History Identification of Landscape Architecture Design: A Case Study of Yinhe Square (Yinhe Guangchang), Tianjin, China

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Abstract

Chinese municipal squares are typically analyzed through governance, publicness, or post-reform urban development, with little attention to world landscape architecture history. This study adopts a qualitative interpretative methodology and typological analysis to examine Yinhe Square (Yinhe Guangchang) in Tianjin, China. Rather than comparing the site to specific historical landmarks, the research evaluates its spatial configuration against broader landscape principles from prehistoric to twentieth-century traditions. Findings reveal that Yinhe Square integrates design ideas from Neolithic menhirs (territoriality, collective memory), Classical agoras and Roman forums (civic openness and scale), ancient theaters (terraced gathering), East Asian principles of balance and appropriation (shakkei), Renaissance axial symmetry, Japanese hide-and-reveal sequencing, English garden naturalistic composition, nineteenth-century public park accessibility, and twentieth-century correspondence between form and context. The square operates as a contemporary palimpsest of global landscape architecture principles rather than solely a product of governance-led public space formation. This conclusion challenges prevailing tendencies in Chinese urban space research and demonstrates the relevance of landscape architectural history for analyzing contemporary civic landscapes. The authors acknowledge this as one interpretative perspective among many possible readings. The findings offer conceptual resources for landscape architecture academics, urban historians, and practitioners seeking historically informed design and analysis of Chinese municipal squares.

Keywords: World landscape architecture history, civic public space, spatial symbolism, historical interpretation, Chinese municipal squares

Introduction

Studies of Chinese urban public space frequently analyse design through governance and ideological frameworks (Flock, 2020). Similarly, Jiang (2023) argues that research on municipal squares in China frequently foregrounds publicness as a socially and institutionally produced condition. This tendency suggests that studies of Chinese municipal squares often prioritize governance and the production of publicness rather than examining them through the perspective of landscape architectural history. Whilst, according to Rogers (2001) states that historical knowledge is essential for understanding landscape architecture, since landscapes embody accumulated cultural values and design intentions. Therefore, it is important to analyse Chinese municipal squares through the broader framework of world landscape architecture history. The Yinhe Square (Yinhe guangchang) Tianjin, China, defined as a case study due to the uniqueness of the site's spatial configuration, the site was selected because of its complex spatial configuration integrating public open space with transportation infrastructure, cultural institutions, commercial facilities, and civic amenities. This study will be utilized as additional insights related to world landscape architecture history in Yinhe Square (Yinhe Guangchang) Tianjin, China, either for Landscape Architecture Academician or Architecture Academician.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretative methodology to analyse Yinhe Square through the lens of world landscape architecture history. Rather than attempting to identify direct formal imitation of specific historical projects, the research focuses on broader landscape typologies, spatial principles, and historically recurring design vocabularies. This approach allows the study to evaluate how contemporary civic landscapes may reinterpret historical design traditions within new sociocultural and urban contexts. Qualitative interpretative methods are particularly appropriate for landscape architectural history because landscapes operate as cultural artefacts containing layered symbolic, spatial, and experiential meanings that cannot be fully understood through quantitative measurement alone (Corner & Cosgrove, 1999; Rogers, 2001) Furthermore, typological analysis enables contemporary landscapes to be examined according to recurring organizational principles and spatial characteristics rather than through speculative assumptions of direct historical borrowing (Groat & Wang, 2013; Moudon, 1994)

Data Collection Methods

Multiple qualitative data sources were employed to ensure analytical robustness.

Literature Review

A systematic literature review was conducted across three major thematic domains:

- World landscape architecture history, including historical landscape typologies, spatial organization principles, and design vocabularies (Jellicoe, G. & Jellicoe, S., 1995; Rogers, 2001)
- Chinese urban public space and municipal civic landscapes, particularly studies concerning publicness, governance, and post-reform urban development (Flock, 2020; Gaubatz, 2008; Jiang, 2023)
- Landscape theory and interpretative spatial analysis methods, especially those related to experiential reading, symbolic interpretation, and typological analysis (Corner & Cosgrove, 1999; Groat & Wang, 2013; Spirn, 1998).

Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and authoritative historical texts to ensure conceptual reliability.

Site Observation & Spatial Documentation

Site observation and spatial documentation of geometry, circulation, axes, hardscape, vegetation, water features, and symbolic elements (Groat & Wang, 2013).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed three interconnected stages:

Thematic coding.

Observed spatial features and landscape elements were categorized according to recurring historical landscape principles identified in the literature review, including axial organization, naturalistic composition, spatial enclosure, scenic framing, civic openness, and sequential visual experience.

- *Comparative analysis.*

The analysis is structured around design principles, vocabularies, and typologies drawn by Rogers (2001), Sullivan (2006) and other relevant literatures from the period of: Prehistory; Classical; 6th-15th CE; 16th- 20th CE. Each spatial feature of Yinhe Square is compared against these period categories, not against singular historical sites.

- *Theoretical synthesis.*

The identified spatial characteristics were synthesised to evaluate how Yinhe Square reinterprets historical landscape principles within a contemporary Chinese municipal civic context. The analytical framework aligns with qualitative research standards in architecture and landscape studies emphasizing interpretative spatial analysis and typological reading (Groat & Wang, 2013; Yin, 2018).

Research Flow Chart

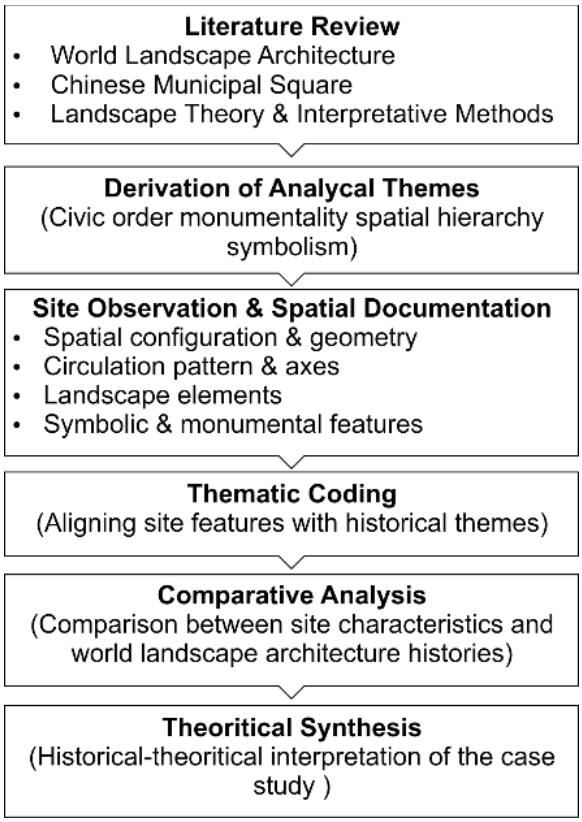


Figure 1 Research Flow Chart

Source: (Author, 2025)

Results and Discussions

Case Study General Informations

Yinhe Square (Yinhe Guangchang) can be interpreted as a contemporary municipal civic square emerging from China's post-reform urban development. Its scale, openness, and multifunctional character correspond with patterns of state-led public space formation identified in studies of Chinese urban squares and institutional publicness (Gaubatz, 2008; Madanipour, 2010; Rowe & Kuan, 2002; Wu, 2005).



