Research Paper

Architectural Identity and Cultural Continuity in Harbin: A Placemaking Strategy for Inclusive Urban Transformation

Tian WANG[1]*, Songtao WU[1], Tong WU[1,2.]

[1]School of Architecture and Design, Key Laboratory of Cold Region Urban and Rural Human Settlement Environment Science and Technology, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin 150001, China

[2]School of Architecture and Design, China University of Mining and Technology

Abstract

Background: Harbin, a city shaped by over a century of global exchanges, presents a unique architectural landscape that blends Russian, Jewish, Chinese, and Western European styles. Known as the "Oriental Moscow" and "Eastern Paris," its urban form reflects a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural historical trajectory. As Harbin experiences rapid urban expansion and modernization, the challenge lies in preserving and activating this rich architectural heritage while ensuring inclusivity and continuity. The city's built environment plays a pivotal role in forming identity and fostering intercultural coexistence, making it a vital case for inclusive urban transformation. Research Objective: This study examines how Harbin's diverse architectural heritage can be reinterpreted and integrated into contemporary urban development to promote cultural inclusivity and place-based identity. It addresses the central problem of homogenization in new urban districts and the neglect of cultural narratives in spatial planning. The goal is to formulate a spatial and design framework that embraces Harbin's stylistic hybridity—especially its "dual-zone" model of classical revival and regional renewal—as a catalyst for inclusive urban regeneration and meaningful place-making. Main Findings and Significance:The study reveals that Harbin's architectural identity is not a static heritage but an evolving narrative that has the potential to underpin inclusive and resilient urban transformation. The core finding is that the city's "tripartite architectural coding"—a synthesis of classical European styles, localized Chinese adaptations (e.g., Zhonghua Baroque), and Soviet-era modernism—offers a rare opportunity to integrate multiple cultural expressions into contemporary place-making. In older districts like Daowai, the adaptive reuse of Zhonghua Baroque buildings supports cultural tourism and informal social spaces, reinforcing local identity. Central Avenue's stylistic continuity and pedestrian focus highlight how preserved aesthetics foster inclusive urban rituals. Meanwhile, newer areas often lack this cohesion, leading to identity fragmentation. To address this, the research proposes an "Inclusive Style Zoning Strategy" based on Harbin's historical three-fold planning logic: (1) Organic renewal zones (Classical Revival): Encourage preservation and reinterpretation of Gothic, Baroque, and Neoclassical structures using flexible reuse policies and façade restoration standards. (2) New development zones (Regional New Style): Promote contemporary architecture that references local traditions and materials while integrating community spaces that reflect collective memory. (3) Cultural landscape corridors: Strengthen visual and spatial links between landmark buildings and natural features (e.g., Songhua River, green boulevards) to reinforce a legible cultural narrative. Furthermore, design handbooks and pattern language guides for architects and planners are suggested to ensure stylistic sensitivity in new construction, avoiding cultural erasure. The study also advocates for participatory design processes to include residents' voices in shaping urban identity. Overall,

the findings contribute to theory by demonstrating how architectural style can be a vehicle for cultural inclusion and social sustainability. For practice, it provides a replicable framework for cities facing similar tensions between modernization and identity preservation.

Keywords

Architectural style, historical heritage, urban transformation

1. Introduction

Harbin is the product of more than a hundred years of exchange with all corners of the world, its buildings and landscapes have styles of Russian, Jewish, Chinese and Western European countries. Nicknamed “Moscow of the East” and “Little Paris of the East”, its history is written by the story of coexisting of multi-ethnic and multi-culture. Faced with the speedy development and modernization of Harbin, how to preserve and revitalize this precious heritage as to provide for inclusion and continuity is a difficult task (Fig. 1). The built environment has an important role to play in the making of both identity and coexistence between cultures making Harbin key case of inclusive urban transformation.

