

## Lao-Zi's Dialectical Thinking and the Exhibition Space Design

LIU Dongfeng<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Shandong Normal University Academy of Fine Arts, Jinan, China.  
\*Corresponding author.

**Supported by** 2013 Youth Research Project of Shandong Normal University "Experience and Cognition: A Study on 'Experiential' Design in Modern Exhibition Space" (13SQR020).

Received 29 September 2015; accepted 22 November 2015  
Published online 26 December 2015

### Abstract

Display design is a design process where all kinds of artistic techniques are used within limited space and time to convey information effectively. Aimed at creating a sound space environment for conveying information, it needs to not only create objective patterns with substantive properties, but also rationally control the organization and proportional relations between different patterns, patterns and space, space and space. Meanwhile, a display designer should also comprehensively consider the physical and mental feelings caused by his created space after intervention of subject participation. Facing the complicated problems, we may get some enlightenment from the thought of dialectics in *Laozi* and find a way to design in the specific design practice.

**Key words:** Laozi's thought of dialectics; Valid and null; Display design; Space

Liu, D. F. (2015). Lao-Zi's Dialectical Thinking and the Exhibition Space Design. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 9(6), 58-61. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/8015>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8015>

### INTRODUCTION

Display design is a design process where all kinds of artistic techniques are used within limited space and time to convey information effectively. Aimed at creating a sound space environment for conveying information, it needs to not only create objective patterns with

substantive properties, but also rationally control the organization and proportional relations between different patterns, patterns and space, space and space. Meanwhile, a display designer should also comprehensively consider the physical and mental feelings caused by his created space after intervention of subject participation. Facing the complicated problems, we may get some enlightenment from the thought of dialectics in *Laozi* and find a way to design in the specific design practice.

*Laozi* is imbedded with rich thought of dialectics. Its thoughts of negative and positive supplementing each other, "valid and null" helping with each other, and abstract and substantive patterns generating in each other have developed space-time concept, mode of thinking and artistic pursuit, which typically exist in China's artistic creation. Meanwhile, Laozi's thought of dialectics contained in his philosophical thought also has a deep impact on the design concept and creative thinking of both China and the rest of the world, and promote the unceasing development of modern artistic design.

As we all know, Laozi put forward an important topic of negative and positive supplementing each other, and he made the extremely deep discussion on the dialectical relationship of "valid and null". He said abstract and substantive patterns are both helpful and favorable. Also, he gave specific examples of spokes, clays, doors and windows which are functional to carriages, utensils and houses because of their empty parts to emphasize the importance of "null" in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Laozi*. (Thirty spokes meet at a nave; because of the hole we may use the wheel. *Clay is moulded into a vessel; because of the hollow we may use the cup. Walls are built around a hearth; because of the doors we may use the house. Thus tools come from what exists, but use from what does not.*) He used practical examples in daily life to clarify the dialectical relationship of valid and null. His contributions mainly reflect on his emphasis on "valid" and non-ignorance of the huge effect of valid. As the examples mentioned above, we all use the empty parts, the

so-called “null” space of carriages, utensils and houses. From this, we can recognize the importance of null. As far as Laozi was concerned, null and valid refer to things and space. Null consists of valid and null is the result of valid. Valid and null have the dialectical relationship of mutually dependences and premises. The topic of valid and null helping with each other has great significance to the creation of modern display design especially displays space design. In the display design, designers shall fully grasp and make most of “empty and null” (the space of all kinds of substantive elements), because this empty and null means places where particular actions are taken, and actors of environment where people can review and get information, have a rest and communicate with each other. Thus, this thought of dialects should be applied to design with the transformation from a philosophical concept to a practical space processing technique. Meanwhile, it should be regarded as a design philosophy to lead us to create a sound space atmosphere by carefully designing the spatial arrangement and combination. In the following part, I will elaborate the enlightenment of Laozi’s thought of dialects to the design idea and specific design methods of display space on three aspects.

