



Cultural

Communication Strategies of Film Space: An Empirical Study Centered on the Astor House Hotel in Shanghai

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Received: 26 July 2025 Revised: 18 August 2025 Accepted: 19 August 2025

Abstract

This study investigates the role of film space as a medium in the dissemination of urban culture, taking the Astor House Hotel in Shanghai as a representative case. The research is motivated by the significance of understanding how landmark architecture mediates cultural memory and identity in the era of multimodal media, particularly through the convergence of cinema and short video platforms. The objective is to construct and validate a theoretical framework that explains the relationship between film space, cultural identity, and communication pathways. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative approach, combining semi-structured in-depth interviews with domain experts—including film historians, a local cinematographer, and an urban development practitioner—and focus group discussions with three categories of audience participants: film students, industry professionals, and general viewers. The findings reveal that film space operates through five interrelated mechanisms—visual symbolism, memory activation, identity formation, media synergy, and participatory engagement—thus serving as a dynamic vehicle for cultural transmission. Specifically, while experts highlighted the role of the Astor House Hotel in reinforcing urban cultural memory, audience groups emphasized the interplay between cinematic narratives, spatial imagery, and short video dissemination in shaping cultural perception. Based on these insights, the study proposes a three-tiered communication strategy comprising historical symbol embedding, narrative synergy across media, and audience engagement activation. The practical implications suggest that integrating film space into media practices can enhance urban branding and cultural communication strategies. Although limited by its case-based focus and relatively small sample size, the research contributes to theoretical development in communication studies by bridging cinematic geography, media convergence, and urban cultural identity.

Keywords: Film Space, Urban Culture, Astor House Hotel, Communication Strategy, Short Video

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Introduction

Film space has increasingly become a critical lens through which urban culture is mediated, negotiated, and disseminated. In the case of Shanghai, a city renowned for its hybrid “Haipai” culture, film and audiovisual media have long played a pivotal role in shaping its global image. Buildings, streetscapes, and historical landmarks not only provide cinematic backdrops but also act as cultural texts, embodying narratives of modernity, colonial legacies, and local identity. Within this context, the study of film space offers valuable insights into how urban sites are reimagined and circulated in both mainstream cinema and emergent short-video platforms, thereby influencing public perceptions of the city and its cultural identity.

This research situates the Astor House Hotel (today the Shanghai Securities Museum) as a representative case to explore the cultural communication strategies embedded in Shanghai’s film spaces. Designed in the British neoclassical style and designated as a protected historic building, the Astor House Hotel has served as both a cinematic site and a cultural landmark (Fu,2022). Its recurrent appearances in films and short videos illustrate how visual media shape audience interpretations of urban heritage while contributing to the city’s branding and cultural tourism. By employing qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus groups with filmmakers, scholars, and media users, this study examines how audiences engage with the mediated representations of the Astor House Hotel and what these interpretations reveal about the broader dynamics of Shanghai’s cultural transmission.

The findings underscore the collaborative role of different media in amplifying the cultural significance of urban film spaces. Cinema, television, and short videos collectively construct a multilayered narrative of Shanghai that bridges local heritage and global visibility. By analyzing the interplay between film space, urban identity, and cultural dissemination, this study contributes to communication scholarship and urban cultural studies, offering a case-based framework for understanding how media representations of heritage sites enhance both cultural recognition and collective memory.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how the visual and narrative representation of filmic space—particularly through short video and cinematic techniques—reconstructs historical architecture and activates urban cultural memory.
2. To investigate how diverse audiences perceive, interpret, and emotionally engage with filmic representations of the Astor House Hotel, thereby contributing to symbolic meaning-making and participatory cultural discourse.

Literature Review

The intersection of film space and urban cultural communication has garnered increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Scholars such as Bruno (2002) and Lefebvre (2006) have emphasized how cinematic representations of architecture contribute to a sensorial experience of place, turning cityscapes into affective and symbolic sites of memory. In parallel, short video platforms have reconfigured spatial narratives through decentralized, everyday-oriented visual storytelling, as noted by Jenkins (2006), allowing ordinary users to contribute to urban cultural discourse.

However, few studies have explored how iconic urban sites mediate between cinematic history and digital-era participatory culture. The case of the Astor House Hotel (formerly known as the Richards Hotel) offers a critical site for such inquiry. Established in 1846 between the British Concession and the old Shanghai county, it marked an early convergence of Western

modernity and urban transformation in China. Its technological firsts—introducing gas lighting (1867), electric lights (1882), and running water (1883)—have been framed by Huang (2007) as symbolic of Shanghai’s entry into modernity.