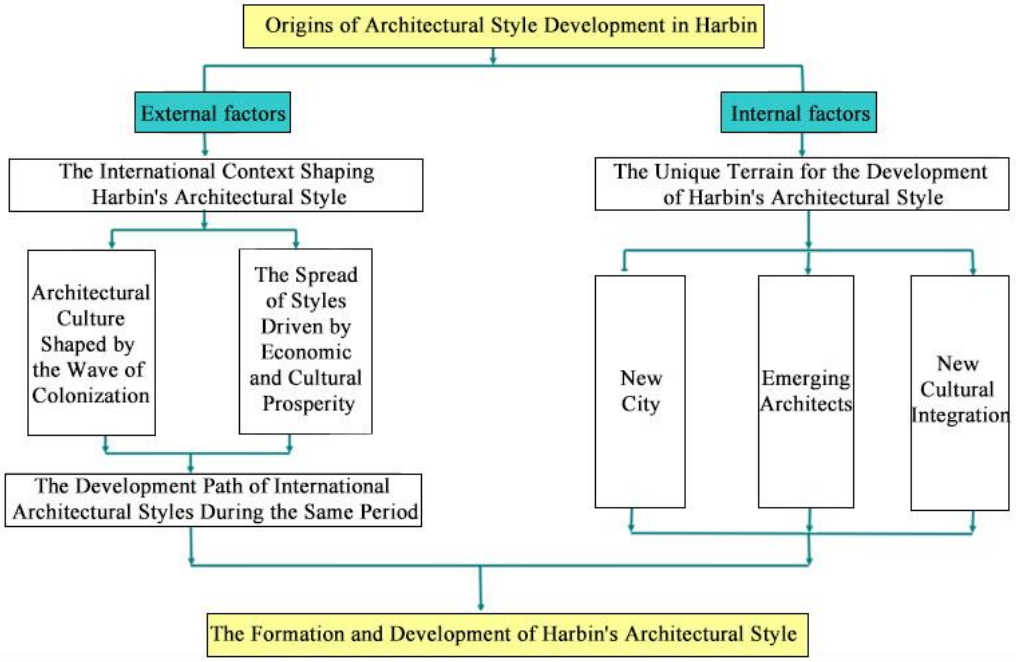

Figure.1 The development of Harbin architectural style originated

2. The background of the development of Harbin architectural style

2.1 Internal factors-the special soil for the development of Harbin architectural style

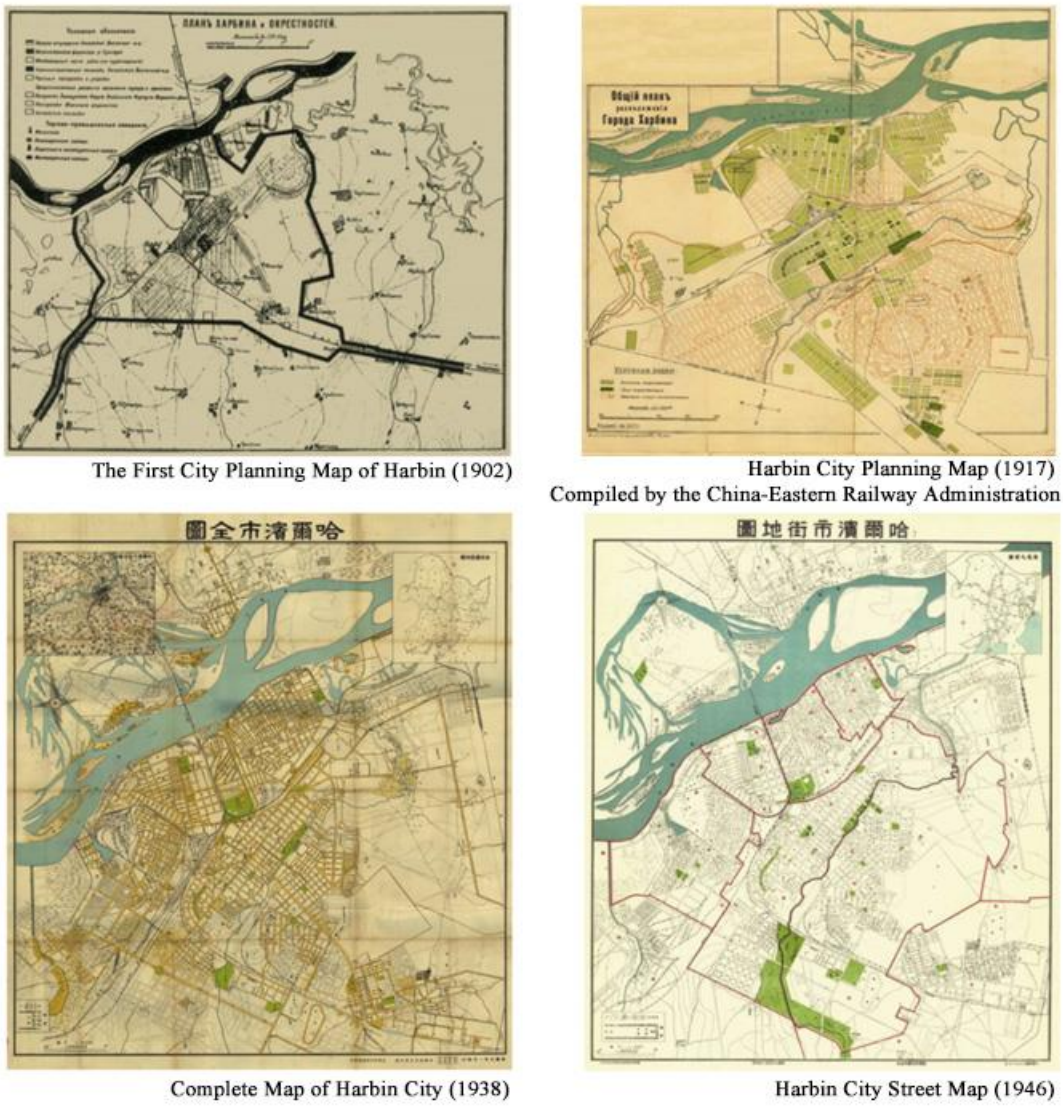

Figure.2 Changes in Harbin's urban development planning map

China-Eastern Railway built in the beginning of the Industrial civilization gave rise to the transition of Harbin from a farming village to an international metropolis. During this transition, the urban scale of Harbin was constantly expanding, the urban environment of Harbin and the urban architecture culture underwent changes, which could be found through the following four stages.（1）1897–1907: The full-fledged construction of the China - Eastern Rail way began, which marked the planning & development of the New Harbin.（2）1908–1931: Opening as a treaty port brought massive population influx, constantly expanding cities.（3）1932–1945: Japans occupation, military forces carry out war-defense-type planning.（4）1946–1949: Post-liberation era was focused on Industrial Growth and City Infrastructural development.（ Figure 2）

At that time, the development and construction of Harbin was mainly the result of colonial adventurism. It was obvious that this city would not have the clout to attract main stream, established, architects,

engineers or developers. Instead, Harbin attracted young architects, engineers, and developers with great skills, good ideas, and a strong work ethic, but few chances back in Europe to show what they could do. With the constraint of tradition gone, and dogmatism towards local culture abandoned, they were free to bring in new ones of their own.

