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Harnessing the Artistic Values of Traditional Visual Arts in North Central Vietnam for Contemporary Applied Arts Design

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ABSTRACT: Background: North Central Vietnam preserves diverse traditions of visual expression, from Dong Son bronze-drum decoration to textiles, folk paintings, and royal enamelwork. Their use in contemporary applied arts offers opportunities for distinctive products but also risks reducing situated cultural practices to detachable ornament. Objective: This article identifies artistic values in selected traditions, examines the conditions under which they can inform contemporary design, and proposes an accountable process of visual transformation. Methods: A qualitative documentary analysis combines theories of visual grammar and design semantics with a purposive comparison of four bodies of material associated with Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, and Hue. Results: The synthesis identifies five layers of artistic value and four recurrent design tensions. It proposes the 5T cycle - Trace, Triage, Transform, Test, and Triangulate - linking provenance, selective visual analysis, functional redesign, prototypes, and multi-perspective review. Conclusion: Design innovation depends less on literal repetition of inherited motifs than on maintaining intelligible relationships among source, visual structure, new function, and community agency. The 5T cycle is a conceptual proposal, not an empirically validated assessment instrument.

KEYWORDS: applied arts, traditional visual arts, North Central Vietnam, visual language, contemporary design, craft knowledge, heritage-based design, 5T framework.

1. INTRODUCTION

Applied arts connect the functions of objects with the meanings through which users recognise places, histories, and identities. Packaging, souvenirs, furnishing, exhibition graphics, and digital interfaces may express regional character through arrangements of images, colour, materials, and form. Traditional visual resources can make such products recognisable, but recognition alone does not demonstrate that they communicate heritage accurately. When a motif is removed from its compositional system, production technique, or original social setting, a new design may preserve an outline while obscuring the cultural relationships that gave it meaning. Heritage-based design therefore requires more than selecting an attractive historic image.

North Central Vietnam offers contrasting traditions in terms of origin, technique, and social purpose. Published sources describe Dong Son bronze-drum decoration associated with Thanh Hoa; textile and craft practices in Quy Chau, Nghe An; Sinh village folk paintings; and Hue royal enamelwork known as phap lam (Vu, 2024; International Trade Centre [ITC] & United Nations Industrial Development Organization [UNIDO], 2011; Ky, 2020; Huynh, 2021). Some visual practices are primarily documented through surviving objects; others remain associated with workshop skills, ritual environments, or living forms of cultural knowledge. Their diversity permits comparison of design decisions without assuming that all localities share a uniform visual style.

A motif-focused approach might reproduce a bird from a bronze drum, insert a woven pattern into a brand mark, or place a ritual figure on consumer packaging. These operations are easy to describe visually but difficult to defend culturally unless the source and context are identified. A more rigorous approach considers whether the transferable resource is a literal image, a compositional principle, a material technique, or a relationship among these features. It also asks whose knowledge and judgement should inform a proposed use. Scholarship on visual communication, craft heritage, and product meaning offers relevant perspectives, but their translation into an explicit design decision process remains necessary.

This article asks three questions. RQ1: What formal and cultural values can be identified in selected traditional visual practices of North Central Vietnam? RQ2: What tensions emerge when these resources are transferred into contemporary products, graphics, and communication environments? RQ3: Which process can help designers account for provenance, transformation, and interpretive responsibility? The intended contribution is a documentary synthesis and a practical conceptual framework. No commercial product, consumer response, field observation, or measured conservation benefit is reported.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Visual language and meaning in design

The artistic value of a visual tradition extends beyond an inventory of reproducible images. Its formal language may involve figure-ground relationships, compositional rhythm, scale, directional movement, colour hierarchy, surface structure, and the ordering of decorative units. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) approach images as arrangements through which meaning is organised. From this perspective, retaining an isolated figure while changing its position, sequence, or relationship to surrounding forms may alter interpretation even if its outline remains familiar. Structural analysis must therefore precede the selection of a motif for new products.