## **1. ABSTRACT AND SUBSTANTIVE PATTERNS GENERATING IN EACH OTHER AND “VALID AND NULL” HELPING WITH EACH OTHER: THE PRINCIPLE BASIS OF DISPLAY SPACE DESIGN**

In Chinese traditional painting, the principle of abstract and substantive patterns generating in each other is very important which can also be applied to the design of display space. In terms of painting, painters are always presenting the unlimited time and space with limited images. The blanks and specific images consist of the art Integration where abstract and substantive patterns supplement and generate in each other. “Knowing the white and keeping the black” also reflects the truth. They are all pursuing the same goal that they need to consider to leave room for imagination while they are pursuing rich images. Display design, despite of being different from painting, also shares the same thought of dialects, for example, in some general business shows, the areas are often small, which requests the designers to fully use different kinds of methods to turn the limited areas into space with the maximum information and the most effective spread. So, affected by the artistic conception forming method of negative and positive supplementing each other and abstract and substantive patterns generating in each other, the expression techniques of viewborrowing, winding path and indistinct reflection in landscape design and painting all have effective functions in stretching the space, so as to realize the unlimited expansion of space in

psychology. To some degrees, these methods can lead to generate a psychological detached feeling and resonance, which can spread the information effectively. With these ideas and methods, the principles of display space design are developed and enriched.

Actually, to deal with display space means to grasp the relationship of abstract and substantive patterns, to analyze all the elements and relationships in the space with the help of rational thinking and to manage the space reasonably. In specific design practice, this space is often not that clear, real but vague, here and faraway with great suggestibility, thus the resultant space is vague and mobile, which gives the audience an overall understanding and appreciation of the charm of the space when they are walking. Of course, the charm is ultimately for the spread of information, which is also the difference between display design and other art forms such as painting and landscape design. It pursues the goal of effectively conveying information mainly in a visual way in specific space and time. In the following part, I shall have a brief discussion on the principles and methods of dealing with different types of display space from two aspects.

### **1.1 Small and Static Space Design**

Unique originality, taste and exquisite shall be applied to small space display design in order to be extraordinary. The small size of space increases the limitation to designers, but it never restricts the huge space of originality. Accordingly, the design adopts the meaning of null, and use the technique of “breaking the valid to null”, in pursuit of sense of expansion and infinite on visual effect and appreciation mentality, thus to deepen and enrich space contents and create infinite interest and charm. As for the specific design technique, advanced technology and mass media are applied to enclose and divide space, turning valid into null, in order to reach the goal of creating abstract with the substance, abstract and substance generating in each other and connection of abstract with substantive, in addition to the realization of space elements” special functions.

In addition, some painting techniques, such as implicit reflection, can be applied to realize the objective of transforming virtual space to mental space. Landscape painters never present everything from view, such as all through the river, or thousands of mountains to their works, but process them artistically to highlight the “valid” and tailor the null, thus creating an effect of abstract and substantive patterns generating in each other and imaginary retaining beyond the substantive to induce infinite associative thoughts and broaden visual mental space. The application of the design technique means to tailor a part of the image or a specific part of image to represent or reflect the whole in the specific design activity to achieve desired effect of conveying information by a unit of the whole.

Taking the Hunan Dwellings Exhibition as an example, since we can never move all the dwellings to the exhibition hall, the technique to be adopted is to design

with some typical building symbols of the dwellings, the functions of which is to represent aroma and charm of the whole dwellings to the visitors in form of simple symbols. The building symbols chosen or building debris are just a part or a tiny section which conveys a scene atmosphere as a whole that induces endless reverie and broadens visual and mental space.

The key to designing small display space is to exert originality and win with newness and novelty. The relation of valid and null of small space shall be fully developed and applied in pursuit of the effect of conveying whole with part, conquering much by few and predicting the infinite with the limited; different design techniques shall be adopted to create different space fields required by different functions to make up for various limitations produced by space restriction.