Figure 2 Aerial View of Yinhe Square Area

Source: (Google, 2025)

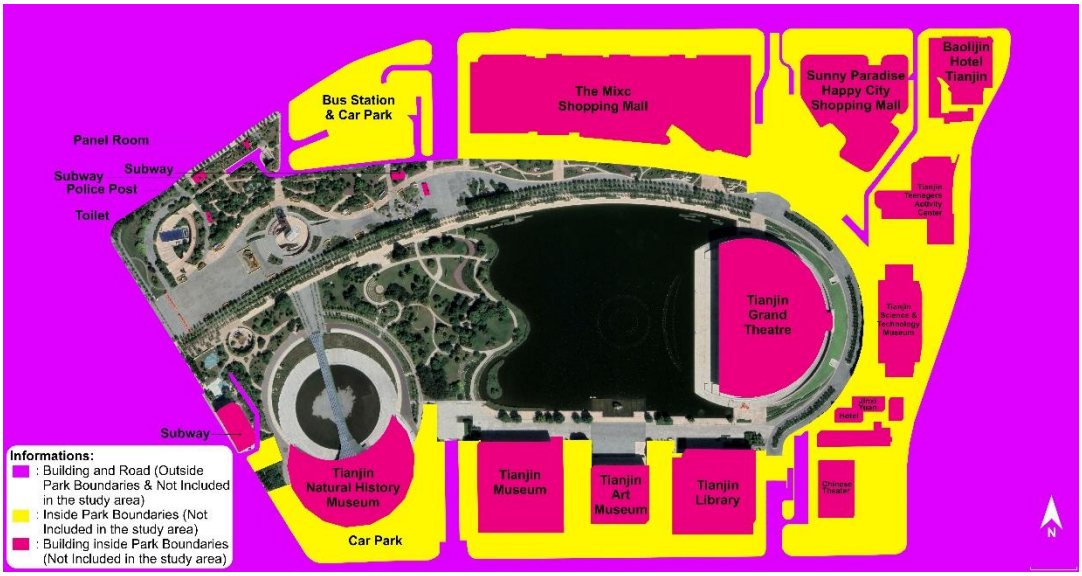


Figure 3 Study Area

Source: (Author, 2025)

Prehistory - 6th CE

<3000 BCE (Menhir)

The design of Yinhe Square can also be interpreted through the symbolic reference to menhirs, expressed most clearly in the sculptural elements located near the lake area (Figure 4). In prehistoric contexts, menhirs emerged during the Neolithic period as upright stone markers that articulated territorial presence, collective memory, and ritual significance (Renfrew, 1976; Whittle, 2003). Rather than functioning as isolated monuments, menhirs often formed part of ceremonial landscapes and movement routes, embedding meaning within broader spatial systems (Scarre, 2002).

The vertical sculptural forms in Yinhe Square echo this menhir tradition through their upright posture, singular prominence, and placement within an open landscape setting. Similar to Neolithic

precedents, these sculptures do not serve utilitarian functions but operate as symbolic markers that structure perception, orientation, and collective experience within the square. This symbolic role aligns with interpretations of menhirs as expressions of social cohesion, territorial identity, and materialized memory within communal space (Renfrew, 1976; Whittle, 2003).

By reinterpreting menhir symbolism in a contemporary civic context, Yinhe Square integrates deep historical landscape principles into modern urban design. The sculptural elements near the lake thus act as anchors of meaning within the public realm, reinforcing the square's role as a place of collective identity and continuity rather than merely a functional urban plaza (Figure 4)

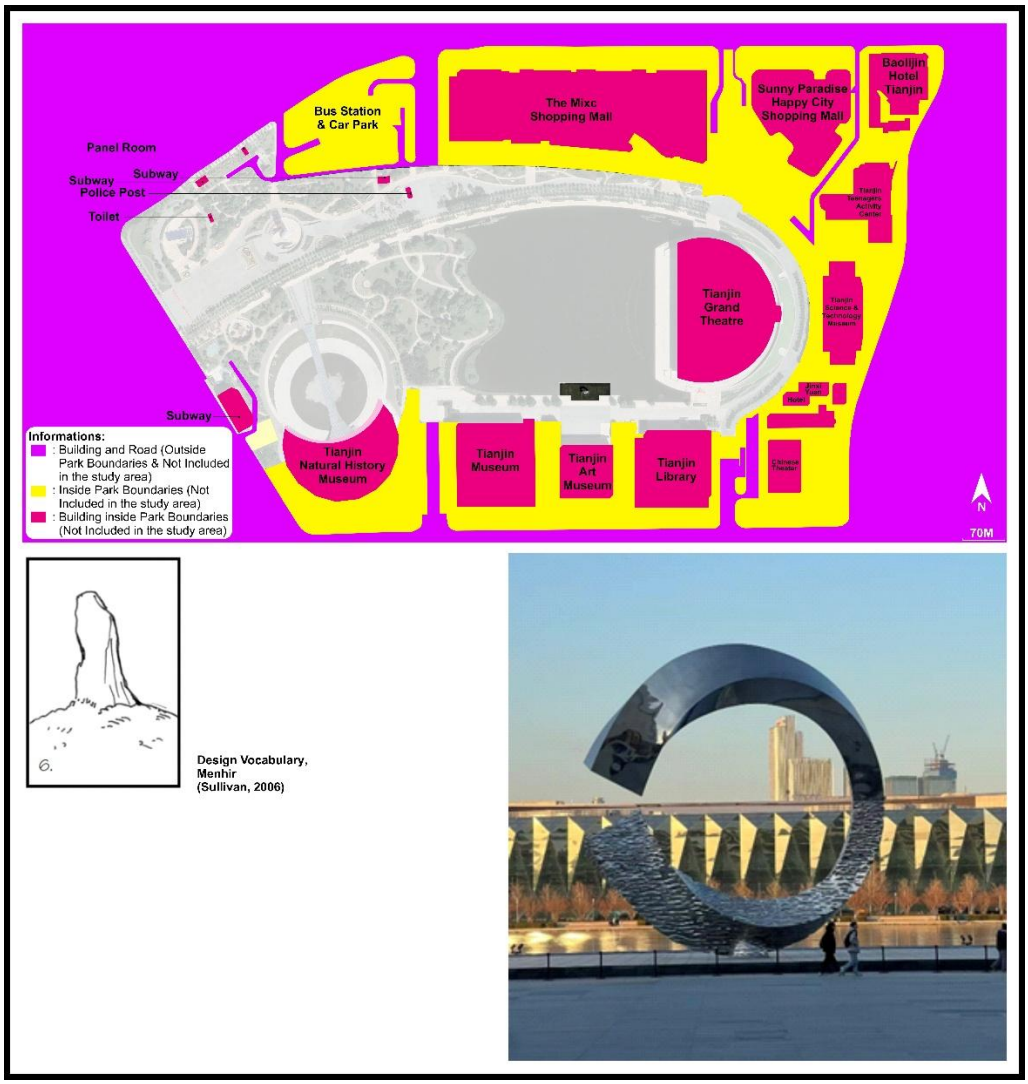


Figure 4 Sculpture (Menhir) in Yinhe Square

Source: (Author, 2025)

12th – 5th BCE (Agora)

Yinhe Square, Tianjin, can be interpreted as a contemporary civic landscape inspired by the classical tradition of public space, conceptually aligned with the Greek agora and sharing typological similarities with

classical civic spaces such as the Roman Forum. In ancient Greek cities, the agora functioned as the civic, political, and social heart of the polis, defined primarily by public gathering and institutional life rather than by architectural enclosure (Camp, 2001; de Polignac, 1995; Hansen, 2006; Osborne, 2009). This understanding is reflected in Yinhe Square through its expansive, open areas that prioritize civic assembly and public interaction over built form, particularly in zones identified as functioning analogously to an agora (Figure 5).



