described as a "gift economy"[42]. Spatial relations based on social ties and gift exchange can therefore be understood as an intermediate community prototype, positioned between overconsumption driven by Internet celebrity economies and processes of spatial decline.

3.3 Dimension III : Spatially Enabling Institutionalization—A Sustainability Model for Addressing Alienation

Processes of gentrification are often closely related to the pace of development and its temporal duration. Building on the above analysis, this study proposes a layered adjustment model for anti-gentrification landscape design based on an optimization curve (Fig. 4). By introducing a dimension of sustainability, the model seeks to identify a potential range of balance before the decline of

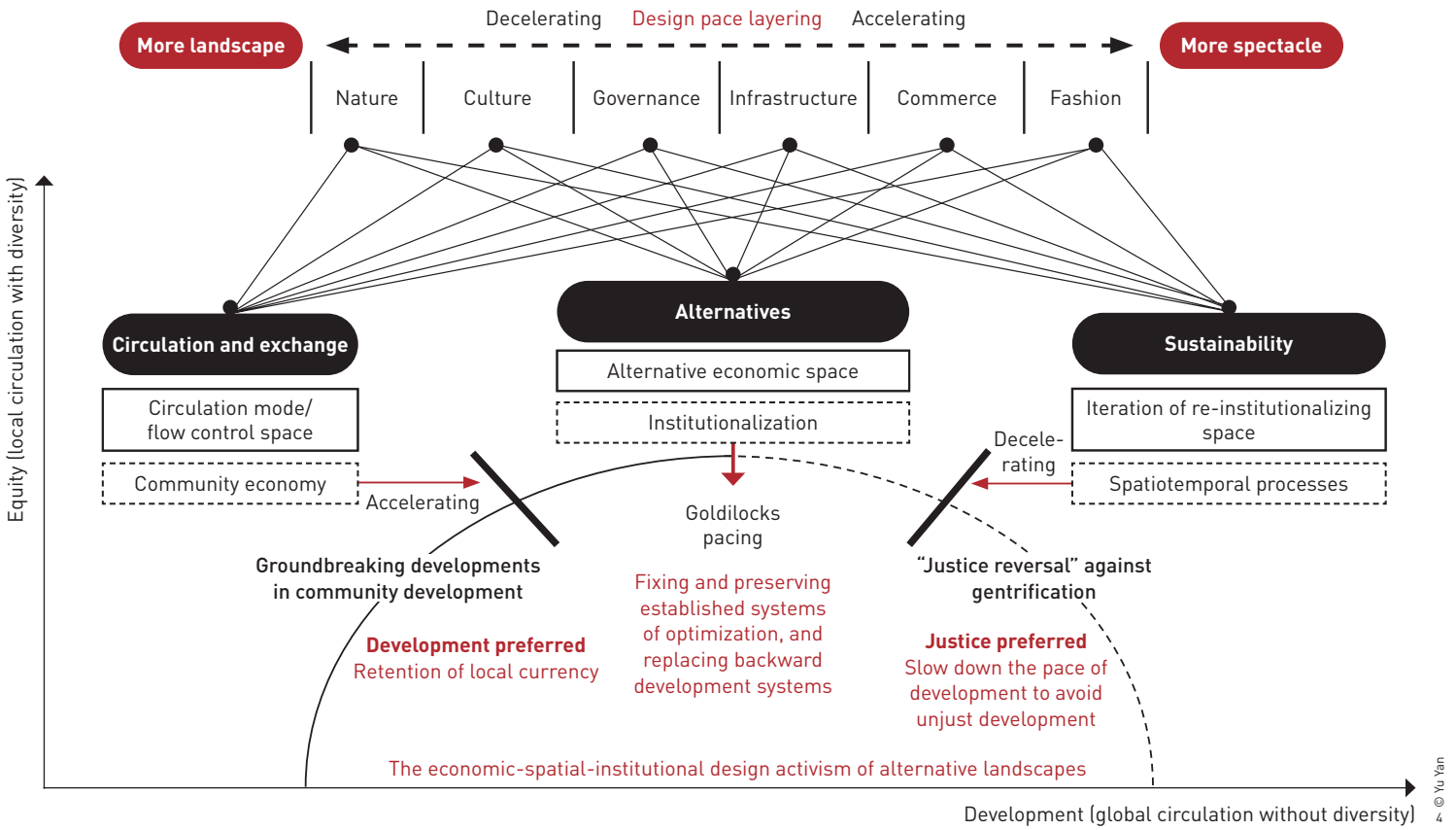


Fig. 4 Hierarchical model of design strategies and parabolic framework for anti-gentrification landscape design.

the Jacobs Curve, and to examine within what range the circulation parameter "x" can achieve a relatively optimal level of community equity "y."