## 1.2 Large and Dynamic Space Design

Display space in large area has more flexibility on space arrangement, combination and overall layout than small space, which may lead to monotone, tediousness even waste of space due to improper design. As to such display space of large area, the key of design is to ensure a reasonable space partition, guarantee continuity and conformity of each segment on space succession as well as ensure the diversity of the display form. Improper design may also result in disorganization of space sequence and unbalance of segment ratio, and thus fail to achieve the expected effect. Some classical Chinese garden design techniques can be borrowed to specific space design, for instance, the varied and fancy effect achieved by form change while stepping forward, which is defined as the mobility principle or "variety" principle.

In display space design, mobility principle does not only refer to great arrangement and combination of space sequence, but also requires effective design of specific image elements on each turning point to guarantee "variety" and "connection" of image, i.e. diversity and continuity, which is aiming at presenting different forms of space combination and image change to the visitors to arouse different mental experience and convey information in interest and charm.

"A winding path leads to a secluded place", a common technique of Chinese classic garden design, arranges scenery spots in a winding route, thus creating a whole meander space, which provides fun of change and sense of endless flow to the visitors. The technique application of A winding path leads to a secluded place requires dialectical thinking in display design, because how to convey information in a most concise and direct way contradicts with the technique itself as for the information-convey-oriented display design. What's more, how to connect the fun of change created by the technique with effective information conveying in practice is very much essential in display, which also reflects designers understanding and grasp of abstract & substance and valid & null.

In addition to the technique of "A winding path leads to a secluded place", the method of "surrounded without separation" is also one of common methods in modern display design. Currently, modern technology development and invention of mass new material provide more material guarantee and possibility for space partition methods, which make the form of "surround" change to a unit of abstract and substance. For example, effectively divide the whole space with the help of colored lights, which draw vague boundaries to the space visually and mentally with a feeling that the space is seemingly surrounded but not. Control of the light continuously changes space type, thus providing different visual experience. In fact, some aspects of the space design method also fully reflect the dialectical thinking of valid and null in Laozi.

Furthermore, contrast of abstract and substance, a common display space design technique as well, shall be applied in the whole design procedure as a concept and a mode of thinking other than a method of abstract and substantive space design.

However, the essence and objective of display design, whether the space is large or small, to create a space environment liable to convey information on basis of proper understanding and grasp of the relation between abstract & substance and valid & null, in order to express unlimited meaning with limited visual image and convey infinite information with finite form elements.

---

## 2. IMPLICATIONS AND BLANKS CONVEYING MORE INFORMATION— FROM THE PHYSICAL SPACE TO PSYCHOLOGICAL SPACE

---

"Hills, mountains, grass and trees belonging to the nature are all realistic scenes; the images created by heart and the breathing conducted by hands are all virtual scenes. The ancients combine the realistic scenes with virtual scenes to create spiritualities," said Fang Shishu, a painter in Qing Dynasty, in his *Essays Written in Tianyong Hut*. Although it refers to painting, it also relates to the application of minds and matters, virtuality and reality to display design. The creation of Chinese classical garden space tightly hinges around artistic conception, aiming to create psychological grooves beyond the space.

With the arrival of information society, the surge in mass information media makes the information come to us like a flood. Every day we are receiving innumerable information, but what should we do to the information? How to make the display design convey information effectively to emphasize what you want to convey among the mass information, and how to make it from the perspectives of recipients are going to be the important contents of the study of display design. However, display design, as a medium of information dissemination, has its own advantages compared to other media: For example, it

can form its own specific space to directly and effectively convey and receive information. But display design also has some defects such as the limit of time and space. If we singly judge from the view of design, we should try to fulfill audiences' transformation from physical media forms to visual perception reflection and then to the state of mind in the limited time and space, in a bid to stretch out information recipients' feeling from physical space to psychological space, and make them recognize and receive the information to the level of spirit. Judging from the present situation of display, it is common that most designers only focus on the pursuit of formal beauty. Of course, to some degrees, the pursuit of formal beauty has a good effect on drawing audiences' attractions. However, we need to concern about how to make the audiences actively experience and taste the connotations of our design with their interests. Under this circumstance, only the design of space and images with rich connotations and deep conceptions appealing to human's physical and mental requests can attract audiences' sights for a longer time than provoke their deeper thinking, in a bid to cause their resonations and convey information effectively to induce their desire to buy the products or service.