Figure 5 Squares (Agora) in Yinhe Square

Source: (Author, 2025)

The main square spaces within Yinhe Square (Figure 6 and 7) can further be understood through comparison with the Roman Forum. Classical scholarship describes the Forum Romanum as an elongated civic space, approximately 130–150 m in length and 45–60 m in width, shaped by historical accumulation rather than strict geometric planning (Claridge, 2010; Coarelli, 2014; Laurence, 2011). Although Yinhe Square adopts a contemporary C-shaped configuration, the scale of its principal square areas remains comparable

to the Roman Forum, allowing it to perform similar civic and symbolic functions. This dimensional correspondence supports the interpretation of Yinhe Square as a modern continuation of classical civic spatial principles rather than a literal formal reproduction.

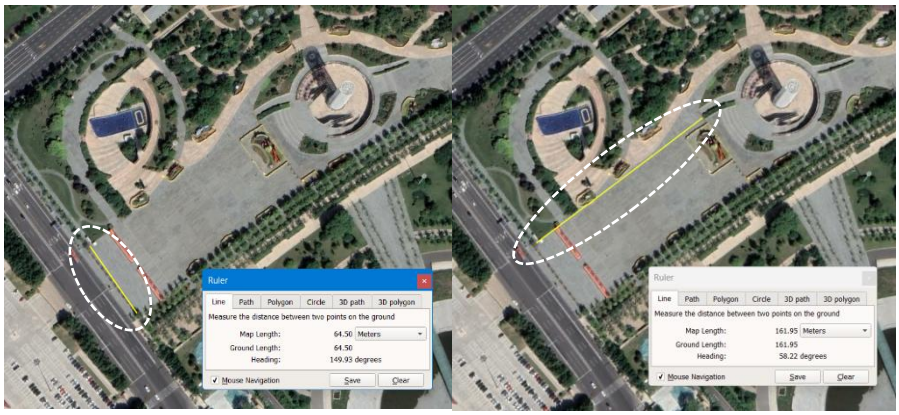


Figure 6 Square 1 Dimensions in Yinhe Square

Source: *(Google Earth Pro: 7.3.6.10441 by Google, 2025. (https://www.google.com/earth/))*

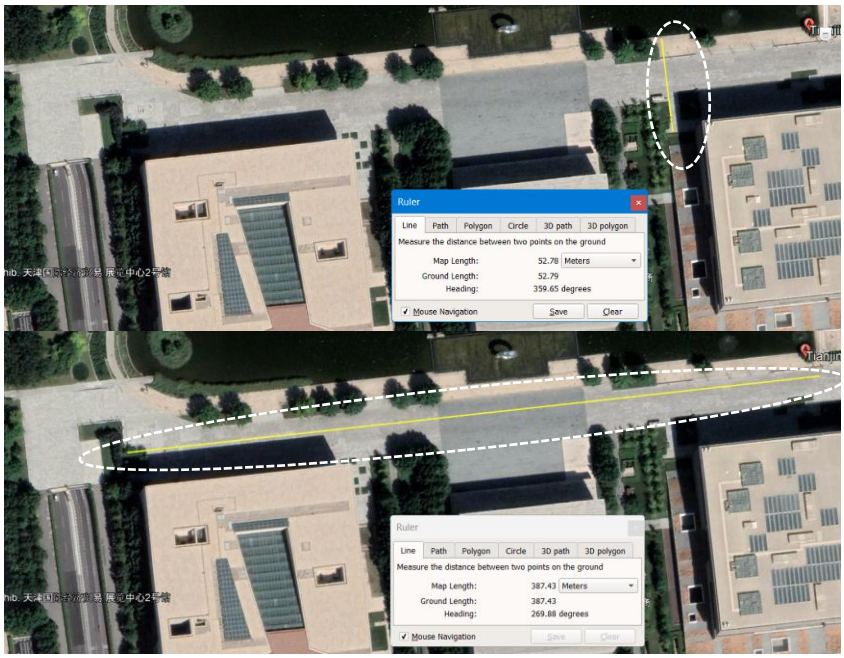


Figure 7 Square 2 Dimensions in Yinhe Square

Source: *(Google Earth Pro: 7.3.6.10441 by Google, 2025. (https://www.google.com/earth/))*

5th – 4th BCE (Ancient Theater)

Yinhe Square can be interpreted as drawing spatial inspiration from the tradition of ancient theaters, particularly through its stepped, semi-enclosed landscape configuration that encourages collective gathering and visual focus (Figure 8). In classical antiquity, Greek theaters evolved from temporary wooden structures into permanent stone constructions by the late 5th and 4th centuries BCE, characterized by terraced seating

arranged to frame a central performance space (Rehm, 2002; Wilson, 2007). Classical Greek theaters such as the Theatre of Dionysus illustrate these broader spatial principles, seating hierarchy, and openness were integrated to support civic and cultural participation (Papastamati-von Moock, 2014).