For the culture of the architecture, every well-known European architectural form and style can be found here.Russian,Byzantine,Gothic,Art Nouveau,Romanticism,Renaissance,Baroque,Neoclassical,Jewish, etc. additionally Japanese classical and modern and Chinese traditional were there as well Harbin is a multi-cultural city with various religions, due to many cultural influences. In addition to traditional Chinese Taoism and Buddhism, and Russian Orthodox Christians' religions and Buddhism, Harbin introduced and received religions are also Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Judaism, as well as Japanese Buddhism and Shintoism. Early 1930s, the religious buildings, churches and temples, of this city numbered at 99; their varied architecture added further beauty to Harbin's urban scenery.

2.2 External factors-the international background of the formation of Harbin architectural style

European classical architecture's profound impact on Harbin's architectural style can't be separated from Harbin's social conditions and geographical environment at the time. The two countries bordering Heilongjiang, Russia and China, made it a natural fit for Harbin, the provincial capital of Heilongjiang province, to be considered Russia's main foothold in China. By the late 19th century, Russia had been influenced by various European architectural styles across Europe. With the Russian troops entering Harbin, the European styles blended with Russia's regional architectural traditions, becoming part of the building culture within Harbin. Over many years of development, this fusion grew into a very rich variety of buildings(Geng, S. 2021). The invasion by the Japanese in 1932 brought regional Japanese architectural styles to Harbin. Afterwards, modernist influences came in, colliding and fusing with the pre-existing European ones, finally ending up together in symbiosis and development (Zh Zhang 2024).