Krippendorff (2006) complements this approach by locating the meaning of artefacts in their use and interpretation. In contemporary applied arts, visual similarity to an older object is not equivalent to continuity of meaning. A concentric arrangement may be adapted into an information graphic and attributed to a documented source; a literal copy of a context-sensitive emblem may be inappropriate for commercial packaging. Conversely, a newly composed visual system could preserve a recognisable organisational logic without claiming to be an unchanged historic design. The important distinction is between formal resemblance and an interpretable relationship to the source.

Combining visual grammar with design semantics separates three questions frequently treated as one: what the source looks like, how its components worked in the original setting, and how a new audience may read the redesigned object. Designers should record the evidence for each answer rather than assume that recognisable decoration speaks for itself. Where the available record does not establish an image's original symbolic meaning, the proposed design should acknowledge that uncertainty instead of inventing a definitive interpretation.

2.2. Craft heritage, practitioner knowledge, and cultural authority

The 2003 UNESCO Convention includes traditional craftsmanship among the domains of intangible cultural heritage, emphasising the transmission of knowledge and skills rather than merely the survival of finished objects (UNESCO, 2003). This approach is important when visual rhythm depends on material processes. Woven patterns, for example, emerge through the interaction of fibres, loom arrangements, technical sequences, and artisans' judgements. A printed approximation may reproduce the surface while replacing those relationships. It should therefore be described as an interpretation rather than automatically presented as the continuation of the craft itself.

UNESCO's ethical principles also call for meaningful community involvement and respect for the people who sustain cultural practices (UNESCO, 2015). These principles do not require contemporary designers to copy tradition unchanged. They support transparent decisions about which forms may be adapted, which are linked to sensitive cultural practices, and how practitioners participate in recognition and benefit. Public access to an image does not establish that every form of commercial reuse is culturally appropriate. A distinction is necessary between a documented public motif, a culturally restricted image, and a new work openly inspired by a source.

Research on brocade weaving and tourism in Vietnam's northern mountainous region raises questions about craft-related product development (Pham et al., 2025), but it does not describe the Nghe An cases analysed here. The ITC and UNIDO (2011) publication provides a closer point of reference: it discusses craft and design initiatives in Vietnam, including textile development associated with Quy Chau and approaches to woven products in the Vinh area. These reports suggest that design may work through technique, repeated line, and construction rather than through ornament alone. They are published examples, not prototypes designed or evaluated in the present study.

2.3. Heritage interpretation, community feedback, and digital media

A product informed by heritage is also a form of communication. Its design may cause users to infer a particular place, craft lineage, historical period, or claim of authenticity. Nguyen and Nguyen (2026) discuss the role of storytelling in heritage-tourism experiences, while Phuong and Lam (2025) examine the contribution of community feedback to evaluating heritage communication in Hanoi. Neither study measures the visual effectiveness of the applied-arts proposals considered here. Their limited relevance lies in the need for accessible source explanations and opportunities for people with relevant cultural knowledge to correct misleading presentations.

Research on heritage-conservation awareness in Hanoi (Nguyen, 2025) offers a related caution: the visibility of a cultural resource and public understanding of its significance are not interchangeable. Digital distribution further complicates attribution. Phuong (2026) addresses both opportunities and limitations in digital preservation in Vietnam. Digital images may facilitate study and creative experimentation, but files can circulate without sufficient information about the photographed object, production technique, cultural context, or use conditions. A reliable design process should preserve provenance and explicitly identify uncertainties instead of assuming that a downloadable image is unrestricted design material.

2.4. Regional conditions and the scope of application

Regional identity cannot be detached from local people and circumstances. Studies of marine cultural-heritage conservation in Thanh Hoa (Hung & Tuyen, 2026) and place attachment and heritage memory in Vietnam (Vu & Nguyen, 2026) provide broader context for cultural responsibility in place-related development. They do not measure how any proposed motif or composition performs on a product. North Central Vietnam is therefore treated in this article as a geographic-cultural frame for comparing distinct sources, not as evidence of one coherent regional visual grammar.

