

Embedding Regional Culture in Campus Design: Shaping Identity and Belonging through Experiential Pathways

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines how regional culture is embedded in campus design and how such cultural embedding contributes to identity formation, place attachment, and a sense of belonging among university members. Using Shandong University as a qualitative case study, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including university administrators, faculty members, local cultural experts, and students, together with on-site observations and documentary/visual materials. The study asks how regional culture is represented through campus design, how these representations are experienced and interpreted in everyday campus life, and how technology-mediated cultural experiences extend such engagement. The findings identify four main pathways through which regional culture influences campus identity: (1) architectural and spatial symbols as visible cultural cues, (2) public art and narrative displays as carriers of cultural memory, (3) rituals and cultural activities as mechanisms for participation and belonging, and (4) digital mediation, such as AR/VR and social media, as an extension of cultural visibility and interpretation. The study contributes an integrated analytical framework linking design carriers, experiential mechanisms, and identity outcomes, and offers practical implications for campus planners and educators seeking to create culturally grounded and inclusive educational environments.

Keywords: regional culture; campus design; cultural memory; cultural identity; education quality

1 Introduction

The acceleration of globalisation brought with it more intense cultural interchange and diversity which is redefining the ways in which educational organisations articulate identity: Universities or campuses are no longer only functional spaces for teaching and living; they are also public spaces in which cultural memory is displayed, negotiated and transmitted.

Regional culture, embodying local histories, traditions, aesthetics, and values, can provide distinctive resources for place-making. When translated into architectural language, public art, signage systems, and everyday spatial experience, regional culture may strengthen members' sense of belonging and provide an experiential basis for cultural inheritance (Davis et al., 2021).

In spite of increasing interest on cultural landscape and campus planning, previous studies have tended to regard culture factors as a kind of symbol decoration or environment atmosphere. The ways how local cultural expressions can be perceived are less considered, usable, and socially activated in everyday use on campus and how the mechanisms tie back into notions of identity and belonging (Foellmer et al., 2021; Mohammed et al., 2022).

Our contribution in this work is (a) a unified theoretical framework that links the features of designs, the mediation processes through which they operate, to their impacts on self-concept; (b) qualitative data collected in the form of interviews and ethnographic notes focusing on the case study institution, namely the university of Shandong, while drawing parallels between it and other institutions; and (c) practical applications to planners and educators who seek to create culturally rooted, inclusive campuses.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Regional culture and cultural identity in educational settings

Culture can be understood as the accumulated set of customs, symbols, practices, aesthetic forms, and value systems that develop within a particular locality or community over time. In educational settings, regional culture

functions not only as a social and historical background but also as a resource through which institutional members make sense of place, history, and collectivity.

In this study, regional culture refers to a recognizable set of local cultural codes, including architectural forms, material practices, stories, rituals, and locally valued meanings, that can be translated into campus spatial, visual, and experiential forms. When such elements become part of the everyday campus environment, they may help members interpret the university as a culturally meaningful place rather than merely a functional site for study and work.

Social identity theory argues that people build part of their self-definition through group memberships and the meanings attached to those memberships, which in turn shape feelings of pride, belonging, and normative behaviour (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In campus contexts, the university is itself a salient social category; however, regional culture can strengthen identity work by providing a distinctive and locally grounded set of symbols that differentiates the institution and makes membership more meaningful.

Cultural presence alone doesn't generate identity, but the greater likelihood of it occurs where cultural cues are (a) legible (easy to recognise), (a) explainable (backed with narratives, explanations or guided experiences), and (c) playable (accessible to be experienced via events, rituals, routines). This resonates with place-identity literature highlighting the contribution of places in building up a sense of self via lived experiences, learned meanings, and emotionally laden memories (Proshansky, 1983). Put differently, regional culture becomes identity-relevant to the extent that campus members are able to experience them over and over again, know it, and do it.