And Harbin is trying to establish its own city architecture, its trend can be seen as a diverse trend. It vividly mirrors the clashing and developing of all Western architectural directions--from the old ones all the way to the new trends in the whole 20th century --while still being able to show the traditional styles of some eastern regions in authentic manners. The architectural movements were the revival of old Greek and Roman architecture, Gothic Architecture, Baroque Architecture, Romantic architecture, Eclectic building, and Russian building, etc.

2.3 Classification of historical building styles in Harbin city

Modern Harbin Urban Architecture Artistic Character Trend toward the Diversified. It comprehensively displays the clash and fusion of old and new Western architectural ideologies from the early 20th century, but it also genuinely portrays traditional styles from some regional architectural traditions. Thus, from a holistic aspect, it could be mainly classified into three types:

By architectural style, there are eleven types: Art Nouveau Buildings, (Byzantine Architecture), Art Deco Architecture, Baroque Architecture (Shao, L. 2023), Gothic Architecture, Arts and Crafts Architecture, Chinese Baroque Architecture, Eclectic Architecture, Renaissance Architecture, Early Modern Architecture, Castle Building Architecture.

Second, according to the architecture of different ethnic regions, it can be divided into 4 kinds: Russian-style architecture, Jewish architecture style, Islamic mosque architecture, and traditional Chinese architecture style. Modern day Harbin has examples of other forms as well, they mostly express themselves to the different local ethnicities and regions via form. There are examples like buildings with a Russian national flavor, two groups of temple structures - Jielesi Temple and the Confucian Temple, executed using traditional Chinese architectural forms, a mosque with an Arabian regional style, and the Jewish religious school building on Tongjiang Street in Daoli District. Though there are not many, they do make a great deal of difference in bringing the artistic character of modern-day Harbin's construction.

Three, categorize buildings by their characteristic architecture styles from certain decades, mainly typical buildings of the 1950s to the1980s with unique styles. Like the Main building of HIT, Workers' Cultural Palace, Harbin Institute of Technology school of architecture, Heilongjiang provincial people's government building, the main building of HLJU, the main building of NFEU, the children's palace and friendship palace in Harbin. These structures are important connections in the architectural historical context of Harbin and they have the characteristics of the styles from their own eras.

3. Methodology

This study was commissioned by the Harbin City Urban and Rural Planning Bureau to do some organisational research as well as produce urban renewal guidelines. Different research methods were applied at different times in the special study on the layout of architectural landscapes in Harbin.

Literature and Drawing Analysis: This part extracts basic restrictions from urban design elements like present-character district,road axis,waterfront corridor according to the historical archives and the design results of Harbin Municipal Archives and urban planning and design institute of HIT

Typological "Gene" Identification: Using already established architectural styles, visual recognition techniques were employed to figure out key features of Baroque and Russian type buildings – features like steady form traits, cornice proportion examples, sequence of windows, parapets with designs on them – then these were turned into 'pattern checklists' for when someone wants to build something or modify an existing building.

4. Harbin city architectural style development orientation

The developmental dilemma for Harbin's main urban area is achieving harmonization between the "old city" and "new city" in terms of their architectural styles. By using research methods (tertiary zoning and binary zoning) as well as learning from "old city" and "new city" area building precedents from well-known international cities like Paris, London, Frankfurt, Moscow, etc., and based on the old city of Harbin where the architectural style bears a close relation with urban development, history, and architecture, the city's development direction for both old and new cities should be determined. within the old city, respect for historical buildings, maintenance and promotion of the original architectural character, and ensuring that architectural control organically unites with the old city. In the new city area, focus will be on being different and standing out compared to the old city. YAN et al., 2024. Compared the reuse models of museums, cultural centers, and community spaces and found that once a project is guided by a" conservation-oriented design brief,"functional transformation can be realized while the building's spirit and logical relationship of space can be preserved (YAN, S. 2024) To control the introduction of

architectural styles into the urban landscape, the establishment of planning guidelines for architectural styles made it possible to manage architectural styles systematically and legally.

