

Integrating Curation and Retail in Chinese Urban Commercial Revitalization: The transnational exchange of the curatorial concept in Shanghai and Beijing, China

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Abstract: Originally from the Latin for "to care for," curation has evolved from organizing and presenting within museums and galleries, to interactive facilities and immersive experience of audiences in contemporary urban space, where art installations transform streets and commercial complexes into vibrant cultural environments. In this vein, the paper focuses on "CURETAIL," a strategy that integrates curatorial practices into retail to rejuvenate urban commercial areas, and attempts to uncover the knowledge exchange behind. It takes two leading contemporary projects, namely TX Huaihai in Shanghai and The Box Chaowai in Beijing as cases. Contextualized in the historical development of retail commercial space and curation practice globally, the paper investigates the conceptualization of project operators, responsive design strategies and consumers' preferences, identifies the characteristics of CURETAIL and reveals the transnational factors behind.

Key words : Transnational exchanges, CURETAIL, retail commercial space, urban regeneration

Nowadays in China's leading cities, a growing buzz emerges introducing curation and art into commercial spaces, as a way to revitalize old declining buildings and districts. CURETAIL (Curated Retail) is created as an innovative strategy to attract younger generations (Youfang, 2023). It has been applied in key urban regeneration projects like Shanghai's TX Huaihai and Beijing's the Box Chaowai, and successfully transformed traditional malls into iconic retail and pop-culture centers. Against the impacts of online shopping and pandemics, CURETAIL provides consumers with choices that go beyond algorithm-led, fixed recommendations at a time of material abundance, and allows the consumers to have a personal emotional experience. The paper accordingly traces the transnational diffusion and exchange of the curatorial concept and intends to uncover the dynamic reasons behind (Souhu, 2019).

1 The birth of CURETAIL in Chinese cities



Fig.1 Dickson Sezto giving talk at TX Huaihai, 2019 (source: <https://www.instagram.com/txhuaihai/>)

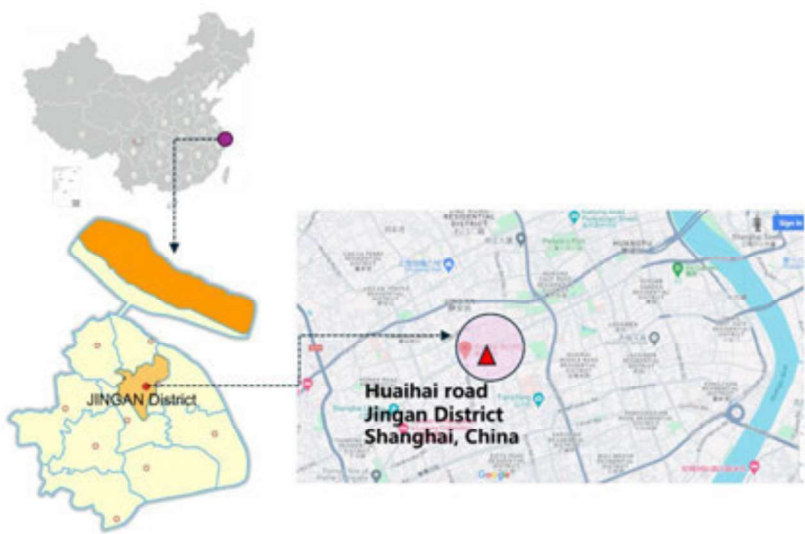


Fig.2 Location of Huaihai Road and TX Huaihai, Shanghai

The CURETAIL concept was proposed by Dickson Sezto (Fig.1), Chairman of URF Yingzhan Group, during the renovation project of the Huaihai Middle Road commercial district in Shanghai. It was first implemented at the Bailian TX Huaihai | Youth Power Center on Huaihai Middle Road (Fig.2). This area, shaded by century-old plane trees and lined with hotels and high-end boutiques, was once recognized as one of Shanghai's most fashionable commercial streets. However, with the rapid development of China's internet economy from

2013 to 2018, physical retail stores, burdened by high rental costs and shrinking sales volumes, were gradually replaced by more convenient and cheaper online stores, forcing many well-known brands on Huaihai Middle Road to close due to financial losses (Souhu, 2019b).



