



# Cultural symbolism and architectural identity: The Bund Finance Center's role in shaping Shanghai's urban legacy and contemporary cultural landscape

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The Bund Finance Center (BFC) in Shanghai exemplifies how contemporary architecture can convey cultural depth while advancing modern urban identity. Designed by Heatherwick Studio and Foster + Partners, the BFC blends kinetic form, traditional materials, and symbolic spatial arrangements to reflect both Shanghai's heritage and its global aspirations. This study investigates the role of BFC in shaping Shanghai's architectural identity and cultural narrative by analyzing its spatial symbolism, public perception, and branding influence. **Methods:** Using a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on visual analysis, design documents, expert literature, and thematic coding of public and professional survey responses. Key features such as the rotating bronze façade, courtyard-like ground plane, and use of stone were widely interpreted as modern expressions of Chinese cultural forms. These design choices position the BFC as both a landmark of innovation and a medium for cultural storytelling. **Findings:** The findings show that the BFC elicits strong emotional responses; particularly pride and belonging and contributes significantly to Shanghai's urban branding and civic identity. Its hybrid design reflects a broader movement in urban architecture that seeks to balance tradition with global design narratives. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the BFC is not only a functional urban space, but also a symbolic bridge between Shanghai's historical memory and its contemporary ambition. It offers a replicable framework for evaluating culturally embedded design in global cities. **Conclusion:** This study concludes that the Bund Finance Center functions as an authentic city-branding instrument by reinterpreting cultural heritage through innovative architecture that evokes emotional engagement, reinforces place identity, and strengthens Shanghai's global urban reputation. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This article offers originality by presenting an interdisciplinary framework that positions culturally embedded contemporary architecture as a strategic instrument of city branding, demonstrating how the Bund Finance Center translates architectural symbolism into urban authenticity, emotional attachment, and global brand identity in a competitive city branding context.

**KEYWORDS:** architectural identity; bund finance center; cultural symbolism; heritage and innovation; urban branding.

## 1. Introduction

The Bund Finance Center (BFC) in Shanghai represents a pivotal architectural intervention at the intersection of historical memory and contemporary urban development. The BFC is situated at the endpoint of the city's most iconic street along the Bund, serving as a transitional threshold between the colonial-era waterfront, the old town, and the emerging financial district (Heatherwick Studio, 2025; Mairs, 2017). As Shanghai

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continues to redefine its global image while preserving its cultural roots, the BFC has emerged as a landmark that embodies this dual ambition through form, symbolism, and civic function. Fig. 1 maps the spatial context of the Bund Finance Center within its surrounding landscape.