A Vietnamese study of garment-cutting instruction for fashion-design students (Tran, 2024) has a narrower pedagogical role. It is relevant to the principle of connecting technical knowledge to practice but does not provide evidence concerning traditional decoration or a heritage-based design method. This distinction matters because the broader reference collection includes studies in tourism, communication, and applied education: a source should be used only for claims that its research materials and methods can support.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research design and geographic scope

The article uses qualitative document analysis combined with purposive, contrastive case comparison. Its unit of analysis is the documented visual configuration: formal features considered together with material processes, social functions, cultural interpretation, and questions raised by potential contemporary reuse. Four groups of material were selected: Dong Son bronze-drum decoration connected to Thanh Hoa; weaving

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traditions associated with Thai communities in Quy Chau, Nghe An; Sinh village folk paintings; and Hue royal enamelwork. The examples differ in medium and customary purpose. Their selection is analytical, not a representative survey of all traditional visual arts in the region.

3.2. Documentary sources and selection criteria

The case-specific sources comprise specialised work on Dong Son bronze-drum ornament (Vu, 2024); an ITC and UNIDO (2011) account of craft and design practices; a study of changes in the Sinh village painting craft (Ky, 2020); and an examination of royal enamelwork in the Hue Museum of Royal Antiquities (Huynh, 2021). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), Krippendorff (2006), and UNESCO (2003, 2015) provide visual, semantic, and ethical reference points. Other publications were retained where they illuminate identifiable questions concerning local identity, heritage interpretation, digital media, cultural participation, or practical design education. The collection is purposive and does not constitute an exhaustive systematic review or formal quality appraisal.

3.3. Comparative procedure and evidentiary boundaries

Each source was examined against five prompts: (1) provenance and identifiable knowledge holders; (2) visual units and organisational principles; (3) social use, meanings, and interpretive constraints; (4) possible translation into new functions or media; and (5) evidence still required to evaluate an actual design proposal. Documented observations were distinguished from the author's inferences and recommendations. Cross-case comparison was then used to identify recurring values and tensions and to formulate an operational design sequence.

No artisan interviews, independent artefact scans, instrument-based colour measurements, fabricated prototypes, consumer surveys, or market tests were undertaken. The examples of product adaptation below are therefore illustrative possibilities. The referenced heritage-communication and tourism studies do not verify whether those products would be visually effective, culturally acceptable, or commercially viable. Similarly, published descriptions of historical objects do not settle all questions of permission for specific contemporary uses. The analytical claims are limited by those evidentiary boundaries.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Five connected layers of traditional artistic value

The documentary comparison identifies five interdependent layers of value. Formal value concerns line, rhythm, proportion, spatial organisation, and colour. Material and technical value concerns the processes by which an image or object is created, including casting, weaving, printing, and enamelling. Symbolic value concerns associations with collective memory, belief, convention, and historical status. Practice-based value concerns the people who make, teach, maintain, or interpret cultural forms. Interpretive value concerns whether users encountering the redesigned product can understand its source and the extent of its transformation. A design may retain recognisable formal features without automatically preserving the other four layers.

Dong Son decoration makes the distinction clear. Concentric bands, repeated geometry, and combinations of figurative and abstract components offer design principles that could inform modular grids or patterned sequences. However, a particular bronze drum should not be treated as an exclusive symbol of Thanh Hoa or taken to represent every object and period associated with Dong Son culture. The discussion of shapes and decoration in Vu (2024) justifies source-specific examination; detailed claims about a motif require the relevant artefact record. A designer might therefore study concentric visual rhythm as a compositional structure while avoiding unsupported claims about the exact symbolic meaning of an isolated bird or human figure.

In Quy Chau, the ITC and UNIDO (2011) material draws attention to woven structure, linear organisation, and technical adjustment in product development. The design opportunity concerns how inherited techniques contribute to material construction, not simply how a woven pattern can be printed onto another surface. Sinh village painting presents different constraints: the relation between printed lines, colour areas, and customary ritual functions requires scrutiny before an image is transferred to everyday merchandise (Ky, 2020). Hue royal enamelwork combines colour, compartmental composition, and historically specific court associations, making it necessary to distinguish broadly decorative structures from imagery with particular roles or status (Huynh, 2021).

