

**Q: How did you first become involved in the renovation project of Kuanzhai Alley? What was your initial inspiration and design concept when creating the cultural wall?**

**Li:** Because I studied Public Art at the Moscow State Stroganov Academy of Design and Applied Arts in Russia, and in 2007, the renovation of Kuanzhai Alley was in great need of concepts from the field of public art, the developer chose our team. At that time, 19 highly professional companies from around the world participated in the open bidding process. They specialized in urban planning, environmental design, architecture, and interior design — but none of them were a good fit. Public art, however, has three key attributes: regional culture, public space, and public art itself. We presented our ideas based on these three aspects and won first place.

**Q: What aspects of local culture and historical stories did the renovation team hope to convey through the cultural wall? Were there any specific requirements or constraints from the government, commercial institutions, or the local community during the creation process?**

**Li:** At that time, the concept of public art was still unfamiliar to most people. Under pressure, we adopted the approach of creating a historical and cultural wall as a way to preserve the often-overlooked urban heritage. We built a 400-meter-long wall using discarded bricks and tiles that had been thrown away. By combining these materials with historical photographs (taken by Zhou Jin in Chengdu), we presented a comprehensive narrative of Chengdu's 10,000-year urban development history. Back then, aside from a small number of supporters, most people were opposed to the idea of spending money on a cultural wall. Between 2006 and 2008, neither the government nor the construction teams understood the concept of public art — nor were they willing to invest in it. At the same time, Chengdu's citizens were putting strong pressure on the municipal government, demanding a proper renovation of Kuanzhai Alley. Their call was to “return a complete Kuanzhai Alley to Chengdu after the renovation,” which was a very difficult task.

**Q: During the creative process, did you interact with local residents, businesses, or cultural institutions? Did their feedback have any influence on your work? Were there any creative ideas you originally wanted to realize during the renovation, but were ultimately unable to carry out?**

**Li:** At that time, within the Kuanzhai Alley Historical and Cultural Preservation Zone, the Chengdu municipal government and the investment and operations company adopted the outcomes of public art for the first time. Through the reconstruction of historical and cultural elements, we were able to preserve a small but important portion of collective memory. We communicated daily with local residents, especially Mr. Yangjiao, an original inhabitant, on how

best to protect the area. In the end, we were able to implement nearly all of our original plans — it was a very successful and fulfilling result.

**Q: Kuanzhai Alley has become highly commercialized today. Do you think the cultural wall and other public artworks still retain their original cultural value?**

**Li:** Yes, I believe they still hold cultural value — but it's undeniable that the risk of that value being diluted is real. The cultural wall and other public artworks were created as carriers of the city's memory. They retain elements of Qing Dynasty architecture and the unique character of Chengdu's "Shaocheng culture." For example, the "Brick Culture Wall" on Jingxiangzi Lane uses actual bricks and historical imagery to tell the story of Chengdu's transformation. It continues to serve as a bridge between the city's past and present, and between locals and visitors.

However, I've also observed a shift. These works have gradually taken on a dual function: not only do they educate, but they've also become part of the visual strategy for attracting tourists. In some cases, their elements have even been simplified and repackaged into merchandise. While this helps spread cultural symbols, it also weakens the depth of the history behind them.

**Q: In the face of rapid commercialization, do you think the cultural meaning of the wall has changed?**

**Li:** Definitely. Commercialization has reshaped how people perceive the wall. Originally, it was a quiet witness to the city's evolution — a story carved in brick and memory. Now, in some ways, it's become a photo backdrop, a design motif, even a brand. I don't necessarily think that's all bad — some commercialization is necessary for the area's survival — but when cultural symbols become decorative props, we risk losing the richness and layers they once carried.

**Q: Are you concerned that Kuanzhai Alley's cultural elements are being consumed and losing their original historical depth?**

**Li:** Yes, that's a real concern. One of the core contradictions in revitalizing Kuanzhai Alley has always been how to strike a balance between commercial energy and cultural integrity. Today, we see a dominance of high-end restaurants and trendy retail, while scenes of traditional street life — teahouses, craftspeople — are slowly disappearing. For instance, something as simple and authentic as ear-cleaning has turned into a luxury service, stripped of its everyday cultural roots.

Still, I must admit: without a certain level of commercial support, historical districts like Kuanzhai Alley couldn't sustain themselves economically. What matters is having a boundary — a development approach with a bottom line. Fortunately, some of the spatial and architectural integrity was preserved during renovation, such as the street patterns and traditional timber structures, which provide a framework for the culture to continue existing.

**Q: What role do you think public art should play between urban renewal and cultural preservation?**

**Li:** Public art should be a translator across time — it should make the past legible in the present and allow future generations to inherit that story. In projects like Kuanzhai Alley, public art has to do two things: preserve authenticity and inject new vitality. Restoration isn't just about rebuilding wooden structures — it's about making those structures work within modern life. That's the art of negotiation between history and function.

More than that, public art helps build cultural identity. When thoughtfully placed, it allows people to feel their city through symbols, materials, and stories. Take the Gongtong Flower Bridge, for instance — it blends nature and human memory into one poetic gesture. That's what good public art should do: connect people to place.

**Q: How can we create an art space in commercial areas that truly belongs to the local community?**

**Li:** The key is to move beyond a tourism-only mindset and design spaces that serve both visitors and residents. Art should enter daily life — from transforming traditional clotheslines into street installations to embedding local dialects into signage, turning ordinary residents' demands into a visual art campaign. The government also needs to step in. Policies could require developers to set aside space for nonprofit cultural use or offer tax incentives to businesses that support local arts. Public art can't thrive on passion alone — it needs structure.