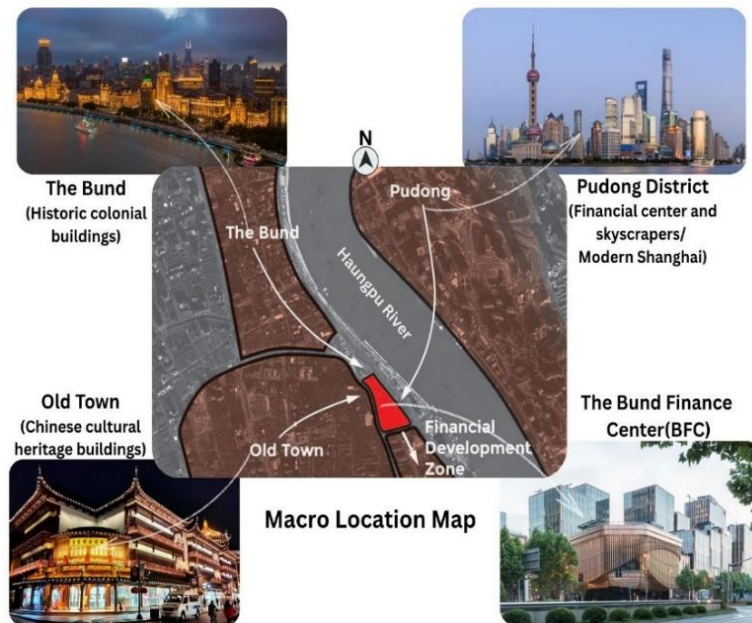


Fig. 1. Macro mapping of the Bund Finance Center within its urban context

The 420,000-square-metre development integrates eight mixed-use buildings that include premium office spaces, luxury retail stores, a boutique hotel, and a cultural centre all interconnected by a publicly accessible landscaped plaza (Heatherwick Studio, 2025). The masterplan was conceived to be highly permeable, offering pedestrian-friendly connections that weave through the old and new districts. In doing so, the project reimagines urban boundaries, positioning architecture as both a spatial and cultural bridge Fig. 2 illustrates the master plan layout.



Fig. 2. Micro mapping of the Bund Finance Center’s master plan configuration

At the heart of the scheme is the Fosun Foundation, a cultural centre elevated on two pillars and wrapped in a kinetic façade composed of 675 magnesium alloy “tassels” inspired by traditional Chinese bridal headdresses and weaving techniques. These movable elements not only animate the structure visually but also serve functional roles; modulating light, privacy, and performance space exposure (Heatherwick Studio, 2025). The design reflects a confluence of craftsmanship and innovation, blending carved stone frames with high-performance glazing systems to evoke both heritage and technological advancement (Mairs, 2017).

The staggered massing of the buildings respects the architectural rhythm of the historic Bund, while the kinetic façade and elevated theatre reinterpret traditional Chinese spatial and ceremonial motifs for a modern audience (Bai, 2023; Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022). As noted by Heatherwick and Evenden, the project was guided by the desire to produce a public-oriented development that resonates with Shanghai’s cultural identity while responding to its urban dynamism (Heatherwick Studio, 2025).

This paper explores the cultural symbolism and architectural identity of the Bund Finance Center (BFC), focusing on how its design contributes to Shanghai’s urban legacy and contemporary cultural landscape. Specifically, the study investigates how traditional elements are abstracted into modern design language, how public perception aligns with intended symbolism, and how the architecture emotionally and culturally engages its users (Arkaraprasertkul, 2007; Greenspan, 2011). Through these inquiries, the BFC is positioned not only as a real estate development but as a cultural statement, a landmark of heritage innovation within the global urban context.

To guide this investigation, the research is structured around several key questions: how the BFC incorporates cultural symbolism into its design; in what ways the BFC shapes Shanghai’s architectural identity; what impact the BFC has on Shanghai’s urban legacy and cultural landscape; and how the BFC’s architecture emotionally or personally impacts observers. By addressing these questions, the study aims to offer insight into how the BFC serves both as a symbol of Shanghai’s modern aspirations and a reflection of its enduring cultural foundations.

The interplay between architecture, cultural symbolism, and urban identity has become a central discourse in contemporary architectural research (Alavi & Tanaka, 2023). Scholars argue that architecture is not solely a matter of form and function, but a vehicle for expressing cultural values, collective memory, and civic identity (Greenspan, 2011; Arkaraprasertkul, 2007). This is particularly relevant in cities like Shanghai, where rapid modernization intersects with a layered historical narrative.

The Bund, a historic zone along Shanghai’s Huangpu River, has long served as both a visual and ideological marker of the city’s evolution from a colonial port to a global financial hub (Henriot, 2010; Taylor, 2002). Within this context, the Bund Finance Center (BFC) offers a unique architectural response that integrates high-performance materials with visual motifs drawn from traditional Chinese design. Its kinetic veil, bronze detailing, and stone-clad volumes are not simply decorative but represent deliberate cultural gestures (Heatherwick Studio, 2025; Bai, 2023).