Table 1. Contrasting visual sources and boundaries of contemporary adaptation

Reference tradition	Visual features for analysis	Illustrative design direction	Caution
Dong Son bronze drums - Thanh Hoa	Concentric bands, geometric repetition and figurative groups	Modular grids and patterned rhythms for identity systems or objects	Verify artefact and period; one motif cannot represent an entire region
Thai weaving - Quy Chau, Nghe An	Linear bands, animal figures, colour relationships and woven structure	Decorative textiles, accessories and product surfaces	Record makers, techniques, relevant permissions and production feasibility
Sinh village painting - Hue	Printed outlines, colour blocks and customary or ritual imagery	Contextual educational illustration and heritage interpretation	Consult on ritual content; avoid indiscriminate use of worship images
Hue royal enamelwork	Coloured enamel, partitioned composition and court-associated figures	Exhibition graphics, interior objects and design systems	Distinguish ordinary ornament from status- or function-specific emblems

Source: Synthesis of Vu (2024), ITC and UNIDO (2011), Ky (2020), and Huynh (2021).

4.2. Four recurring tensions in heritage-based design

Four tensions emerge from the comparison. First, immediate recognition may come at the expense of accurate provenance: a drum image may broadly evoke Vietnamese antiquity without identifying the particular Thanh Hoa object being referenced. Second, a change in colour, scale,

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placement, or context can make inherited symbolism misleading, even where the visual change appears minor. Third, standardised manufacturing can erase variations central to craft expertise and may reduce makers to providers of cultural branding. Fourth, digitisation facilitates circulation of images while raising questions about incomplete source records, attribution, permissions, and inappropriate reuse.

These are analytical tensions, not findings about the frequency of misuse in the region. They do not mean that every creative adaptation is objectionable. Rather, they show why the evidence and consultation required for a commercial use should be proportionate to the source and intended application. A museum's explanatory graphic, for example, need not claim to be a community-made object. A commercial product marketed as a traditional craft, by contrast, needs a more substantial account of production and collaboration. A ritual image and a general abstract compositional rhythm may also warrant different levels of cultural review.

Table 2. Design tensions and questions for preliminary assessment

Design tension	Risk of narrow interpretation	Review question
Recognition / source accuracy	Combining unrelated motifs into a supposedly uniform regional style	Which source, locality, period or practice is documented?
Creativity / cultural meaning	Altered colours or compositions misrepresent customary or ritual signals	Which meanings are retained, altered or intentionally excluded?
Production / craft knowledge	Mass-market goods use a community name without meaningful participation	Are makers involved in decisions, attribution and benefit arrangements?
Digitisation / reuse	Images circulate without provenance or reuse records	Are source, permissions, credit and contextual limitations recorded?

Source: Author's interpretation based on Krippendorff (2006), UNESCO (2015), and Phuong (2026).

4.3. Three levels of transformation into contemporary products

The analysis distinguishes three possible levels of applied transformation, without ranking them as better or worse art. Direct reference retains an image or colour arrangement close to a documented source. This approach requires identification of the original and assessment of appropriate conditions for reproduction. Structural abstraction draws on transferable principles such as concentric rhythm, banded composition, figure-ground contrast, or modular segmentation to create a new visual system. It requires a clear explanation of the changes so that the resulting design is not mistaken for an unchanged historic artefact.

The third level is technique-informed co-design. A product may adopt a new function or material while craft practitioners participate in selecting techniques, assessing feasibility, and deciding how their contribution is credited. This requires records of collaboration and a prototype capable of being reviewed. The three levels may overlap within one project. A contemporary cultural package, for instance, might reproduce a documented image in an educational insert while using an abstract structural rhythm on the outer surface. Its credibility would depend on the distinction being clearly communicated, not merely on visual attractiveness.

These levels move evaluation beyond a binary choice between faithful copying and unrestricted innovation. A product that transforms compositional principles can sometimes communicate its source more responsibly than an unannotated literal imitation, particularly when its function differs greatly from that of the original. That possibility is an interpretive proposition, not an observed consumer effect. The appropriate choice would need to be assessed for a specific source, proposed use, and intended audience.