4.1 The design technique of organic renewal area is "classical revival"

Organic Renewal Zone (Retro Revival): The reuse of Gothic, Baroque and Neoclassical architecture is promoted via flexible reuse policies and façade restoration. Study on Harbin's urban architectural style development positioning, it puts forward dual zoning control mode that divide the city to organic renewal area and new urban area. Organic renewal zone (the old city area, general urban area): According to elements like urban location, building times, and construction characteristics, buildings inside the organic renewal zones include old building and new building. Historical buildings focus on the special historical architectural characters of its era to restore it. New buildings should have some elements and symbols from old building but it's okay to be innovative as well.

For example, in representative buildings of the Russian Revival style, the colors of the buildings are vividly bright: Churches have mainly red brick walls, while brick - wood buildings are usually white walls that are warm yellow and paired with gray or green tiles. The wooden buildings kept the yellow and the white as main colors, the carvings have been made in bright colors. Architecture in Orthodox Church windows and doors, we can find in this way is very novel and elaborate window and door frames. Tops will end in curves. Window divisions are divided proportionately, most often vertically, with only a few square windows; they tend to be 1:2 to 1:3 in proportion, but there are still a few. Wooden structures have many door and window frames that consist of several different pieces of wood. Small pedments, with semi circular moulding, often come above windows, mostly by a ratio of 1:2. Brick structure uses simple doors and windows, with doors and windows also decorated, such as using trim. Vertical proportions are most commonly used and mostly between 1:2-1:3 (figure 3):

The dome is the most prominent and distinctive part of Russian style, with two typical forms: the tent top on wooden buildings and the onion head on brick buildings. These two shapes allow for rich and lively layouts in simple designs and makes Russian architecture a symbol of harbin as there are many sloping roofs and single stories that have a very steep slope, making up an important part of the active building images. Apart from churches, some multi-story buildings have flat roofs; Important buildings, or certain parts of important buildings where the combination of domes constitutes the symbol of the building, and the treatment of eaves and eaves is very numerous, especially in buildings without sloping roofs and undulating and tiered line heads and mortar lines are used to make changes in several different levels. There are quite a few decorative methods in the Russian architectural style, showing great traditional Russian national feelings. especially when it is in "Russian style" wooden style, its eaves, doors and windows are surrounded by a set of complicated yet exquisite lines formed by several layers of wooden boards, and the columns and railings formed by wood products also have unique forms; wooden columns and boards are carved into all kinds of patterns and styles, and Russian traditional wooden carvings and decorative patterns such as doorways and sunrooms come from the typical decorative style of Russian folk wooden style. On brick and wooden buildings with battlement style parapets and bell-shaped eaves, and on the top and waistline of mountain walls and brick lintels of windows with a variety of lines are typical Russian style.