The artistic pursuits of implications and blanks conveying more information are practical application of Laozi's thought of dialectics, as well as the embodiment of the design concept's sublimation. When the concept is applied to practical design, we should reveal rich connotations as many as possible and convey more accurate and clear information by using the limited artistic images, and make the images themselves have the functions of stimulating human's active participation and receiving information. From this point, we can see that the blanks can also convey information, which contains rich philosophy of virtuality and reality. In display design, implications and blanks conveying more information can cause and expand recipients' psychological changes and expansions of space by setting the space.

### 3. THE PRINCIPLE FROM SIMPLE TO COMPLEXITY AND WINNING WITH FEWER FORCES: THE PURSUIT OF DISPLAY DESIGN TECHNIQUE EXPRESSIONS

The principle from simple to complexity and winning with fewer forces is both embodiments of Laozi's philosophical thought of dialectics of valid and null. Deletion of the redundancies and extract the essence is one of the methods of using simple to overcome complexity. Chinese painters always choose only the most beautiful branches of paint and ignore all the other images, which is called Broken Branches. One or two branches stretch from outside into

the painting and give us a feeling of "With so much spring in the garden, how can it be contained? A spray of red apricot blossom has already reached over the wall".

In display design, the principles of from simple to complexity and winning with fewer forces are aimed at conveying more information with limited images which require the images to be more functional. As the first picture, it is not only a lamp but also a booth, and it also serves as a medium to divide the space. The technique has embodied Laozi's philosophical thought of winning with fewer forces and coincides with modern advocated minimalism. In addition, the technique of expression has also promoted the awareness of environmental protection. The fewer and more environmentally friendly materials are used in the design with the concept of winning with fewer forces to reach a better display effect. Moreover, since the expression technique of winning with fewer forces embodies certain eco-environmental protection concept, fewer materials shall be chosen to achieve great display effect in the design process.

Of course, in Laozi's thought of dialectics, besides valid and null and "virtuality and reality", there are also concepts of "dynamic and static" and "tough and tender", which have significant meanings on display design.

### SUMMARY

Display design requires some space for information exchange and the creation of space requires artful usage of all kinds of techniques to achieve the rationality of the spatial organization and the accuracy of image creation. In practical design, the techniques of space design are various, which lead to different modes and types of space creation. Regardless of the modes and types, they all contain Laozi's thought of dialectics of valid and null and virtuality and reality. These thoughts of dialectics have important enlightenment function and practical significance on practical design. To study them and learn from them can enrich the principles of display design and promote the transformation of design concepts.

### REFERENCES

- Bruno, Z. (n.d.). *Architecture as space: How to look at architecture*. In H. Xue (Trans.). China Architecture and Building Press.
- Cao, H. Y. (2001). On the meaning of virtual space in China architecture; architecture planning, design, and research. *Anhui Architecture*, (2), 35-37
- Hoffman, W. (n.d.). *Turning point in twentieth century art*. In H. Xue (Trans.). Guangxi Normal University Press.
- Liu, D. F. (2012). *Exhibition design*. China: Posts and Telecom Press.
- Pan, Y. G. (2007). *The painting theories in six dynasties during Han and Wei*. China: Hunan Arts Press.
- Wang, Y. X., et al. (2008). *Tao Te Ching of Laozi*. China: Shandong Science and Technology Press.