Before Refurbishment, 1990s



After Refurbishment, 2020

Fig. 3 Real scenes of TX Huaihai, Shanghai. (source: https://m.thepaper.cn/wifiKey_detail.jsp?contid=10913161&from=wifiKey)

TX Huaihai was no exception. Formerly home to the First Department Store Huaihai and Isetan (Fig.3), it had been in decline for years and was in desperate need of transformation. On one hand, emerging commercial centers in various districts of Shanghai and internet retail businesses had siphoned off the clientele originally belonging to Huaihai Middle Road. On the other hand, Huaihai Middle Road suffered from typical old-town issues such as insufficient parking and dispersed public transport stops (Karimi, 2023). Sezto's response was to focus on "youth" and "trends." The urban layout of the old district made it difficult to change; middle-class individuals with cars preferred to drive to suburban shopping complexes with better facilities. Elderly people who rely on public transport found it inconvenient, as their physical condition did not support walking several kilometers from the nearest public transport stop to their destination. Only young people, keen on following internet trends and relatively less affluent, would make the effort to travel to places of interest. These potential young customers are known as China's Generation Z. Predominantly university students and young white-collar workers, they are under thirty, mostly unmarried and childless, with some disposable time and a relatively strong purchasing power. On one hand, Generation Z pursues individual interests and emotional experiences, with significant differences among individuals (Zhang and Lee, 2022). On the other hand, due to increasingly frequent and extensive international exchanges, their interests are not limited to domestic cultural IPs but also encompass cultural products from around the world.

Therefore, Dickson Sezto introduced the CURETAIL model, aiming to attract the potential Generation Z consumer group. By consulting with globally renowned trendsetters and incorporating trend culture forums, brands, and events, he transformed the original shopping center into an art gallery, exhibition center, and show venue (Fig.4-6). Considering that the shopping desires of the same consumer group are ultimately limited, it is more effective to rotate exhibitions, pop-ups, parties, and meet-and-greets to meet the varying needs of different consumer groups, ultimately achieving the goal of selling products (Gao et al., 2022). CURETAIL strives to keep the pace of brand scene changes in sync with the speed of young

people's smartphone refresh rates, ensuring that new activities are available in the public spaces every week. The operator continuously attracts new customer sources through these activities, maintaining a steady and sufficient flow of visitors (Zhao et al., 2023).



Fig. 4 Bird view of TX Huaihai (source: <https://www.instagram.com/txhuaihai/>)