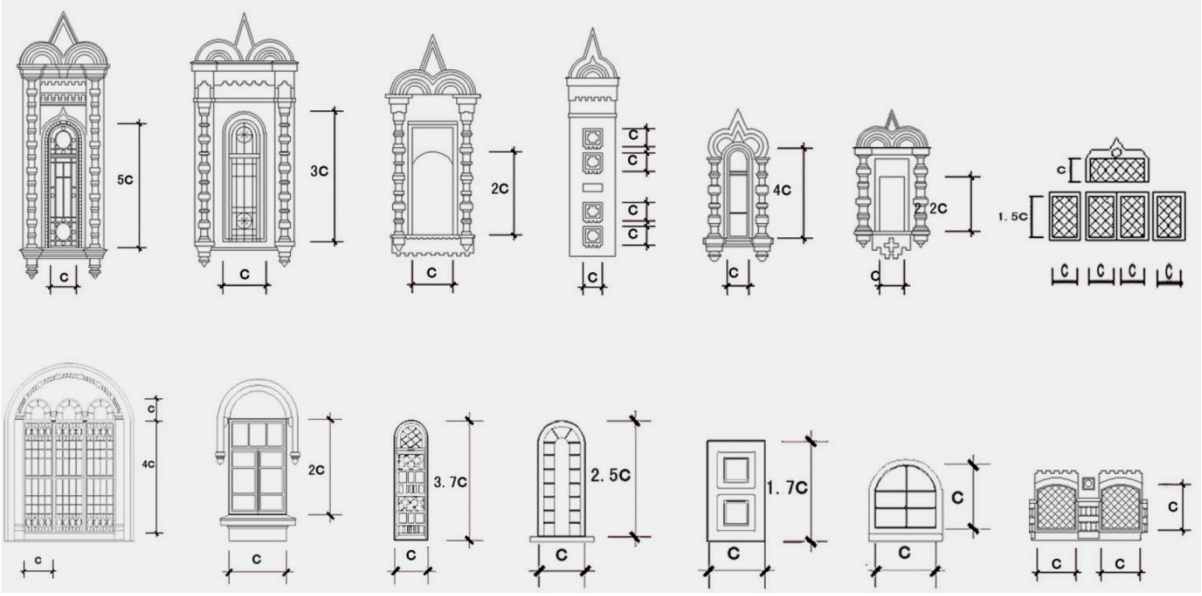

Figure.3 Analysis of construction proportions of Russian style Windows

Since the late 19th century, Harbin has displayed a picture of a city where various cultures mix with each other. Its architectural appearance is highly reflective of this multi-path trajectory, it's the impact and fusion between a collection of Western architectural traditions and innovations can be seen all here. Here one can experience the “classic revival” of many different traditional styles. Harbin is considered one of the cities in East Asia with the greatest diversity in architectural styles, which greatly influences its urban style and blends architectural elements from different European periods and styles. It has the magnificence of Greek Revival Architecture, the solemnity of Roman Revival Architecture, the individual freedom of Gothic Revival Architecture, the flowing accuracy of Russian Architecture, and the ornate romanticism of Baroque Architecture. It also takes in the order and spaciousness of urban design as well as the order and spaciousness of Baroque.

4.2 The design technique of the new urban area of the times is "regional new wind"

New Development Zone (Regional New Style): buildings that are contemporary and also incorporate the communal spaces for the collective memories, as well drawing from the regional culture and materials Times New City District: According to the location of the buildings, the construction period, and architectural appearance, the buildings in Times New City can be divided into old buildings and newly built buildings. As for existing buildings, because they have a special regional background in the process of international architecture development, whether it’s renovation or renewal, it should be harmonious with the surrounding environment and has its own characteristics of the building in Harbin. new construction, accept modern and new ideas, strongly push for bold and novel elements, images, and architectural symbols from global modern buildings.

When it comes to defining the architectural style of its new urban districts, modern day Harbin increasingly combines regional traits with contemporary trends, reflecting a kind of “regional innovation” – for example, introducing more modern, sleek elements into Neoclassical architecture, which itself is built on an already existing classical and elegant base. Art Deco architecture applies art and craft techniques and modern decorations to get a more harmonious and prettier look. Art nouveau buildings exhibit both new creative decorative forms as well as old forms. Technology aesthetic architecture uses new technology to showcase

the local characteristics and characteristics of a culture. New Urbanism architecture is about regional architecture from the point of view of urban design.

4.3 Cultural landscape corridor: road-waterfront composite network reconstruction

It plans to make both of the cities' main thoroughfares and waterfronts "key scenic axes". These include 20 urban roads with image display functions: Youyi Road, Xuefu Road, Dazhi Street, Zhongshan Road, Changjiang Road, Nanzhi Road, Xianfeng Road, Songpu Avenue, and Songbei Avenue. The master plan clearly states that these roads form a skeleton for transportation as well as for external connectivity and are also very important places where people can “understand the city’s buildings”. They have to be made to fit with urban design priorities for their design and management. In terms of waterfront axis, the Songhua River and Hulan River banks are both designated as living waterfronts. Together with Majiagou, Hejiagou, Xinyigou, Ash River, and the newly constructed Songbei Canal, they constitute a multi-layered three-dimensional scenic water axis. Therefore, the 'road-waterfront-blue-green finger-like water system' could be transformed into a cultural landscape corridor network. Roadside trees and waterfront greenbelts weave landmark building clumps, public plazas, and riversides into a continuing, readable tale. In order to enhance the visual and spatial relationship between these prominent buildings and nature (Songhua river, Green Avenue of trees and so on) we can create a very great narrative of culture.