More crucially, the Astor House was the venue for China’s first public film screening on May 22, 1897, positioning it as the birthplace of Chinese cinematic dissemination (Fu, 2022). Yet, while this milestone has been cited in film history, its ongoing symbolic function in urban memory, especially within short video culture—remains under-researched. Recent contributions by Burgess and Green (2018) suggest that digital platforms reanimate heritage spaces through a collective re-appropriation of urban memory. Building on these insights, this study situates the Astor House Hotel as a mediating node between historical cinematic practices and contemporary digital representations.

Therefore, by tracing the visual and communicative transitions of this landmark architecture across film and short video formats, this study seeks to bridge the theoretical gap at the intersection of film space, urban culture, and communication strategy through a case-based analysis that integrates historical depth and media hybridity.

Conceptual Framework

This study is qualitative research. It aims to explore how filmic spaces contribute to urban cultural communication through both cinematic narratives and short video dissemination. The researcher has defined the research framework based on the concepts of cinematic geography (Lukinbeal, 2005), mediated landscape (Adams, 2009), cultural memory theory (Assmann, 1995), and the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). These theoretical foundations support the investigation of spatial representation, meaning construction, and audience reception within mediated urban environments.

1. The framework consists of three main components:

Filmic Space Representation – analyzing how urban spaces, particularly iconic sites like the Astor House Hotel, are visually and symbolically constructed in cinematic and short video narratives.

2. Media Dissemination Pathways – examining how such representations are transmitted through platforms (e.g., WeChat Video Channel), focusing on short video production, circulation, and user interaction.

3. Audience Reception and Cultural Impact – exploring how different audiences (professionals, students, general public) perceive and interpret these representations, contributing to cultural identity and memory construction.



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach structured around the tripartite process of visual production—media dissemination—audience response, aiming to comprehensively examine the role of filmic space in the communication of urban culture. The research is conducted in three key phases: a case study of the Astor House Hotel, in-depth interviews with professionals, and focus group discussions with diverse audience segments. Each phase contributes distinct but interrelated insights into the mechanisms through which urban filmic spaces facilitate cultural transmission.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with three categories of professionals selected for their specialized expertise. These include two scholars in film history, one local cinematographer with extensive experience filming in Shanghai, and one urban planner involved in cultural tourism and urban regeneration projects. A thematic analysis of the interview data enabled the development of a theoretical framework termed the "Fivefold Mechanism of Urban Filmic Space Communication." This framework identifies five interrelated mechanisms: the construction of visual symbols, the evocation of cultural memory, the generation of urban identity, the synergy of media convergence, and the interaction of public participation. Together, these mechanisms offer a robust theoretical basis for understanding how cinematic representations of urban space mediate and shape cultural meanings in the public sphere.

Focus group discussions were designed to assess the practical implications of the theoretical framework from the perspective of general audiences. Three representative groups were formed: five film students from Shanghai, five film industry practitioners with hands-on experience, and five ordinary viewers including both local and non-local participants. Participants engaged in collective viewing sessions followed by guided discussions centered on spatial perception, cultural comprehension, and emotional resonance in short video content. The analysis highlights the interplay between professional interpretations and everyday experiences, shedding light on both convergences and divergences in meaning-making. These discussions not only reflect the audience's feedback loop within the communication process but also provide empirical validation and refinement of the theoretical model established in the previous phase.

By integrating case analysis, expert interviews, and audience-centered focus groups, this study offers a comprehensive methodological design for investigating how filmic spaces function as mediators of urban cultural communication across multiple levels of production and reception.

Results

1. In-Depth Interviews

For exploring how cinematic space contributes to the dissemination of urban culture via short-form video platforms, this study conducted in-depth interviews with three categories of core professionals: (1) film historians, (2) Shanghai-based cinematographers, (3) urban space, and (4) film historians and development project managers. Through thematic coding and semantic categorization, five key mechanisms were identified that reveal how filmic representation of space influences urban cultural communication. These findings laid the groundwork for the construction of this study's theoretical communication framework.

1.1 Narrative Reconfiguration of Historic Architecture

The Astor House Hotel not only served as the earliest site for film screening in Shanghai, but also stands as an architectural narrative in itself, with its British neoclassical

style and over a century of historical accumulation. Interviewees consistently emphasized that historic urban spaces, when mediated through cinematic narratives, can be reconfigured as tangible cultural carriers, thereby rendering urban history “visible, perceptible, and transmissible.”