Finally, in increasingly internationalised and diverse campuses, cultural embedding must be considered from an inclusion perspective. Regional culture should be presented as a shared learning resource rather than an exclusive marker that narrows belonging to only local insiders. This requires careful selection of narratives, multilingual interpretation where appropriate, and participatory

formats that invite diverse groups into the meaning-making process (that is, culture as a platform for exchange rather than a boundary).

2.2 Campus planning, landscape, and cultural memory

Campus planning and landscape studies highlight the impact of spatial organisation, architecture character, or environmental affordances on learning, wellbeing, and social interaction (Hami & Abdi, 2021; Hassamancioglu & Çanga, 2022). From an identity point of view, campus space is not just functional; is also mnemonic. Cultural memory scholarship proposes that society remembers through the means of both social interaction, as well as through durable external carriers, e.g., texts, monuments, buildings, symbols.

According to Halbwachs' notion of collective memory, remembering is socially constructed and situated in a physical context which provides the stability for shared stories across generations (Halbwachs, 1992). Assmann also differentiates cultural memory as longer term, institutionally supported remembrance which persists in material and symbolic media, which enable the storage of meaning across more than just one life-time (Assmann, 2011). In campus settings, buildings, memorial nodes, gates, sculptures, and curated exhibitions might be thought of as sites of memory in the sense of Nora (1989), i.e., physical anchors that distill history to digestible shapes and call for public interpretation.

This is why campuses can function as everyday museums where institutional history and local narratives become visible, discussable, and teachable through ordinary movement and use. Crucially, the effectiveness of cultural memory carriers depends on how they are integrated into daily life. A symbol placed on a remote corner of campus may be less influential than one located along high-frequency routes that repeatedly structure everyday experience (for example, main gates, central squares, libraries, and principal teaching buildings).

Place attachment theory offers another complementary psychological explanation for the importance of cultural memory carriers. Scannell & Gifford's three-component model

conceptualizes place attachment as consisting of ,process, and place: (1) person (individual and group meanings), (2) process (affect, cognition, behaviour), and (3) place (physical and social dimensions) (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). In that perspective, culturalized landscapes on campuses are effective if they evoke an emotional reaction (affect), a sense of understanding (cognition), and recurrence of use or involvement (behaviour).

Similarly, place-identity research suggests that places support continuity, distinctiveness, and self-esteem when they provide stable and meaningful reference points over time. From this perspective, culturally embedded campus design should not be understood as ornamentation alone. Architectural form, material selection, spatial sequence, memorial nodes, and landscape features can all act as carriers of continuity between institutional life and local history. Their influence becomes stronger when they are accompanied by interpretive supports such as labels, exhibitions, guided tours, or educational programming, and when they are socially activated through events, workshops, and commemorative practices. In this way, cultural memory becomes experiential rather than merely symbolic, thereby strengthening place attachment and belonging.

2.3 Technology-mediated cultural experience

Digital tools such as GIS, AR/VR, online exhibitions, and social media can broaden access to cultural information and support new forms of cultural interpretation in educational settings. In the context of campus design, technology-mediated cultural experience should be understood as a complement to physical place rather than a substitute for it.

Technology may strengthen campus cultural experience in at least three ways. First, it can improve legibility by helping students and visitors recognize the cultural meaning of buildings, landscapes, and campus symbols through mobile guides, QR codes, or AR overlays. Second, it can enhance narrativity by connecting physical sites with curated stories, historical explanations, and multimedia reconstructions. Third, it can extend participation and circulation by enabling users to share experiences, co-produce cultural content, and continue engagement beyond a specific site or event.

At the same time, technology-mediated cultural presentation raises concerns about authenticity, access, and inclusion. If digital storytelling oversimplifies local culture or prioritizes spectacle over understanding, it may produce superficial engagement. Likewise, if access depends on specific devices, digital literacy, or language competence, technological mediation may reproduce exclusion. For this reason, digital tools should be designed in culturally grounded, accessible, and inclusive ways, and should remain aligned with on-site cultural carriers and participatory educational activities.