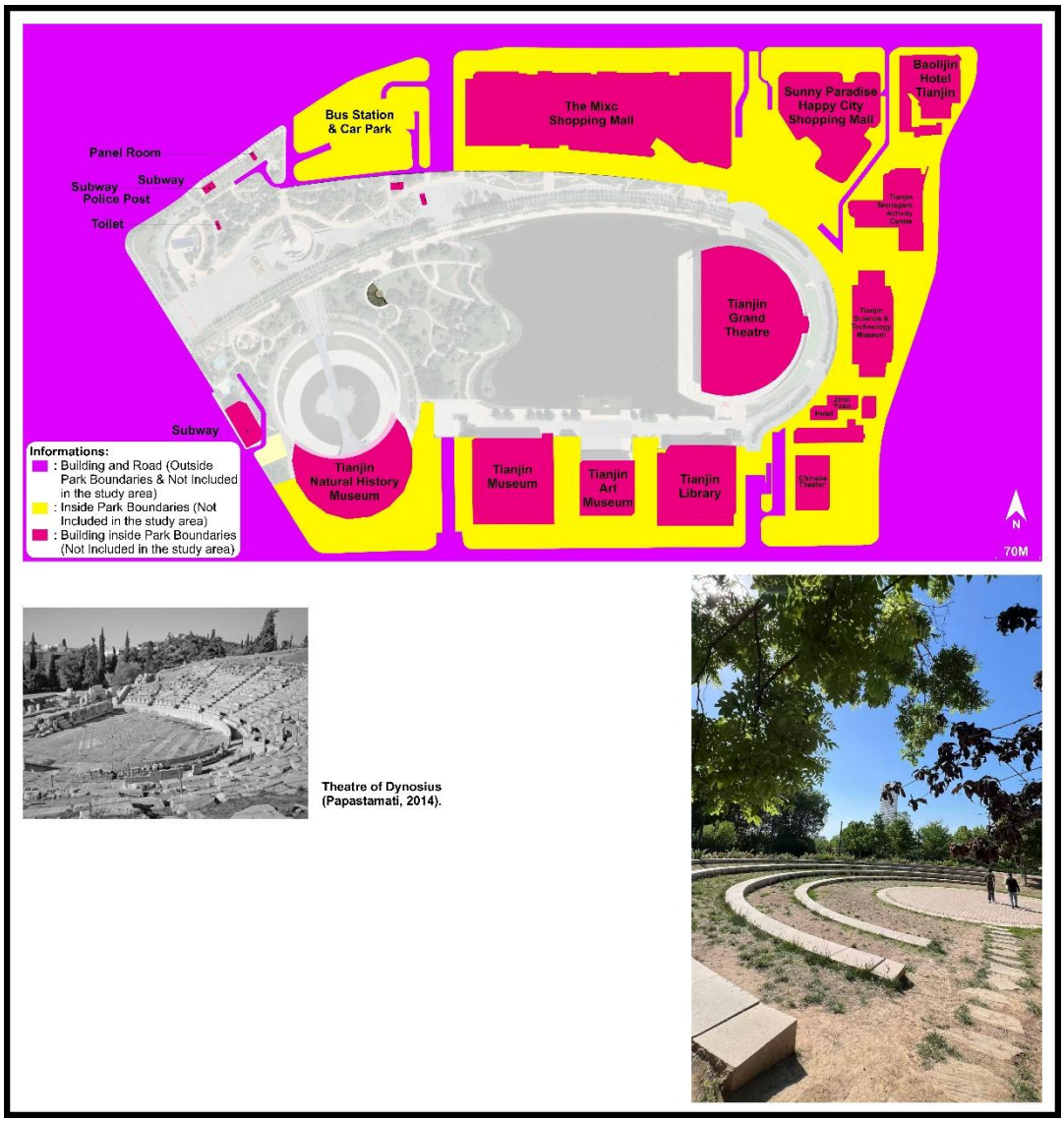


Figure 8 Outdoor Amphitheater in Yinhe Square.

Source: (Author, 2025)

Similarly, the stepped spatial elements within Yinhe Square function as contemporary reinterpretations of theater seating, shaping the ground plane to accommodate public assembly, informal performances, and civic observation. Rather than serving a purely performative function, this theater-like arrangement establishes a visual and social relationship between participants and space, reinforcing the square's role as a communal civic arena. Through this adaptation, Yinhe Square translates ancient theatrical

principles—collective visibility, spatial hierarchy, and public engagement—into one of designed landscape frameworks (Figure 8)

6th – 15th CE (Balance & Appropriation Design Principle)

The design of Yinhe Square can be interpreted as drawing inspiration from two historically grounded East Asian landscape principles: balance, associated with the period 589–618 CE, and appropriation (*shakkei*), associated with the period 1185–1333 CE. According to Sullivan (2006), the Chinese garden tradition conceptualizes landscape as a microcosm of nature in which balance is achieved through the visual and experiential equilibrium of opposing elements such as rock and water, solid and void. This principle, historically developed during the late sixth to early seventh century (589–618 CE), is evident in Yinhe Square through the careful juxtaposition of open paved spaces with the lake and landscaped edges, creating a harmonious spatial composition (Figure 9).

In contrast, the principle of appropriation or *shakkei*, which became prominent during the period 1185–1333 CE, emphasizes the visual incorporation of surrounding scenery beyond the immediate site boundary into the designed landscape (Sullivan, 2006). In Yinhe Square, views across the lake intentionally extend toward the surrounding urban skyline and sky, allowing external elements to become integral components of the spatial experience. Through the combined application of these historically rooted principles of balance and appropriation, Yinhe Square integrates classical East Asian landscape concepts into a contemporary civic public space (Figure 9)