In the process of design intervention across these three types of prototypes, questions of intensity and tempo also become important. For example, mechanisms such as "pulling back" and "pushing forward," as shown in Figs. 3, 4 (the arrows), can be interpreted through the shearing layers framework proposed by Stewart Brand[43]. This framework helps distinguish the varying degrees of influence that different elements exert in spatial evolution and can be understood as analogous to the regulatory force of design adjustments within the curve. In addition, Michael Hensel describes the issue of acceleration regulation in social sustainability as the desynchronization of long-term processes[39]. Drawing on discussions of accelerationism[44], he further explains the temporal characteristics of spatial transformation, particularly the problem of accelerated transformation in the built environment.

As shown in Fig. 4, within the layered framework proposed by Brand[43,45–46], different thematic domains can all be related to landscape practice. Among these, elements such as commerce and fashion are more closely aligned with the notion of the spectacle, as articulated by Guy Debord[27], and tend to accelerate processes of gentrification more directly. By contrast, changes associated with nature and culture tend to occur more slowly, while governance and infrastructure operate across different layers to provide mediation and coordination. These differences help explain how various design intervention pathways produce distinct mechanisms of commercial acceleration and varying scales of impact in processes of spatial transformation. For example, design approaches driven by fashion often stimulate spatial vitality through commercial acceleration, rapidly advancing development and introducing external flows into local communities. At the opposite end of the spectrum, nature-oriented design is less likely to become quickly entangled in processes of capital accumulation.

4 Case Analyses

Consistent with the theoretical discussion above, the notion of "exit" does not imply a passive stance. Rather, it emphasizes, within a community design framework, careful attention to both global and local ecological conditions, the layered regulation of development acceleration, and the sustained operation of institutional mechanisms. Based on the three dimensions discussed above, namely circulation, alternative, and sustainability, it is possible to conduct a systematic analysis of anti-gentrification practices in community design cases. This approach also makes it

possible to identify potential design prototypes that may emerge under each evaluative dimension.

4.1 Rethinking Circulation Prototypes: Designing Spaces for Flow Control

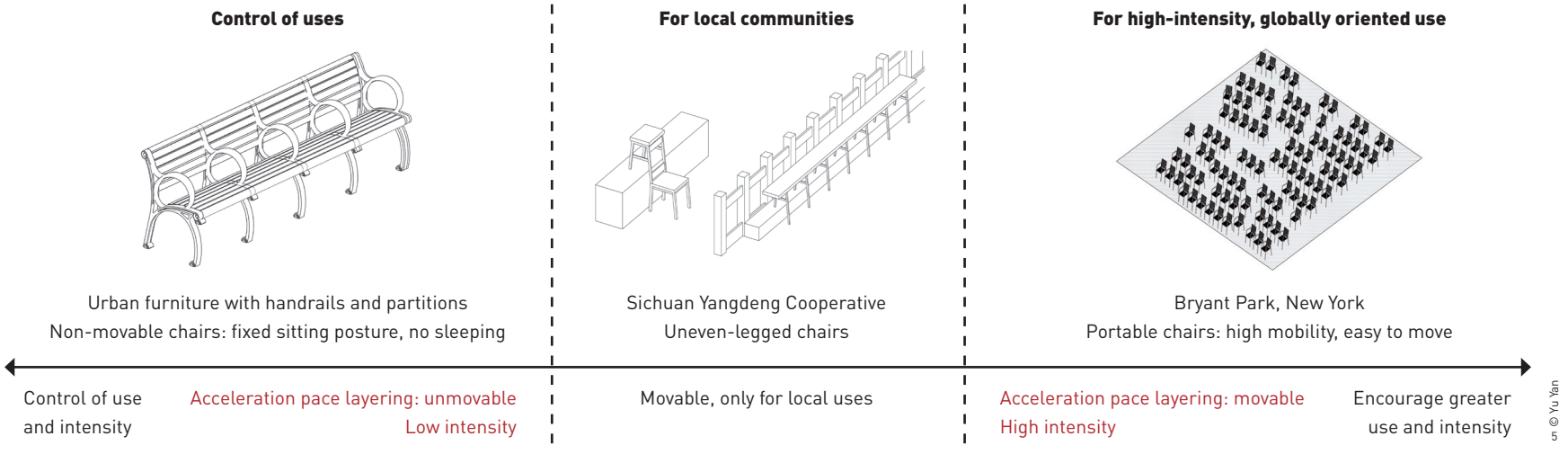
"Chairs," as important objects and mediating elements in placemaking and landscape design, have long been associated with regulating user behavior and shaping place[46]. From the perspective of circulation, users' value judgments and patterns of use regarding spatial elements such as chairs, within micro-scale contexts, offer a new way to understand space.