Recent scholarship emphasizes how such gestures are part of broader urban branding strategies. “Brandscapes” as introduced by Architectural Theory Review, frame architecture as a spectacle-driven medium for experience and identity creation. In this light, BFC’s fusion of innovation and heritage functions as both a symbolic and commercial asset, aligning with Shanghai’s global urban narrative (Fernsebner, 2010; Zhang & Yang, 2019). Greenspan (2011) expands on this by noting the power of spectacle to evoke emotional engagement and collective identification with place.

From a heritage perspective, Den Hartog & González Martínez (2022) explore how projects like BFC enable “re-signification” of memory blending traditional spatial concepts, such as open theatres and courtyard forms, into modern multifunctional spaces. Similarly, Cody (1999) and Yu (2008) explore how Shanghai’s historic architecture has long operated as a contested field of identity, shaped by external influences and internal reinterpretation.

Heatherwick Studio and Foster + Partners, through their design of the BFC, embody these principles by creating a development that is both context-responsive and globally attuned. The BFC's integration of cultural motifs like Chinese weaving patterns and theatrical spatial forms shows how architecture can generate layered meaning and emotional resonance (Heatherwick Studio, 2025; Heatherwick Studio, 2025). In sum, the literature confirms that the BFC's design strategy rooted in cultural semiotics, emotional engagement, and urban spectacle aligns with contemporary theories of identity-driven architecture. It contributes to an emerging paradigm where buildings are not only utilitarian or aesthetic objects but dynamic actors in the cultural and symbolic life of cities (McNeill, 2022; Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022; Bai, 2023).

## 2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology to explore the cultural symbolism and architectural identity of the Bund Finance Center (BFC) in Shanghai. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this research, as it allows for a deep, interpretive understanding of how architectural forms carry meaning, evoke emotion, and reflect cultural identity in a contemporary urban context (Arkaraprasertkul, 2007; Greenspan, 2011). The method integrates multiple data sources design documentation, academic literature, visual analysis, and public responses to ensure triangulation and thematic richness. NVivo software was used to support coding and synthesis of findings across these sources, allowing patterns to emerge both inductively and deductively. To clarify the scope and function of each data type, the following table outlines how each source was used to answer the research questions.

Table 1. Data sources and purpose

Data Type	Purpose	Research Question(s)
Questionnaire	Understand public/professional perceptions	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
Design Documents	Analyze visual and symbolic features	RQ1
Expert Literature	Theoretical framing and validation	RQ2, RQ3
Visual Analysis	Semiotic interpretation	RQ1, RQ3

As shown in Table 1, the structured questionnaire helped assess both public and expert interpretations of the BFC's design, cultural references, and emotional impact. This was crucial in evaluating how closely user perception aligns with intended symbolism and architectural identity (Bai, 2023; Yu, 2008). Design documents from Heatherwick Studio and Foster + Partners were analyzed to identify embedded visual metaphors such as the kinetic veil, material palette, and courtyard-like configurations (Heatherwick Studio, 2025; Cody, 1999).

Literature was reviewed to provide the theoretical grounding for interpreting the relationship between built form, memory, and symbolic identity (Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022)(Fernsebner, 2010). Visual analysis techniques were used to interpret spatial composition and architectural gestures, especially those tied to public interaction and heritage reinterpretation (Klingmann, 2010; Zhang & Yang, 2019).

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo 12, which supported the systematic coding of qualitative inputs. Responses from the questionnaire were coded into thematic nodes such as Cultural Symbolism, Architectural Identity, Urban Branding and Legacy, Emotional Connection, and Sustainability and Innovation. These themes directly aligned with the study's research questions and helped structure the findings presented in Tables 2 to 5. For example, responses categorized under Cultural Symbolism (linked to RQ1) correspond to interpretations of the kinetic façade and bronze detailing as expressions of traditional Chinese theatre and craftsmanship (Heatherwick Studio, 2025; Bai, 2023). Similarly, nodes like Urban Branding and Architectural Identity supported RQ2 and RQ3, drawing connections between the building's design language and Shanghai's evolving image as a global yet culturally rooted city (Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022; Greenspan, 2011).