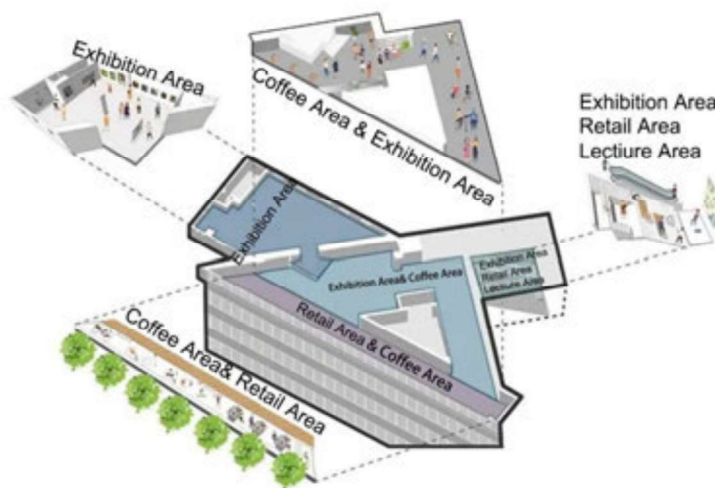


Fig. 5 Functional layout of TX Huaihai

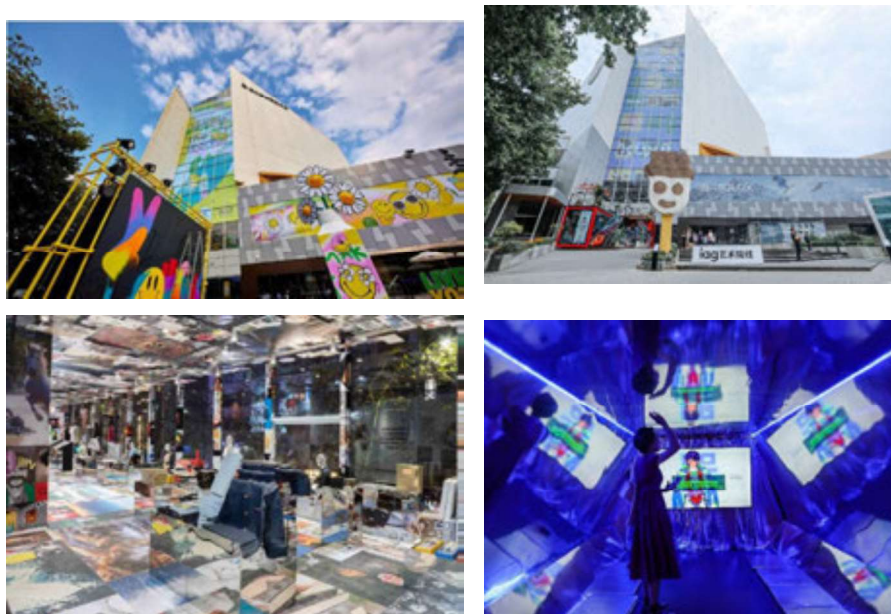


Fig.6 Changing Exhibitions at TX Huaihai, 2019-2020

Dickson Sezto applied the CURETAIL concept once again at The Box | Youth Power Center in Beijing's Chaowai area. Located in one of Beijing's earlier developed regional commercial centers, Chaowai does not have the long history or large scale of other major commercial centers like Xidan, Wangfujing, and Qianmen, nor does it have a diverse range of retail products (Fig.7). Instead, it primarily targets high-income consumers from the Chaoyang district. With the development of Zhongguancun in the Haidian district, the high-income consumer base is gradually shifting northwest, leading to the aging of commercial building facilities in the Chaowai area, which has become increasingly dilapidated (Motomura et al., 2022). Additionally, the area suffers from a severe lack of parking spaces and already has numerous department stores and commercial complexes catering to middle-aged and elderly consumers. To secure a foothold in such a competitive environment, it is essential to develop a new customer base. In 2021, the BaonaoHui, formerly a major electronics marketplace in the Chaowai area, successfully transformed into a retail art experience space themed around home living, thus beginning to attract young people (De Winne et al., 2020). As a result, the CURETAIL concept was chosen for the renovation and redesign of the space at The Box Chaowai (Fig.8).



Fig.7 Location Distribution of Important Business Districts in Beijing



Before refurbishment, 2010s After refurbishment, 2023

Fig. 8 Real scenes of BOX Chaowai, Beijing

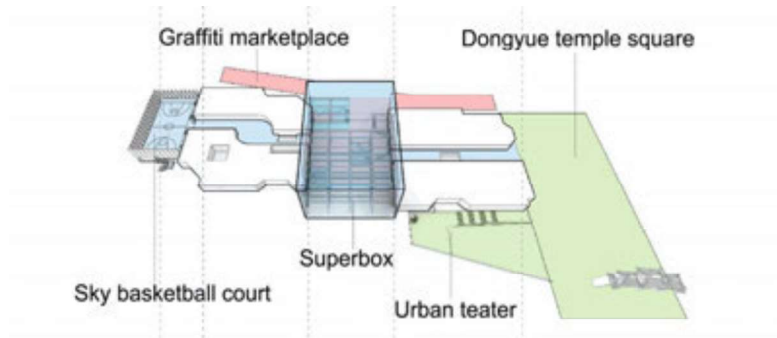


Fig. 9 Functional layout of BOX Chaowai, Beijing



Fig.10 Exhibitions at THE BOX Chaowai, 2022-2023

The main structure of Chaowai THE BOX (Fig.9-10), known as the GLASS BOX Super Trendy Box, retains the original beam and column structure of the KunTai Mall but has been transformed by dismantling and reconfiguring the floor plates into a 360° flexible multi-path space. This space is now used for brand launches, premieres, curated fashion shows, flash retail, and multimedia events. Additionally, it includes numerous functional auxiliary spaces. On the east side, there is an outdoor basketball court and skateboarding area, making it a gathering place for street trend enthusiasts. The south side features Beijing's first graffiti market, while the northwest side has been excavated to create an open-air, immersive "Slope Theater." The west side utilizes the archway of the Dongyue Temple to provide a cultural activity square, offering a variety of spaces for activities and gatherings for young people (Soyinka et al., 2021).

Since its operation began on September 16, 2023, Chaowai THE BOX has seen an average daily foot traffic of about 15,000 people, which increases to 50,000 during weekend exhibitions. The asset value of the enterprise is expected to increase by 20%-30%, with the commercial spaces generating over one billion RMB in annual revenue. Office space rent is expected to grow by 20%-30%, with annual taxes paid amounting to approximately 1.53 billion RMB—an increase of about 1 billion RMB from before the renovation. Additionally, it is projected to create about 3,000 new jobs.