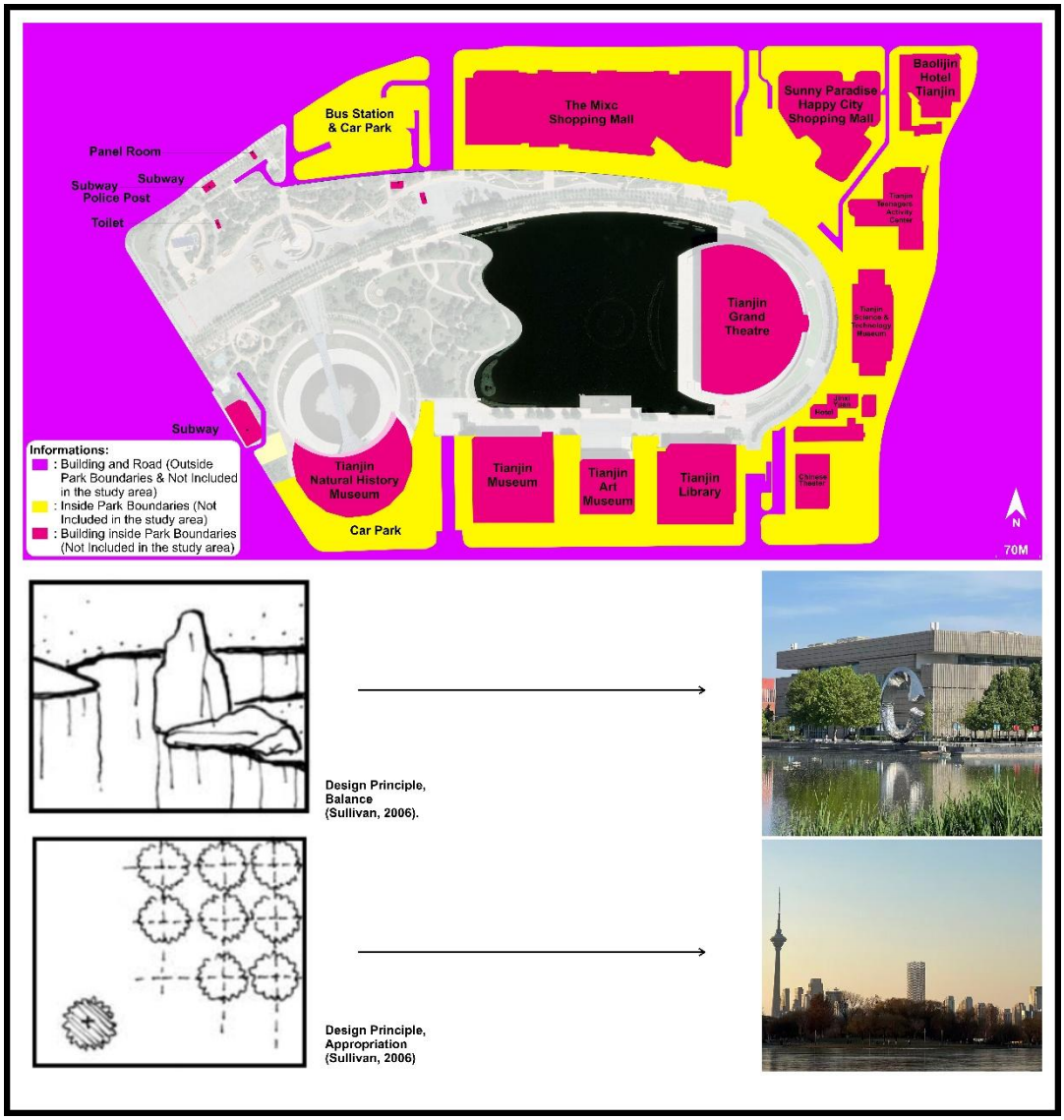


Figure 9 Yinhe square lake

Source: (Author, 2025)

16th CE (Axial Symmetry Design Principle)

The spatial organization of Yinhe Square can be interpreted as being inspired by the principle of axial symmetry derived from Italian Renaissance garden design. Italian Renaissance landscapes were structured around strong central axes, using linear sightlines to impose geometric order, visual hierarchy, and spatial control across the landscape (Sullivan, 2006). This principle is evident in Yinhe Square through the clear alignment of major spatial elements along a dominant linear axis (Figure 10).

The application of this axial logic is explicitly demonstrated in Figure 10, where a continuous visual and spatial axis extends from the Tianjin National History Museum directly toward the Yinhe Square Tower. This linear alignment mirrors the Renaissance use of long, uninterrupted axes to connect architecture, landscape, and symbolic focal points into a unified composition (Sullivan, 2006). Through this axial

symmetry, Yinhe Square translates a classical Western landscape principle into a contemporary civic space, reinforcing order, monumentality, and visual coherence within the urban fabric (Figure 10).

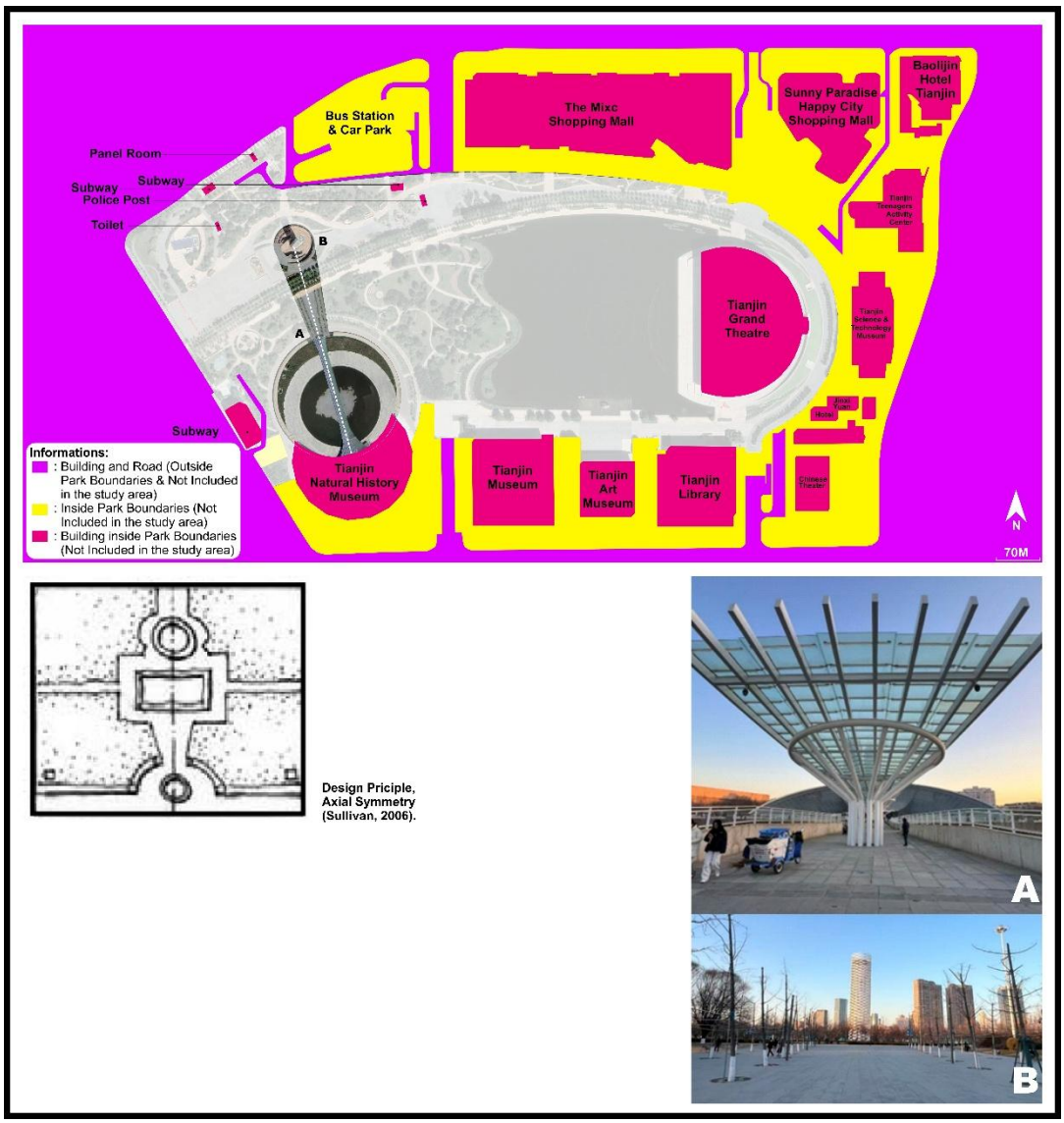


Figure 10 Linear Axis from Tianjin National History Museum to Yinhe Square Tower

Source: (Author, 2025)

17th CE (Hide & Reveal Design Principle)

The design of Yinhe Square can be interpreted as being inspired by the hide-and-reveal spatial principle, in which landscape experience unfolds incrementally through controlled visibility and sequential focal points. In Japanese stroll garden theory, space is intentionally revealed in stages so that movement through the landscape generates anticipation, discovery, and imagination, rather than immediate visual comprehension (Sullivan, 2006). This principle is evident in Yinhe Square through the use of curved paths,

layered vegetation, and strategically placed structures that partially conceal views and then gradually reveal key spatial moments (Figure 11).