Land – water transition, increased public access: will be the primary key narrative nodes. Bridge approaches, wharves, plaza intersections and greenbelt openings will be set up as “narrative beat points” with improved wayfinding and interpretations systems, historical-stylistic-landscapes themes, embedded nighttime lightings and small cultural facilities, pocket exhibition pavilions, street theaters. For the waterfront section, relevant studies already suggested solving for riverfront building silhouette, sculptures, plazas, nighttime view. The same set of “nightscape-landscape-wayfinding” can be applied to the road axis and blue-green finger-like corridors, thus forming a unified yet distinct landscape view.

Figure 4 Harbin’s comprehensive urban character block (unit) planning map, this map shows the location of 40 different thematic units distributed in Harbin according to architectural style zoning. Including: 1 Chinese Baroque classic unit, 3 memories of the first five-year plan revival units, 4 scenic tourism units, 3 forest landscape units, 6 new urban composite units, 7 new axis units, 8 industrial core landscape units. Architectural style units are areas with a cluster of urban functions, a clear positioning for development, a prominent architectural character, and a coordinated unity. They are important showcase districts for Harbin's architectural cultural identity. Building styles within planned units must remain controlled. Historic buildings’ legal status on preservation should be protected by law for those on key spatial junctions This achieves the positioning requirements for the organic renewal zones: “Classical Revival”. And the contemporary new districts: “Regional Innovation” completely.