4.4. The proposed 5T framework

The synthesis is translated into five linked decisions, termed 5T in this English presentation: Trace, Triage, Transform, Test, and Triangulate. Trace establishes provenance, the relevant source object or practice, associated people, historical context, and conditions of reuse. Triage separates visual organisational principles from features whose meaning or function makes them context-sensitive. Transform reconstructs selected relationships for a new purpose while documenting the changes. Test examines prototypes for readability, usability, material feasibility, and user response. Triangulate brings relevant craft practitioners, experts, and users into an appraisal of what should be accepted, revised, or avoided. Later findings may require return to an earlier stage.

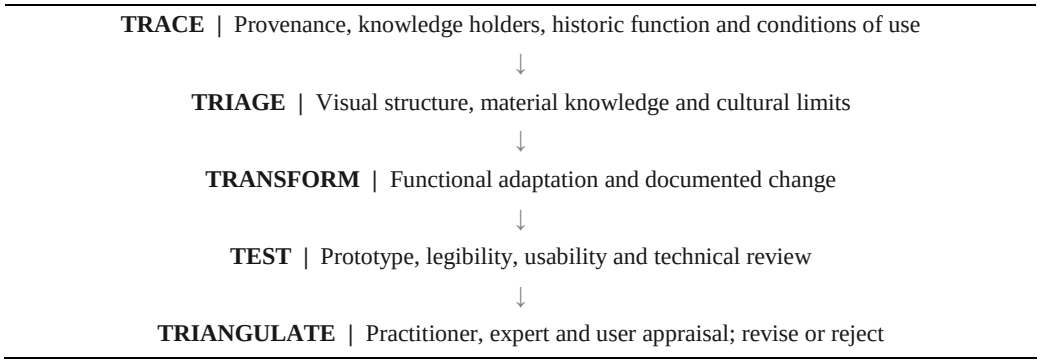


Figure 1. The proposed 5T sequence for heritage-informed applied arts
Source: Author-developed conceptual synthesis. Appraisal may return the team to any previous stage; 5T has not been empirically validated.

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The framework is a proposed design process rather than an additive authenticity score. Technical success does not compensate for the inappropriate reproduction of a ceremonial image; likewise, accurate attribution cannot establish a product's function, durability, or audience legibility. Keeping these matters separate enables design teams to identify non-negotiable restrictions before considering market benefits. It also makes revision possible at the sketch and prototype stages, when formal changes can still be undertaken without substantial production costs.

Table 3. Operational evidence proposed for the 5T design cycle

5T stage	Core decision	Suggested evidence
Trace	Where does the form come from, and who can interpret it?	Artefact records, source images, provenance, custodians and conditions of reuse
Triage	Which visual structures are transferable and which meanings are context-sensitive?	Annotated motifs, formal analysis, palette maps, cultural-use boundaries
Transform	What changes are justified by the contemporary function?	Sketch variations, grid rules, product brief and account of modifications
Test	Is the proposed product readable, useful and technically feasible?	Prototype, material trials, usability review and feedback log
Triangulate	What should be approved, revised or rejected?	Practitioner, expert and user feedback; documented decisions and revisions

Source: Author-developed conceptual framework; its feasibility and assessment reliability have not been validated.

The proposed documentary record should be concise enough for practical use while retaining the decisions that matter. A provenance sheet may identify the precise artefact, photograph, museum record, or workshop practice. An annotated analysis can distinguish visual rhythm from symbolic content. Sketches can document the selected transformation, and prototype notes can preserve technical problems and user feedback. Finally, a review record can state which people were consulted and why a design was changed or rejected. These materials cannot substitute for expertise, but they can make the basis of a design claim open to scrutiny.

4.5. Application in applied-arts education and product development

In university applied-arts education, 5T could be translated into a limited design assignment containing a sourced image dossier; analysis of visual principles; at least two approaches to abstraction; one functional concept or prototype; and an appraisal record. Rather than judging only the appearance of the final object, assessment would ask whether the student can explain provenance, justify transformation, and revise the proposal in response to criticism. This design is consistent with general practice-oriented teaching principles discussed in relation to fashion-design education in Thanh Hoa (Tran, 2024). It has not been tested as an instructional intervention in applied-arts programmes.