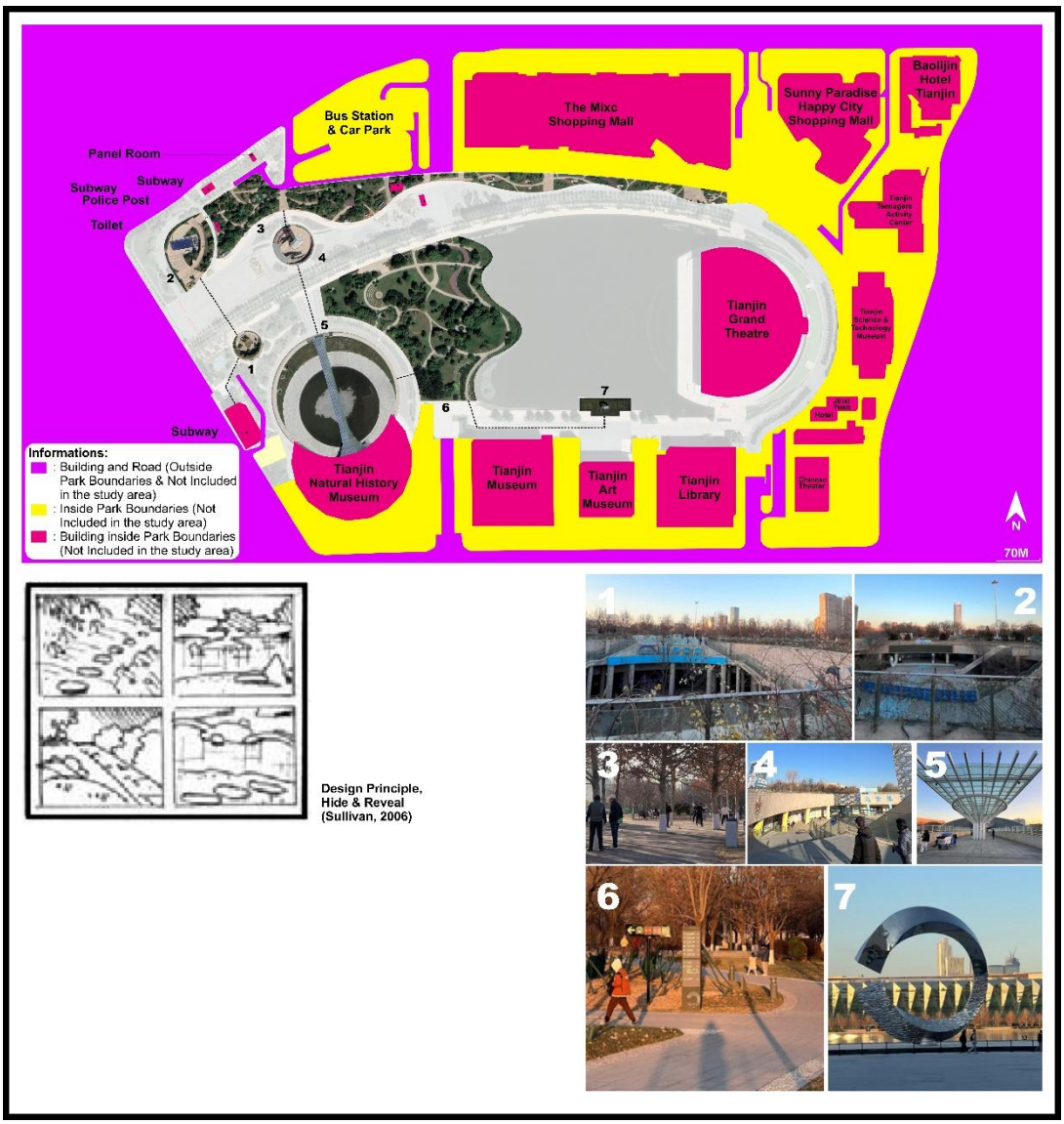


Figure 11 Focal Points Images in Yinhe Square

Source: (Author, 2025)

As users move through the square, visual focus shifts from one focal element to another—such as water features, sculptures, and open gathering areas—mirroring the experiential rhythm described in hide-and-reveal design logic (Sullivan, 2006). Rather than presenting a single dominant vista, Yinhe Square constructs a sequence of unfolding spaces that enhance sensory engagement and spatial depth within the contemporary civic landscape (Figure 11)

18th CE (English Garden Design Vocabulary)



Figure 12 English Garden Image in Yinhe Square

Source: (Author, 2025)

The landscape composition of Yinhe Square can be interpreted as being inspired by the design vocabulary of the English garden, particularly in the shaping of water bodies, gentle landform transitions, and the use of trees as visual framing elements. English garden designers traditionally manipulated lakes and hills to create naturalistic scenery, while trees were strategically arranged to frame views and guide visual movement through the landscape (Sullivan, 2006). These characteristics are evident in Yinhe Square through the informal shoreline of the lake, softly contoured terrain, and clustered tree plantings that define and articulate spatial views.

This influence is clearly demonstrated in Figure 12, where the lake and surrounding vegetation in Yinhe Square reflect characteristics associated with the English landscape garden tradition of integrating water, landform, and planting into a cohesive scenic composition. Rather than emphasizing rigid geometry,

the space relies on pictorial depth and framed vistas, translating the English landscape garden vocabulary into a contemporary civic public space (Figure 12)

19th CE (Accessibility Design principle)

The design of Yinhe Square can be interpreted through nineteenth-century public park principles emphasizing accessibility, circulation continuity, and social inclusivity. During the nineteenth century, urban public parks increasingly incorporated integrated pedestrian circulation systems, open lawns, connected scenic routes, and multiple points of access to accommodate broader public use within rapidly industrializing cities (Cranz, 1982; Taylor, 1999).

A similar circulation logic is visible in Yinhe Square, where pedestrian pathways, waterfront areas, gathering spaces, and surrounding institutional buildings are interconnected through continuous and permeable movement networks (Figure 13). Multiple entry points allow users to access different areas of the site efficiently while maintaining visual continuity throughout the landscape.

Rather than referencing a single precedent project, Yinhe Square may therefore be understood as reflecting broader nineteenth-century public park planning principles prioritizing accessibility, circulation integration, and collective public use within the urban environment.