2.4 Analytical framework

Building on the literature reviewed above, this study adopts an analytical framework that links design carriers, experiential mechanisms, and identity outcomes. This framework guided the interview protocol, the on-site observation checklist, and the thematic coding process.

Design carriers refer to the material and symbolic forms through which regional culture is embedded in campus space. In this study, four types of carriers are foregrounded: (1) architectural and spatial symbols, such as rooflines, courtyards, materials, ornaments, and landmark compositions; (2) public art and narrative displays, such as sculptures, murals, exhibitions, and interpretive panels; (3) rituals and cultural activities, such as festivals, ceremonies, lectures, and workshops; and (4) digital or mediated carriers, such as AR/VR tours, online exhibitions, and social media dissemination.

Experiential mechanisms refer to the processes through which campus members perceive, interpret, and internalize cultural meaning. These mechanisms include perception, interpretation, participation, and mediation. Perception concerns whether cultural cues are visible and salient in everyday movement. Interpretation concerns whether cultural forms are supported by stories, labels, and explanatory narratives. Participation concerns whether culture becomes part of shared activity and social interaction. Mediation concerns whether digital platforms extend cultural learning and communication across time and space (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Identity outcomes refer to the effects of these experiences on campus members' sense of self and belonging. In this study, the main outcomes are cultural identification, place attachment, and belonging. Drawing on social identity theory and place attachment research, the framework assumes that regional culture shapes identity most effectively when visible cultural carriers are combined with interpretive support, participatory activation, and inclusive mediation. This integrated framework also informs the organization of the findings, which are presented through four pathways linking regional culture to campus identity (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

3 Methods

3.1 Research design and case context

This study adopts a qualitative case study design in order to examine how regional culture is embedded in campus planning and how such cultural embedding is experienced in everyday university life. A qualitative case approach is appropriate because the study focuses on meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences rather than on measuring predetermined variables.

Shandong University was selected as the focal case for three reasons. First, it is a historically significant institution with a long institutional trajectory and strong symbolic visibility within the region. Second, its campus spaces, landmarks, and visual identity provide a rich setting for examining how regional culture is translated into spatial and visual forms. Third, the case allows exploration of how local cultural heritage may be interpreted within a contemporary higher education environment. To improve the transferability of the analysis, the study also drew on comparative observations and documentary/visual materials from campuses situated in different urban-rural contexts, although Shandong University remained the primary case.

Founded in 1901, Shandong University is widely recognized as one of the early modern universities in China (Yu et al., 2023). Its layered campus landscape, institutional memory, and landmark spaces make it a useful setting for examining the relationship between regional culture, campus design, and identity formation (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Main Gate, School Emblem and Part of Honglou Campus of Shandong University

3.2 Participants and data sources

Data collection was mainly conducted by semi-structured interviews and on-site visit, with interviewees including various stakeholders associated with the campus culture/planning, including administrators/campus planners, teachers and regional culture experts; observations focusing on spatial and visual carriers of region culture and their application to daily campus life.

This study employed purposive sampling to recruit information-rich participants who were familiar with campus planning, campus culture, or everyday cultural experience on campus. Participants were drawn from four stakeholder groups: (1) university administrators and campus planning personnel (n = 3), (2) faculty members (n = 3), (3) local cultural experts (n = 3), and (4) students (n = 6).

Participants were approached on the basis of their roles and relevance to the research topic. Administrators and planning personnel were selected because of their involvement in campus management or planning processes. Faculty members were recruited because of their teaching roles and their observations of student engagement with campus culture. Local cultural experts were included because of their professional knowledge of regional heritage and cultural representation. Student participants were selected across different years, majors, and levels of involvement in campus activities in order to capture variation in everyday campus experience.

Inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) being currently enrolled at or employed by the university for student, faculty, and administrator groups, or having recognized expertise in local culture for the expert group; and (b) having direct experience with campus space use, campus cultural activities, or

campus planning/design issues. All participants were anonymized using role-based identifiers, such as Student S1, Faculty F2, Planner P1, and Expert E3, in order to protect confidentiality.

Data sources consisted of (i) semi-structured interviews, (ii) systematic on-site observations, and (iii) documentary and visual materials, including campus signage, public art, exhibitions, and institutional archival or online materials, which were used to contextualize and triangulate participants’ accounts.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted to elicit participants’ interpretations of regional cultural elements in campus design, their perceived meanings, and their influence on identity and belonging.

Interviews were conducted between May 2024 and June 2024, either in person on campus or by telephone. Each interview lasted approximately 10-20 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants’ permission. Although the interviews were relatively brief, they were designed as focused semi-structured conversations with information-rich participants and were concentrated on a clearly defined set of themes, including cultural representation, spatial experience, belonging, and technology-mediated engagement. The interview data were also triangulated with on-site observations and documentary/visual materials in order to strengthen interpretive depth.

Table 1 Interview schedule

Interviewees	Interview questions
3 for managers of educational institutions and	How do you see the importance of regional culture in campus design?

campus planners	What regional cultural elements have been considered in recent campus planning or renovations? How do you think regional cultural elements should be reflected in campus design? How would you assess the extent and effectiveness of the integration of regional cultural elements in current campus design? What role do you think regional culture plays in the campus environment? How do you incorporate elements of the campus' regional culture in your classroom? How do you think the regional cultural elements of the campus affect student learning and identity? What experiences or examples can you share about how geographic culture affects a student's educational experience? How do you evaluate the use of regional culture in contemporary campus design? What are some success stories to share in which regional cultural elements have been effectively utilised in campus design? How do you think regional cultures should be better integrated and presented in future campus design? What role can schools and educational institutions play in the promotion and preservation of regional culture? For students What regional cultural elements on campus impressed you the most? How have these elements impacted your campus	experience? What regional cultural features on campus do you think best represent your school? What types of regional cultural expressions would you like to see more of on campus?
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3.4 Data analysis and trustworthiness

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of Atlas.ti. Analysis proceeded through three iterative stages. First, open coding was used to identify meaning units related to cultural carriers, spatial experience, interpretation, participation, and identity. Second, axial coding was conducted to group related codes into higher-order categories and to examine relationships among design features, experiential processes, and identity-related outcomes. Third, theme refinement was undertaken to develop the final thematic structure that explains how regional culture becomes meaningful in campus settings.

The analytical framework developed in Section 2.4 served as a sensitizing structure during analysis, but coding remained open to themes emerging from the empirical materials. Interview data, observation notes, and documentary/visual materials were repeatedly compared in order to assess convergence, divergence, and contextual nuance.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study adopted several strategies. First, it used triangulation across interviews, observations, and documentary/visual evidence. Second, an audit trail was maintained, including coding notes, category development, and analytic memos. Third, themes were repeatedly checked against raw materials to reduce overgeneralization and to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts and observed campus practices. In addition, peer debriefing was used during the analytic process to challenge interpretations, consider alternative explanations, and refine the emerging thematic structure.

4 Results

4.1 Architectural and spatial symbols as identity cues

Across the observed campuses, architectural forms and spatial compositions frequently incorporated recognisable regional features. Traditional stylistic references (e.g., rooflines, courtyard organisation, material palettes, and ornamentation) provided visually legible cues that connected everyday campus experience with local history and cultural values.

4.2 Public art and narrative displays materialising cultural memory

Physical storytelling through public art, exhibits, and displays (e.g., sculptures, murals, themed displays), which were physical manifestations of the region's stories to support informal learning in conveying local legends, illustrations, history, and even people to the masses in a way that is easily understood or digested; thus providing a means of preserving these elements within the culture by reiteration and reinterpretation.