“Space is silent, but film gives it a voice.” — Film Historian A4

“When architecture is translated into moving images, it becomes part of the city’s story.” — Cinematographer A2

1.2 Cinematic Space and the Activation of Collective Memory

As the birthplace of modern cinema in Shanghai, the Astor House Hotel functions in short videos as a site of spatial reconstruction that transforms individual memory into shared public remembrance. Cinematic imagery acts as a bridge between space and memory, invoking emotional resonance in both local residents and external audiences.

“The silent film segment at the beginning really triggered a sense of old Shanghai nostalgia.” — Urban Planner A3

“Such visual content reintegrates city memory into the contemporary media discourse.” — Cinematographer A2

1.3 Dialect, Costume, and Cultural Identification

The use of Shanghainese dialect for voiceover, together with Republican-era costumes and vintage *mise-en-scène*, imbues the spatial narrative with strong regional cultural specificity. Respondents noted that this “localized symbolic system” significantly enhances the recognizability of urban culture, especially in transregional or global communication contexts.

“Language and costume are the most direct channels for cultural transmission.” — Film Historian A1

“Using Shanghainese voiceover is a deliberate gesture of cultural positioning.” — Cinematographer A2

1.4 Spatial Translation and Cultural Tourism Synergy

Experts widely agreed that the cinematic presentation of architectural space now transcends traditional notions of “filming locations.” Instead, these spaces are transformed into “image landmarks” with dual functions: they serve both as vectors of cultural communication and as attractions in urban tourism. In this sense, cinematic space becomes an entry point for broader cultural branding and the construction of urban identity.

“Historical buildings are not just heritage relics; they are media for cultural experience.” — Urban Project Manager A3

“The integration of filmic space will be essential in future urban cultural tourism.” — Cinematographer A2

1.5 Strategic Media Adaptation: The Affordances of Short Video

All interviewees concurred that short-form videos—by virtue of their brevity, audiovisual appeal, and shareability—are naturally suited to the “soft communication” of urban culture. Particularly among Gen Z and tourism-driven audiences, short videos offer an effective means for rapid diffusion of cinematic space.

“Documentaries are no longer enough to convey historical content; short videos have greater outreach potential.” — Urban Project Manager A3

1.6 Theoretical model construction: film space cultural communication mechanism

Combined with the above analysis, the study preliminarily established the following theoretical path map:

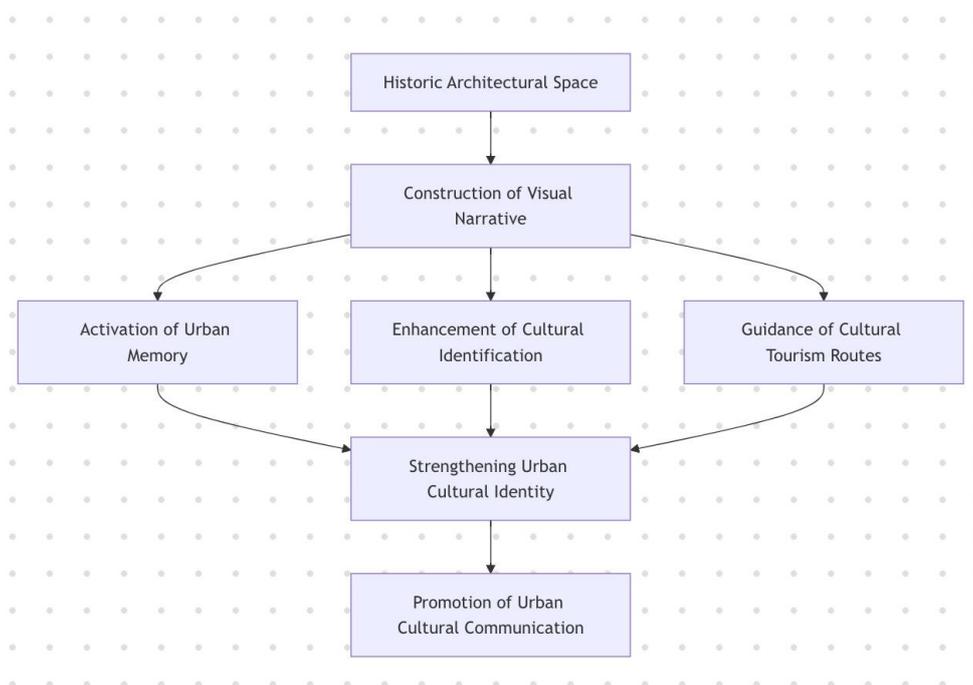


Figure 2: Theoretical Framework Diagram Explanation

The in-depth interview analysis results and models provide a theoretical basis for subsequent focus group interviews, which will further verify the actual impact path of this model from the perspective of "audience perception and communication behavior".