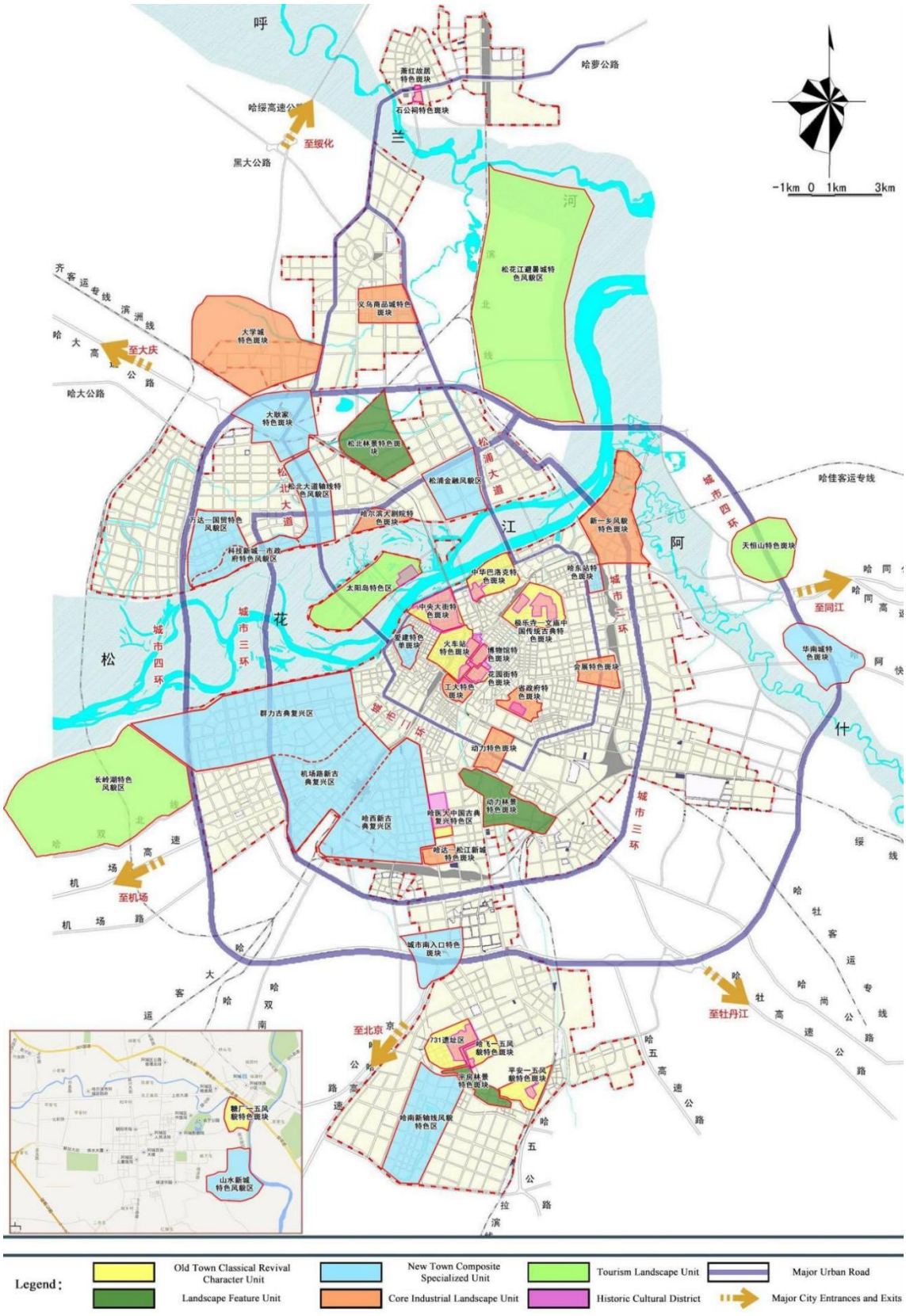

Figure 4 Harbin city characteristic patch (unit) planning map

5. Main findings and significance

From the literature research, it can be seen that Harbin's architectural identity is not a static heritage, but also a process of continuous evolution, and it has the possibility to support inclusive and resilient reformation of the cities. The cities' multi-faceted identity from past and present doesn't stop modern development but it becomes a medium for making new cultural distinctive and welcoming spaces. Take pieces of what is already known for architecture styles and then rework them into an evidence based integration and a new DNA to architecture emerges, creating fresh opportunities to bring various cultural expressions into making places today. Daowai in old districts and similar adaptive uses of Chinese Baroque to support cultural tourism and informal social space to enhance local identity are at their most exemplary. And in Central Street's continuously displayed and pedestrian oriented way, we find how to maintain the aesthetic continuity in order to promote inclusive urban rituals too. But New districts don't give that to them, So they end up with chopped up identities. It could also be applied to other multi-heritage cities in their journey between modernization and preservation.

Also the development of design manuals, pattern languages for architects, and planners so that any new construction will be sensitive to the existing styles and not erase a culture. It also calls for participatory design processes involving the local populace in the formation of urban identity. In general, it does show theoretically how an architecture style can act as a way for cultural inclusion and social sustainability. It also practically gives guidelines that are replicable to be used on cities with the same pressures with modernity and identity.

6. References

Geng, S., Chau, H-W., Wang, T. & Yan, S. (2021) 'Influences of Russian culture on Harbin's urban planning from 1898 to 1931 and conservation recommendations', Journal of Chinese Architecture and Urbanism, 3(1), pp. 1–25. doi:10.36922/jcau.v3i1.1030.

Zhang, W. (2024) 'Heritage, memory and identity of Harbin: A confluence of Russian and Japanese colonial effects', Memory Studies, 17(6), pp. 1569–1590. doi:10.1177/17506980231188483.

Shao, L. & Sun, J. (2023) 'Identification of historic building "genes" based on deep learning: A case study on Chinese Baroque architecture in Harbin, China', Heritage Science, 11, 241. doi:10.1186/s40494-023-01091-3.

Yan, S., Geng, S., Chau, H.-W., Wang, T. & Vrcelj, Z. (2024) 'Adaptive reuse of Russian-influenced religious architecture in Harbin: Architectural identity and heritage tourism', Heritage, 7(12), 329. doi:10.3390/heritage7120329