4.3 Cultural activities and participation strengthening belonging

The regional culture was also embodied in the rituals of the campus life or programmed events such as festivals, shows, workshops and lectures. These events provided a context of participation and shared experience: building community connections and enhancing the perception that local heritage is relevant for current university experiences.

4.4 Technology-enabled mediation extending cultural engagement

Digital mediation was found as an important complement of physical design. Participants described that the experience using AR/VR, online exhibits, and social media sharing might enhance exposure to content, assist in the narrative interpretation, and allow for wider participation than just in a particular location on campus. At the same time, they emphasized stories rooted in culture as well as universal access.

5 Discussion

5.1 From symbolic display to experiential mechanism

The findings suggest that regional culture contributes to campus identity not merely through symbolic display, but through an experiential mechanism linking visibility, interpretation, participation, and circulation. Architectural and visual symbols make culture recognizable in everyday space; narrative displays and interpretive materials make such symbols understandable; rituals and activities make them socially lived; and digital media extend them beyond specific locations and moments. This helps explain why some cultural elements remain superficial while others become meaningful components of institutional identity and belonging. The study therefore contributes to campus design research by showing that the identity-related effects of cultural embedding depend less on the mere presence of cultural symbols than on how those symbols are experienced, interpreted, and activated in everyday campus life.

5.2 Implications for campus design and educational practice

The study has implications for both campus design and educational practice. For campus planners and designers, regional culture should not be treated as a decorative layer added after the functional organization of space has been determined. Instead, it should be approached as an integrated system involving architectural language, landscape structure, public art, signage, interpretive media, and opportunities for participation. Design strategies are more likely to support belonging when cultural elements are visible along everyday routes, accompanied by accessible explanations, and connected to recurring activities.

For educators and institutions, regional culture can also function as a shared learning resource. Lectures, exhibitions, workshops, and campus events can help students engage with local cultural meaning in ways that connect place, history, and institutional life. This is especially important in diverse campuses, where inclusive and dialogic forms of cultural presentation can support not only cultural continuity but also intercultural understanding.

5.3 Technology–tradition complementarity and inclusiveness

The findings also highlight the need to understand technology and tradition as complementary rather than competing dimensions of campus cultural design. Digital tools can deepen interpretation, broaden access, and extend engagement, but they should support rather than replace embodied encounters with campus space. Their value lies in making cultural meaning more legible and shareable, not in displacing physical experience.

Inclusiveness is equally important. If regional culture is presented as a fixed marker belonging only to local insiders, it may unintentionally narrow participation. By contrast, multilingual signage, accessible digital interfaces, and participatory cultural programming can present regional culture as a shared platform for learning and exchange. In this sense, inclusive cultural embedding allows local identity to become a resource for community-building rather than a boundary of exclusion.

6 Conclusions

This study examined how regional culture is embedded in campus design and how such cultural embedding shapes identity-related experience in higher education settings. Using Shandong University as the primary case, the study showed that regional culture operates through multiple pathways, including architectural and spatial symbols, public art and narrative displays, cultural

activities and rituals, and technology-mediated forms of cultural presentation.

The findings suggest that regional culture contributes to campus identity most effectively when it is not only symbolically present but also experientially meaningful. Cultural carriers become more influential when they are visible in everyday space, supported by interpretation, activated through participation, and extended through inclusive forms of mediation. In this sense, culturally embedded campus design can strengthen cultural identification, place attachment, and belonging.

Practically, the study suggests that successful cultural embedding requires alignment among physical design, interpretive communication, and participatory programming. For planners and educators, the challenge is not simply to display local culture, but to make it readable, usable, and meaningful for diverse campus members.

This study has several limitations. As a qualitative case study, its findings are context-sensitive and cannot be generalized statistically. In addition, the study does not fully address the long-term economic, logistical, and maintenance implications of culturally embedded design interventions. Future research could extend the analysis through cross-regional comparison, participatory co-design with stakeholders, and longitudinal evaluation of how culturally embedded campus environments influence belonging over time.

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