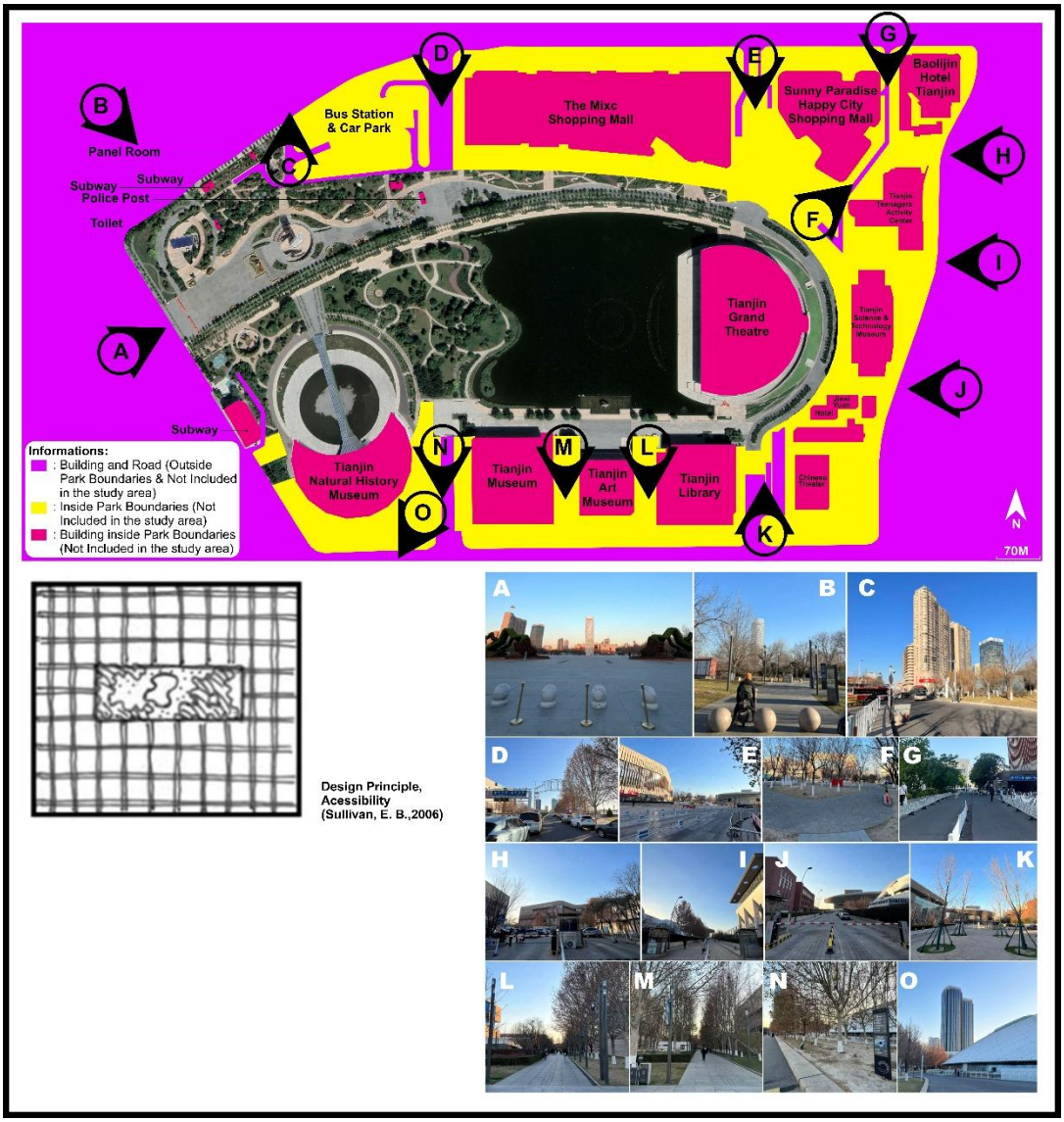


Figure 13 Images of Acess points in Yinhe Square

Source: (Author, 2025)

20th CE (Correspondence Design Principle)

The design of Yinhe Square can be interpreted as being inspired by the design principle of correspondence, in which landscape form emerges from the synchronic relationship between time, place, and design intent. Sullivan emphasizes that beauty in landscape architecture results from an awareness of this synchronicity, where spatial form corresponds meaningfully to its surrounding context rather than existing as an isolated composition (Sullivan, 2006). This principle is evident in Yinhe Square, where the configuration of open spaces, circulation paths, and landscape elements is shaped by the surrounding urban structures and spatial conditions (Figure 14).

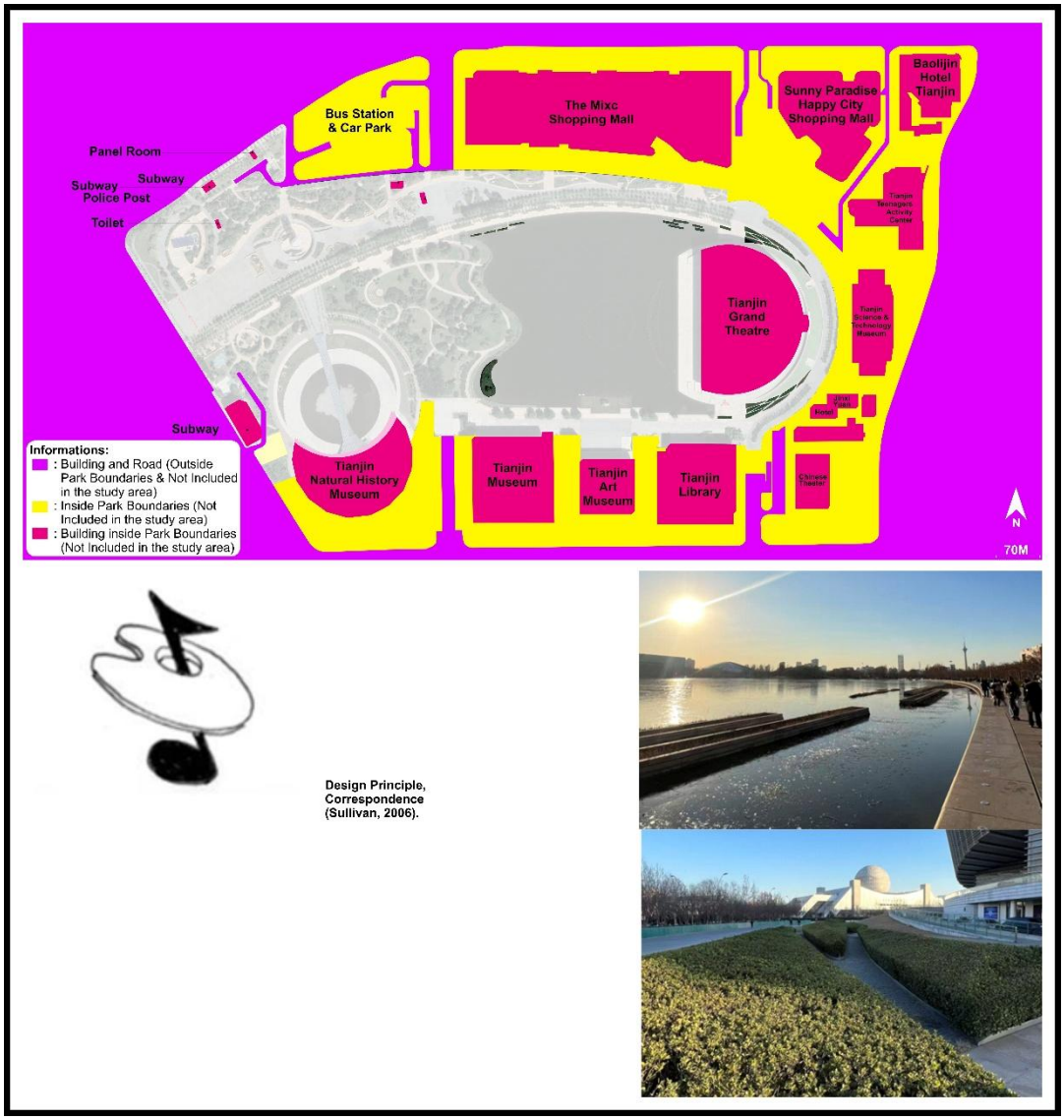


Figure 14 Design Principle - Correspondence in Yinhe Square

Source: (Author, 2025)

As shown in Figure 14, the landscape forms of Yinhe Square correspond directly with adjacent buildings, visual corridors, and movement patterns, demonstrating how the designed landscape responds to and is generated by its surroundings. Through this correspondence, Yinhe Square achieves spatial coherence, ensuring that its landscape design is synchronously integrated with the surrounding designed landscape and civic functions of the site (Figure 15).