2. Focus Group Interview

This phase centers on analyzing the communicative effectiveness of film space representations from the perspective of diverse audiences. Three representative focus groups were formed, comprising (1) film and media students from the Shanghai area (5 participants), (2) experienced film industry practitioners (5 participants), and (3) local and non-local general audience members (5 participants). After collectively viewing a series of short videos featuring the Astor House Hotel, each group engaged in structured discussions on the theme of "spatial representation and cultural communication." The conversations focused on how the videos influenced participants' spatial perception, cultural understanding, and emotional identification, thereby providing insights into the actual impact of short-form video content in communicating urban culture.

The focus group discussions not only revealed the feedback mechanisms at play within different audience segments but also highlighted the complementary tensions between professional interpretations and everyday viewer experiences. This stage thus offered a valuable perspective on how communicative strategies are received at the audience level. Moreover, the findings from the focus groups served to further substantiate and extend the five-layered communication mechanism of film space previously identified through expert interviews. In this way, the focus group analysis empirically tested the applicability of the proposed theoretical model, contributing both validation and refinement through audience-based responses.

2.1 Collective meaning-making and symbolic anchoring of film spaces

Participants in the focus group discussions frequently referred to specific visual scenes, narratively significant architectural spaces, and symbolic items that appeared in films featuring the Astor House Hotel. Through dialogue and mutual elaboration, group members co-constructed symbolic meanings—for example, one participant noted: “The hotel’s staircase and stained-glass windows reminded me of old Shanghai’s cosmopolitan charm. It’s not just a building—it’s a time capsule.” (Participant B3). Such statements underscore how the collective experience of watching and discussing cinematic representations leads to a stabilized yet dynamic set of cultural symbols associated with the site.

2.2 Tensions between cinematic imagination and lived spatial experience

A significant finding emerged around the divergence between cinematic imaginaries and participants’ real-world experiences of the Astor House Hotel. While films offered aesthetically heightened, emotionally charged portrayals, some participants voiced a disconnect. One noted: “When I visited the site, it looked much smaller than in the movie—it felt like the film had exaggerated the grandeur.” (Participant A2). This contrast generated critical discussions about media framing, nostalgic reconstruction, and the role of creative license in cultural storytelling.

2.3 Negotiated cultural identity and generational differences

The discussions revealed that participants from different age groups interpreted the same scenes through varying cultural lenses. Older participants tended to see the films as evoking authentic memories of Shanghai’s past, whereas younger participants emphasized stylization and modern reinterpretation. For instance, a younger participant observed: “To me, the scenes weren’t realistic—but that’s okay. They give us a stylized way to appreciate our heritage.” (Participant C1). This negotiation of cultural identity highlights how cinematic space serves as a platform for intergenerational discourse.

2.4 Reflexivity and participatory engagement with film-induced space

Focus group members also discussed how their own media consumption practices were influenced by the films. Some reported revisiting or exploring the Astor House Hotel after viewing certain movies or short videos: “After watching that film, I wanted to see the hotel in real life—I even made my own vlog there.” (Participant D2). This reveals a reflexive loop between representation and spatial practice, indicating the potential of cinematic space to actively shape urban cultural tourism and site recontextualization.

2.5 Emotional resonance and imagined communities

Finally, the focus groups underscored how cinematic representations of the Astor House Hotel evoked not only personal nostalgia but also a shared emotional attachment. Participants spoke of a “sense of pride” or “belonging” when seeing familiar urban landmarks in film. “I felt proud to see our local spaces in such beautiful frames—it makes me feel like we’re part of something bigger.” (Participant A5). Such affective responses reinforce the idea of imagined communities formed around shared cultural and spatial memory, facilitated by the medium of film.

2.6 Conclusion

In contrast to the in-depth interviews, which emphasized individualized perception and introspection, the focus group interviews highlighted the social dynamics of meaning-making and the negotiation of cultural identity through collective discourse. The findings suggest that filmic representations of urban space not only influence individual cognition but also shape shared values, foster emotional communities, and potentially encourage cultural participation. These insights provide a critical supplement to the previous stage of research,

revealing how cinematic urban space functions as a site of cultural exchange, symbolic imagination, and participatory identity formation.