2 The transnational re-shaping of Retail space

When examining CURETAIL within the context of the evolution of retail business, it fundamentally restructures the relationship among "people," "goods," and "spaces" within retail environments (Requena-Ruiz et al., 2023). In the early stages of human society, retail was mostly a small-scale self-producing and self-selling workshop model, with retail spaces

dispersed in narrow fronts and workshops at the back of urban buildings (Fig.11). With the outbreak of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-19th century, the advent of department stores marked the transition of retail spaces indoors, where products moved from being singular and scattered to being centrally displayed and diversified, enhancing the consumer shopping experience significantly. In these department stores, "people" were the main actors in the retail scene, with "goods" and "spaces" playing the roles of objects and backdrops, respectively (Fig.12).

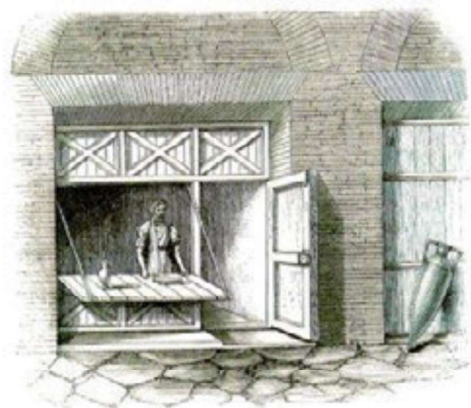


Fig.11 Tabernae in ancient Rome, a plural retail space different from open market



Fig.12 A early 20th century department store in Paris

By the mid-20th century, influenced jointly by the proliferation of automobiles and government housing policies, urban residents massively relocated to the suburbs, and shopping centers made their debut in American suburbs (Fig.13). These centers, composed of department stores and small retail shops, were equipped with large, free parking areas to accommodate consumers who drove there. Beyond "goods," these "spaces" combined indoor and outdoor elements, offering a variety of distinctive public areas that met the social needs of "people," creating an atmosphere conducive to social life and cultural activities.



Fig.13 The Park & Shop in Cleveland Park, Washington, D.C. (1930) is one of the earliest examples of a small center with dedicated on-site parking in front. (source: Neighborhood shopping center - Wikipedia)



Fig.14 The interior of Garden State Plaza megamall in Paramus, New Jersey. (Source: Shopping mall - Wikipedia)

In the 1990s, as urbanization accelerated and land use efficiency improved, the retail "space" moved with "people" back to urban centers, evolving into more intensive and multifunctional urban commercial complexes (Fig.14), serving city dwellers of all ages and incorporating restaurants, cinemas, and entertainment venues to meet diverse free-choice, leisure, and entertainment needs (Liu, 2022). Since the 21st century, as the internal market in cities became saturated, operators of commercial complexes began to strengthen and sustain customer attraction through collaborations with other arts and cultural industries. The CURETAIL analyzed in this paper is one such model.

Under the CURETAIL model, consumer behavior shifts from active to passive, with "goods" being imbued with stories to attract traffic, and "spaces" providing an immersive experience. "Goods" and "spaces" take the leading role, guiding the thoughts and actions of "people" and tying them to consumption. At this point, the exhibitions have become the "social currency" of Bailian TX Huaihai and Chaowai THE BOX, keeping the pace of changing scenes in sync with the rhythm of young

people and using constantly evolving aesthetics to draw them back to once-declining traditional commercial districts.

3 The curate origin of CURETAIL

The term "curate" originates from the occupational meaning of "curator," which itself comes from the Latin word meaning to care or heal, initially used to describe "someone who cares for people's souls," essentially a parish priest (Hu et al., 2022). In the 1660s, the term "curator" began to be associated with the management of art, museums, and libraries. The first recorded curator in history, scientist, inventor, and architect Robert Hooke, in 1667, conducted an experimental project titled "Using a bellows to inflate a dog's lungs to keep it alive." By the 19th century, the term "curator" started to be used for museum curators and independent curators in the modern sense of curation. Subsequently, influenced by the postmodernism trends across various fields in the 20th century, the concepts of "critical curation" and "independent curators" emerged. In 1969, Harald Szeemann, at the Kunsthalle Bern, creatively redefined the relationships between curator, artist, and the exhibition itself in his exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information." He allowed artists to take over the museum, creating their works on-site, completing most of the exhibits a few weeks before the exhibition opened.