Conclusions

This research demonstrates that Yinhe Square (Yinhe Guangchang) is not merely a contemporary municipal civic square shaped by post-reform urban governance, but a historically layered landscape whose design logic can be interpreted through the lens of world landscape architecture history. While its scale, openness, and multifunctional character align with state-led patterns of public space formation in modern

Chinese cities (Gaubatz, 2008; Madanipour, 2010; Rowe & Kuan, 2002; Wu, 2005), the square's spatial composition reveals a deliberate engagement with long-standing global landscape design principles

The chronological analysis reveals that Yinhe Square integrates design ideas spanning from prehistoric to twentieth-century traditions. Symbolic references to menhirs introduce themes of territoriality, collective memory, and ritual presence rooted in Neolithic landscapes (Renfrew, 1976; Scarre, 2002; Whittle, 2003). The square's openness and civic centrality resonate with the Greek agora, while its linear scale and proportions correspond with the spatial logic of the Roman Forum, reinforcing its role as a civic void rather than a purely formal plaza (Camp, 2001; Coarelli, 2014; Hansen, 2006)

Spatial configurations inspired by ancient theaters further strengthen Yinhe Square's function as a setting for collective gathering and civic visibility, translating principles of terraced seating, visual focus, and public engagement into a contemporary landscape framework (Rehm, 2002; Wilson, 2007). East Asian traditions are embedded through the principles of balance, appropriation (*shakkei*), and hide-and-reveal, which structure harmony, contextual integration, and experiential sequencing in accordance with classical Chinese and Japanese garden theories (Sullivan, 2006).

Western landscape traditions are equally evident through axial ordering, naturalistic scenic composition, and accessibility-oriented circulation systems associated with Renaissance landscapes, English landscape gardens, and nineteenth-century public park traditions. These diverse historical influences are ultimately synthesized through the principle of correspondence, where landscape form emerges from the synchronic relationship between time, place, surrounding urban conditions, and design intent (Sullivan, 2006).

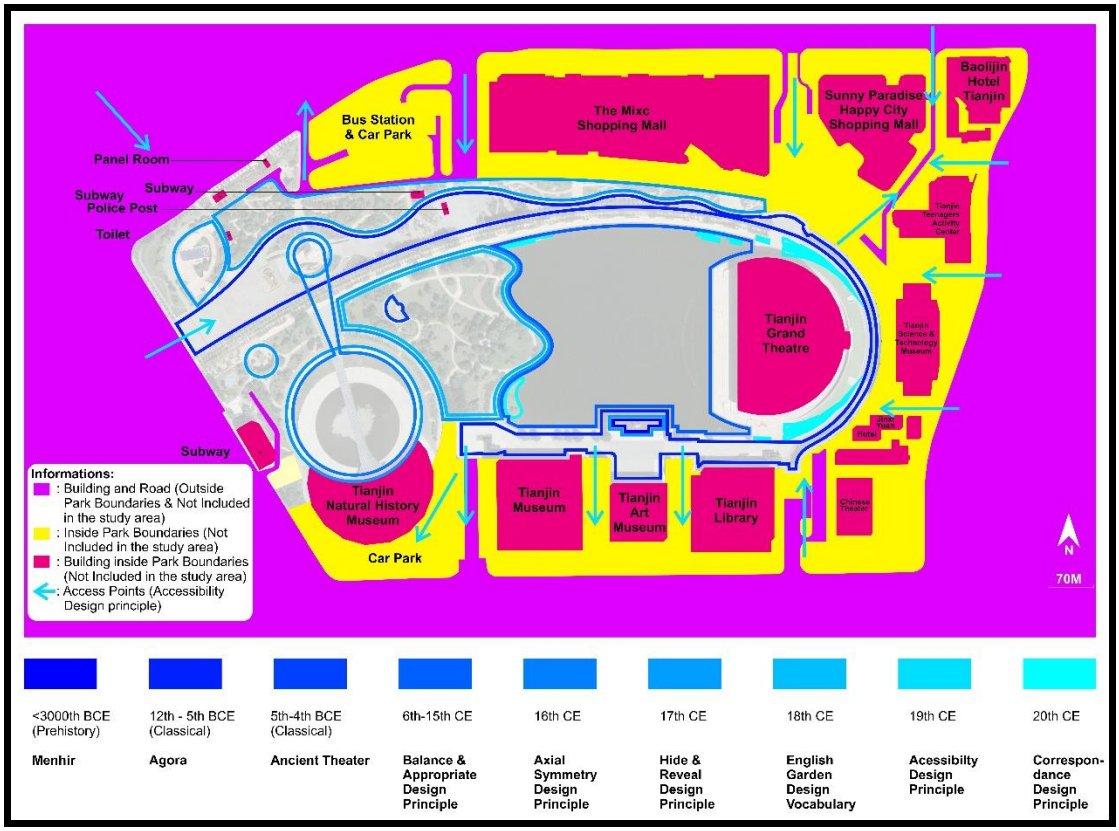


Figure 15 Conceptual Findings Synthesis

Source: (Author, 2025)

Taken together, Yinhe Square can be understood as a contemporary palimpsest of global landscape architecture principles reinterpreted within a modern Chinese civic context. This finding challenges the tendency to interpret Chinese municipal squares solely as products of governance or institutional publicness, and instead demonstrates that world landscape architecture history provides a relevant framework for understanding the spatial, symbolic, and experiential qualities of contemporary urban public spaces in China. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that this conclusion represents one interpretative perspective among many possible readings of the site. Alternative theoretical, sociopolitical, cultural, or urban analyses may generate different interpretations regarding the meanings and historical influences embedded within Yinhe Square. Accordingly, the historical associations identified in this study should be understood as typological and analytical interpretations rather than definitive evidence of direct historical influence or intentional design replication.

At the same time, this study reinforces the argument that landscape design cannot be understood only through utilitarian functions, as suggested by Vitruvius (1914). The findings further indicate that historical design codes continue to serve as significant sources of inspiration in the formation of contemporary Chinese municipal squares, aligning with the perspective of Lagerfeld (2013), who emphasized the importance of historical references in producing relevant design. In this sense, the influence of historical landscape

principles extends beyond purely sociopolitical interpretations of Chinese civic space, particularly in the context of Tianjin, China. Furthermore, the findings of this research may contribute valuable insights for landscape architecture academicians, urban historians, architects, and practitioners seeking a broader historical understanding in the analysis and design of contemporary Chinese municipal squares.

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