For example, in the rural development and community art practice of the Yangdeng Art Cooperative in Tongzi Town, Sichuan Province[47], wooden stools placed along the river were designed with uneven leg lengths so that they could only fit specific step heights. This design prevents them from being casually moved or removed, thereby establishing a localized mode of circulation (Fig. 5). When compared with practices such as chair-bombing in tactical urbanism, as well as park benches designed with partitions to restrict lying down, a clear distinction emerges (Fig. 5). If landscape design is understood as the construction of a "use ecology," the first approach achieves a fine-grained regulation of resources and commercial flows through design. The latter two, by contrast, tend toward either the unrestricted release of resources and commercial flows, or the restriction of specific user behaviors. Together, these examples demonstrate that design can regulate spatial use at a micro level, thereby preventing the overconsumption of space. As indicated along the acceleration axis in Fig. 5, governance and infrastructure positioned at the midpoint of spatial flow control can influence both the cultural and commercial dynamics of a place.

4.2 Rethinking Alternative Prototypes: Alternative Economic Spaces

Although commercial development in urban districts often depends on a certain level of footfall, controlling overdevelopment and stabilizing the community value structure are equally important for long-term sustainability. This dimension is also related to the concept of positionality in spatial production, as discussed by Sarah Fox[48]. It concerns the relative positions and opportunities of different groups within space. This perspective does not reject the introduction of external flows through development, but places greater emphasis on how "the alternative" addresses community stratification and positionality within spatial production. It highlights the importance of maintaining a balanced community economic ecology, particularly the niches occupied by lower-income groups. On this basis, design can intervene not only through the careful regulation of use, but also through aesthetic strategies that contribute to a degree of value enhancement. These strategies can empower the formation of community-based economic ecologies and create more opportunities for connections across different social positions within spatial production. The difference in acceleration between slower community processes and faster capital flows is fundamentally determined by the circulation that connects these positions. Aesthetics provides the visible, accessible, and perceptible basis for such circulation, while design must carefully regulate its pace. In this sense, the task of the community is to identify a "third" alternative state between community and capital in terms of capital and production relations.

Fig. 5 Acceleration-based typology of three seating strategies: control-oriented restrictive seating, community-oriented fixed seating, and flow-oriented temporary seating.



The Digua (Sweet Potato) Community in Beijing represents such an alternative economic space. Internally, it forms a relatively stable community ecology through cooperative organization, while externally it maintains a high degree of inclusiveness, addressing the spatial needs of diverse groups such as migrants. Its visual identity draws on the image of "breaking a sweet potato to share," referencing the concept of the "rhizome"[49], as a metaphor for decentralized connections and multidirectional organizational structures.

More importantly, the ideas of the sweet potato and the rhizome are translated here into a mechanism of production and sharing. In the specific context of the Digua Community, the project transforms previously marginal underground spaces into public and commercial areas through adaptive reuse. Through the combined effects of continuous aesthetic transformation, placemaking, and relatively affordable rental mechanisms, a positive cycle gradually emerges. This process supports residents in carrying out services and small-scale business activities within the community. In this process, spatial design participates in reconstructing the economic and ecological relations of the community, enabling residents to become both producers and consumers. Aesthetics functions not only as a medium of spatial connection, such as in storefront design, but also as a vehicle for replicating this model. This approach has already been adopted in other cities and continues to develop as a distributed community network guided by the principle of value localization.