In the 1990s, with the development of internet technology and the advent of the information explosion era, numerous new media platforms enabled everyone to assume the role of a curator in their domain. The concept of "curatorial nature," which encourages exhibition visitors to actively explore the content and meaning of the exhibits, began to enter mainstream vision. As a result, the democratization of curation moved it beyond galleries and museums and into the realm of retail business, emphasizing the interaction between people, the items on display, and the exhibition spaces.

The proponent of CURETAIL is Dickson Sezto, who was born in Hong Kong in the 1970s, a crucial port for international economic and cultural exchanges at the time. Sezto grew up in a bilingual environment where Chinese and English coexisted, deeply identifying with Chinese traditional culture while also being influenced by Western trends and business practices. He graduated in 1992 from Monash University in Australia with a degree in literature, specializing in social statistics and psychological analysis of social phenomena, which honed his skills in statistical analysis and market research, shaping his unique insights and sharp vision as a business executive. Sezto has been dedicated to commercial real estate development, with his most well-known project being the transformation of Shanghai's Xintiandi, an old alleyway, into a landmark international retail and pedestrian area. In 2019, Sezto once again became a focal point in retail business by proposing the CURETAIL model, which led to the creation of the Bailian TX Huaihai | Youth Power Center.

In conceptualizing "CURETAIL as an exhibition-driven business," Sezto drew upon numerous transnational experiences, such as the practices at the Innovation District on Boston's waterfront, the South Lake Union area in Seattle, and the East London Tech City in the UK. These experiences emphasize enhancing the customer experience and creating immersive interactive spaces. Noticing the rapid development of the internet and e-commerce, which has provided consumers with more convenient choices, Sezto realized that shopping is no longer primarily about visiting physical retail spaces. Thus, he focused on creating a rich artistic

atmosphere and a cultural identity aligned with trendy concepts, including virtual and augmented reality displays related to the metaverse, making these the primary attractions of the retail spaces under the CURETAIL model.

4 Conclusion

In general, the CURETAIL includes three main characteristics. Firstly, it emphasizes the open and flexible public spaces. CURETAIL promotes retail spaces that are not confined to indoors but integrate seamlessly with outdoor environments, providing consumers with various options to socialize, enjoy views, or relax over tea. This integration offers more space for activities and ensures a superior experience while walking, viewing, or shopping. Secondly, it frequently updates its exhibitions and displays. The CURETAIL model involves frequent updates of public space arrangements and hosts highly targeted events for different consumer groups. Operators can stay abreast of cultural trends and introduce popular cultural activities, responding dynamically to the changing cultural landscape. Thirdly, it actively collaborates with influential brands and hotspots. Under the CURETAIL model, operators can take advantage of popular influencer spots to forge collaborations with well-known domestic and international brands in specific fields, complementing each other's strengths. Particularly, the "flagship store economy" can be utilized to attract foot traffic and enhance economic benefits.

The formation and successful application of the CURETAIL concept are inseparable from transnational influences. Firstly, global Influence on Interactive Commercial Retail Spaces: Although Dickson Sezto originally conceptualized CURETAIL, similar models of interactive retail spaces have existed worldwide, influenced to varying degrees by the concept of "curated retail." For instance, a subway renovation in East London transformed into the OTHER WORLD gaming experience venue, and in Icheon, South Korea, the NONSPACE café serves as a "cross-cultural space." Secondly, the proponent of CURETAIL Dickson Sezto has transnational background. He grew up in Hong Kong—a melting pot of Eastern and Western cultures. His landmark urban renewal project, Shanghai Xintiandi, was completed in collaboration with Benjamin Wood's architecture firm from the USA and DP Architects from Singapore, incorporating advanced technologies from Germany and elsewhere. During the development of CURETAIL, Sezto frequently consulted with global trendsetters like Hiroshi Fujiwara and Chen Man.

Thirdly, CURETAIL's targeting consumer Generation Z is a transnational generation. The primary target audience for the CURETAIL model is Generation Z, born into the thriving "global village" of the internet age. The advent of the information era has intensified their passion for international trends and cultural shifts, making them particularly sensitive to changes in cultural currents. These factors enable CURETAIL to integrate diverse culture and innovative retail strategies to cater to a globally connected, trend-sensitive consumer base.

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