Discussion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on film space and urban cultural communication by demonstrating how the Astor House Hotel functions as both a cinematic medium and a symbolic site of collective memory. The findings reveal that film space is not merely a visual backdrop but an active communicative interface, capable of reanimating historical architecture, activating cultural memory, and shaping localized identity through multimodal strategies. In particular, the use of Shanghainese dialect, silent film aesthetics, and short-form video dissemination illustrates how cultural specificity and media convergence enhance affective engagement with urban landmarks. These insights extend existing scholarship on cinematic space, which has traditionally emphasized aesthetics and narrative, by foregrounding the communicative role of film space in mediating urban history and cultural meaning.

At the same time, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the scope of this case study is limited to the Astor House Hotel, a historically significant yet singular example within Shanghai's urban landscape. While its symbolic importance justifies the focus, this inevitably constrains the generalizability of the findings to other urban contexts or types of filmic spaces. Second, the data collection relies primarily on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, drawing on a relatively small sample of media creators, cultural practitioners, and local audiences. Although this provides rich qualitative insights, it may also introduce interpretive bias and limit the representativeness of the findings. Third, the study centers predominantly on cinematic media and short video platforms, leaving unexplored other emerging modalities of digital cultural dissemination such as immersive exhibitions, interactive installations, and virtual reality experiences.

Future research could address these limitations by conducting comparative studies of multiple film spaces across Shanghai and other global cities with similar characteristics of cultural hybridity and historical preservation. Methodologically, integrating mixed approaches—including quantitative surveys, digital ethnography, or big data analysis of online engagement—would further enhance the robustness of the findings. A longitudinal perspective would also be valuable, tracing how filmic representations of urban landmarks evolve alongside technological innovations and shifting audience practices. By pursuing these directions, future studies can build on this work to more comprehensively illuminate the interplay between film space, cultural identity, and urban communication strategies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study examined the communicative functions of film space in relation to the Astor House Hotel, focusing on its role in reconstructing historical architecture, activating urban memory, and shaping audience engagement. Addressing the first objective, the findings show that film space reanimates urban history and embeds cultural memory through visual and narrative strategies. The re-staging of the Astor House Hotel not only revived fragmented layers of Shanghai's past but also evoked audience memory and emotional resonance. Techniques such as Shanghainese dialect, silent film aesthetics, and time-travel narratives localized cinematic expression, enhancing cultural specificity and affective power. Short-form

videos further expanded this effect by transforming film space into a participatory medium with immediacy, emotional accessibility, and social shareability. The proposed five-fold mechanism—spatial translation → memory activation → immersive context → urban identity → space-media linkage—captures the logic of this process and contributes to communication theory.

Regarding the second objective, comparative analysis of interviews and focus groups demonstrates that audience interpretations vary across professional and general groups. While scholars and practitioners emphasized historical, aesthetic, and theoretical perspectives, lay audiences engaged primarily through memory, emotion, and localized attachment. These differentiated responses highlight the multiplicity of interpretive pathways through which film space generates symbolic meaning and fosters participatory cultural discourse. Accordingly, communication strategies should balance professional depth with accessibility, ensuring that film space both preserves historical significance and resonates broadly with public audiences.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and analysis, this study proposes the following recommendations for improving the cultural dissemination of Shanghai's film heritage through short video platforms:

Strategic Collaboration between Cultural Institutions and Content Creators: Local museums, film archives, and cultural tourism departments should actively collaborate with experienced short video creators to produce culturally rich, visually engaging content. By integrating expert knowledge with digital storytelling techniques, these collaborations can ensure both accuracy and emotional appeal.

Developing Narrative Templates for Urban Film Culture: Authorities and platform operators may consider supporting the development of storytelling templates or toolkits that guide creators in effectively integrating filmic space, cultural landmarks, and narrative context. This will help maintain narrative depth while adapting to short-form constraints.

Platform Support for Algorithmic Visibility of Cultural Content: Short video platforms should refine their algorithms to offer greater visibility to high-quality cultural content. Through curated topic pages, "heritage challenges," or seasonal cultural themes, platforms can provide an incentive for users to engage with meaningful and educational content.

Audience Education and Participatory Campaigns: Implementing campaigns that invite audiences to share their own stories about Shanghai's film culture (e.g., personal memories of cinemas, favorite movie scenes) can foster community participation and strengthen cultural identity, especially among younger generations.

Preservation and Contextualization of Short-Form Content: Institutions should consider archiving and contextualizing culturally significant short videos as part of Shanghai's evolving digital cultural record. This can ensure that these ephemeral forms contribute to long-term cultural memory and scholarship.

Future Research and Policy Integration: Further interdisciplinary research is recommended to examine the long-term effects of digital platforms on cultural memory and identity. Findings from such studies should inform public policy in areas like cultural preservation, digital literacy, and urban branding.

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