For professional production, 5T might clarify collaboration among museums, archives, design teams, and craftspeople. A brief could specify the source collection and conditions of use; a designer could document alternative visual structures; practitioners could examine technique and cultural appropriateness; and user testing could assess whether the product communicates as intended. The purpose is not to require every product to reproduce all features of a historic practice. It is to make the relationship between inherited material and new design intelligible, proportionate, and open to revision when new evidence emerges.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Theoretical contribution: from copying motifs to transforming relationships

The central contribution is a shift from viewing traditional visual arts as a supply of decorative units to viewing them as configurations of relationships. A literal reproduction might appear faithful while being misleading when presented without historical context or placed on a product with an incompatible social function. Conversely, a design that retains only a principle of visual hierarchy, rhythmic segmentation, or spatial organisation may communicate an informed source relation if provenance and transformation are explained. Visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and meaning-oriented design (Krippendorff, 2006) provide complementary reasons to distinguish visual resemblance from interpretive continuity.

The cases indicate why this distinction must remain context-sensitive. For Dong Son objects, dating and artefact attribution deserve priority; for weaving, material procedure and maker agency matter; for Sinh painting, ritual associations may limit particular uses; and for Hue enamelwork, court-related functions and status imagery require careful interpretation. A single visual checklist cannot fully represent these differences. The 5T framework offers a common process of questioning rather than one prescribed style or a universal list of motifs considered permissible.

5.2. Implications for cultural governance and creative industries

Visual resources may support tourism products and local communication, but a visually successful design is not automatically a conservation achievement. Studies concerning interpretation at the Hue Imperial Citadel (Ha et al., 2026) and heritage storytelling (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2026) support attention to intelligibility for audiences. Work on Hanoi community awareness (Nguyen, 2025), Thanh Hoa marine heritage (Hung & Tuyen, 2026), and place attachment (Vu & Nguyen, 2026) provides broader social and cultural context. None of these sources measures product sales, visual preference, or community approval for the designs proposed in the present paper. Their relevance should not be expanded beyond those limits.

Practical implementation requires distinct contributions from those who hold source records, those who create designs, and those who practise the relevant craft or heritage activity. Museums can help identify provenance; makers can explain production knowledge and cultural boundaries; designers can propose functional translation; and intended users can provide evidence of clarity and usefulness. Consultation is most meaningful

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when it occurs before the concept is fixed and can change the final product. Similarly, the digitisation of a motif should preserve information about its source and conditions of reuse rather than detach it into a generic downloadable graphic.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study relies on published materials and four selected visual traditions associated with three localities. It has no original fieldwork, comprehensive artefact inventory, prototype collection, or consumer dataset. Some sources in the reference list address tourism or communication in other regions; they help clarify context but cannot directly validate a particular colour, motif, or design technique. The analysis also does not determine the specific reuse rights of each image, the range of variation across all communities, or the technical performance of proposed materials. Further work should first identify particular objects, workshop practices, and relevant knowledge holders, then document which visual principles they recognise and which uses they consider inappropriate. Design teams could test comparable prototypes using direct quotation, structural abstraction, and practitioner-led redesign. Repeated user assessments could examine legibility and usability; maker and expert interviews could examine cultural acceptability and attribution. Only such research could determine whether the 5T cycle is feasible, consistently applied, or beneficial to actual design and heritage outcomes.

6. CONCLUSION

The traditional visual arts of North Central Vietnam provide valuable resources for contemporary applied arts, but they are not a uniform archive of ready-made patterns. Dong Son bronze-drum decoration, Quy Chau weaving, Sinh village painting, and Hue royal enamelwork reveal different relations among visual organisation, technique, customary meaning, and the people who sustain cultural knowledge. This documentary comparison identifies five connected layers of artistic value and four recurrent tensions concerning source accuracy, interpretation, production, and digital reuse.

The proposed 5T cycle - Trace, Triage, Transform, Test, and Triangulate - connects documented provenance, selective visual analysis, functional redesign, prototype evaluation, and multi-perspective appraisal. It offers a conceptual decision tool rather than empirical proof of improved products or conservation outcomes. Field examination of artefacts, consultation with practitioners, and testing of concrete designs are needed before wider claims of cultural or economic impact can be made.

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