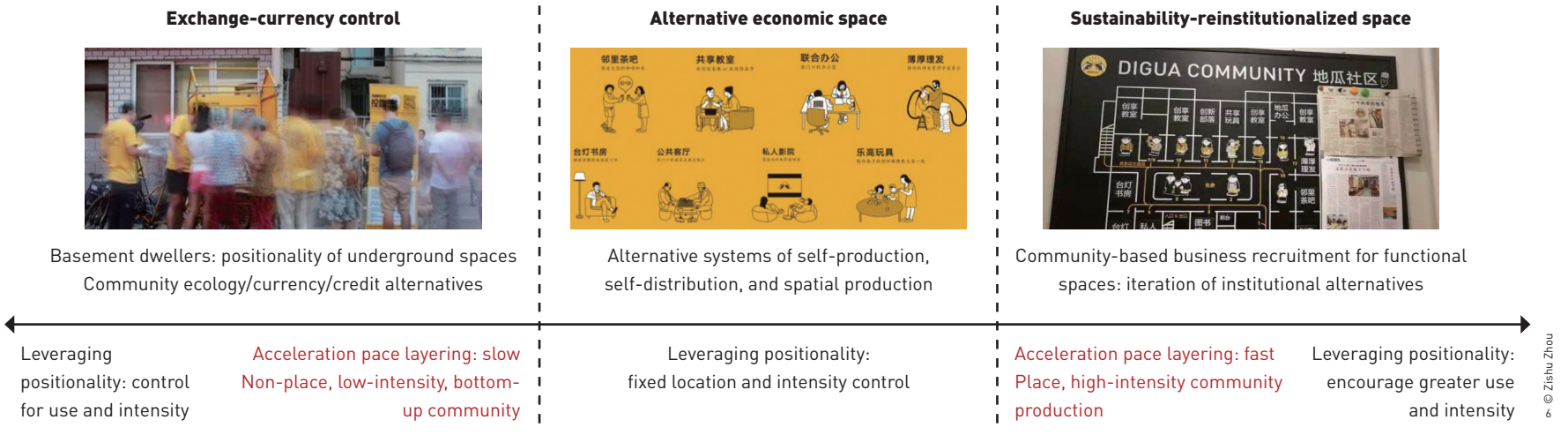
Building on the framework shown in Fig. 6, the Digua Community case demonstrates how spatial design and the optimization of use patterns can transform the positional attributes of underground space within the overall structure, shifting it from a marginal condition to one that is accessible, visible, and usable. At the same time, this process gradually establishes internal systems of community trust and rules for circulation based on community currency, forming a spatially grounded form of community infrastructure (Fig. 4). As development continues, this model can be further iterated through community-oriented tenant selection and recruitment. From the perspectives of spatial activation and anti-gentrification, the regulation of flows in this case can be understood as operating within a relatively balanced range along the curve shown in Fig. 4. Drawing on the analogy discussed in the previous section, this process can be interpreted as a shift from localized control of individual spatial elements toward the coordinated construction of the site as a whole. It highlights the role of design in facilitating the formation of diverse economic relations and community connections.

4.3 Rethinking Sustainability Prototypes: Spaces for Re-institutionalizing Iteration

Neil Brenner argues that the key to sustaining local alternative economies lies in preventing their capture by external capital through institutional arrangements. This requires engagement with mechanisms such as land trusts, rezoning, and housing policy, within which design can play a critical role as an intervening force[40].

For example, since 2017, organizations such as Chinatown community unions in cities including Vancouver, Boston, and New York have promoted a series of rezoning practices. These initiatives address issues such as development intensity, spatial capacity,

Fig. 6 A community-based cooperative model integrating production and consumption through local and ecological networks.



and the preservation of historical and cultural character[50]. At the same time, relevant trust organizations have incorporated data collaboration into institutional practice through the development of websites and participatory data platforms[51]. Within this public arena shaped by policy and documentation, local groups and designers collaborate to update proposals, turning rezoning drawings into open platforms for discussion and dissemination. In this process, design plays an important role in supporting community-based institutionalization and local preservation efforts. Ultimately, this process resonates with Walter Benjamin's discussion in the Arcades Project[52], where he describes how grassroots actors appropriate decorative classical elements to legitimize informal storefronts. Similarly, through the professional language of drawings and regulatory metrics, such as floor area ratio calculations, rezoning proposals are translated into institutional outcomes grounded in land trust frameworks.

5 Conclusions

This article constructs a threefold analytical framework of economy, space, and institutionalization, and, through case studies, examines the mechanisms through which design can respond to urban development issues such as gentrification. The findings can be summarized in two main aspects. First, it is essential to recognize the spatial value generated by design and its role in activating and regulating flows, thereby stabilizing community ecological niches. Second, different domains of landscape practice operate at varying levels of acceleration in relation to gentrification. It is therefore necessary to ground design in nature and culture, while integrating space, institutionalization, and infrastructure into a coordinated framework for regulating development acceleration. In doing so, the evolution of elements such as commerce and fashion can be moderated to remain within a relatively balanced range.

To borrow the words of Karatani, economic policy without a value orientation is unlikely to provide effective guidance, while moral concerns detached from economic engagement remain empty[53]. Clarifying the structure and operative dimensions of design activism, and expressing them through diagrammatic means, can help shift spatial design from a static ideal toward a mode of dynamic regulation[54], thereby extending its applicability and explanatory power in practice.

Competing interests | The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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