By integrating multiple perspectives, professional and public, the study not only validates its findings through triangulation but also illustrates the multidimensional role of BFC in shaping and symbolizing Shanghai's urban narrative.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Cultural symbolism as expressed design language (RQ1)

The Bund Finance Center (BFC) embodies a spatial narrative rooted in cultural symbolism, where design elements are purposefully chosen to convey deeper meanings beyond function. A major theme revealed through survey responses is the intentional referencing of traditional Chinese forms, materials, and philosophies. This supports the idea that architectural features can serve as symbols that reinforce and communicate identity. As part of this inquiry, participants were asked to identify which design features of the BFC they associated with cultural references. The results are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Perceived cultural symbolism in BFC design

Symbolic Element	Design Feature	Cultural Reference	% of Respondents Who Noted It	Thematic Code (NVivo)
Kinetic Façade	Rotating bronze tubes	Chinese theater curtains / bamboo blinds	73%	Movement & Transformation
Material Use	Bronze-toned metals, stone	Traditional Chinese craftsmanship/materials	68%	Cultural Symbolism
Dynamic Form	Changing shadows and silhouettes	Taoist/Buddhist philosophy of change	61%	Cultural Symbolism
Courtyard-like Layout	Semi-open ground levels	Traditional Chinese courtyard homes	56%	Spatial Heritage Symbolism

##### 3.1.1 Kinetic façade

As shown in Table 1, the most widely recognized symbolic element was the kinetic façade of the cultural center, with 73% of respondents drawing a connection between its rotating bronze tubes and traditional Chinese theater curtains or bamboo blinds. This not only reflects visual familiarity but also invokes symbolic connotations of ceremonial space, rhythm, and cultural performance (Heatherwick Studio, 2025; Bai, 2023). The façade's ability to transform over time through rotation echoes the Taoist and Buddhist concepts of impermanence, a theme noted by 61% of respondents who interpreted the dynamic shadows and silhouettes as metaphors for change (Arkaraprasertkul, 2007; Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022).

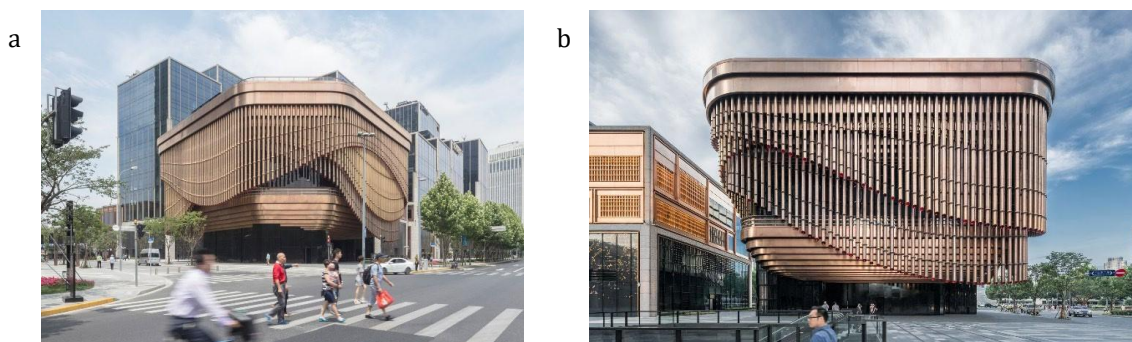


Fig. 3. (a) Kinetic façade of cultural center; (b) North elevation of cultural center (ArchDaily, 2017; Behance, 2020)

The kinetic façade is composed of 675 metal tassels that rotate to form a moving curtain around the building's cultural centre (Heatherwick Studio, 2025). This curtain, inspired by traditional Chinese bridal headdresses, can open and close like a stage set, blurring the boundary between interior and exterior space and creating a ceremonial atmosphere (ArchDaily, 2017; Bai, 2023). The movement of the façade acts as a visual metaphor for transformation and rhythm, allowing the building to engage dynamically with both natural light and human presence (Fernsebner, 2010).

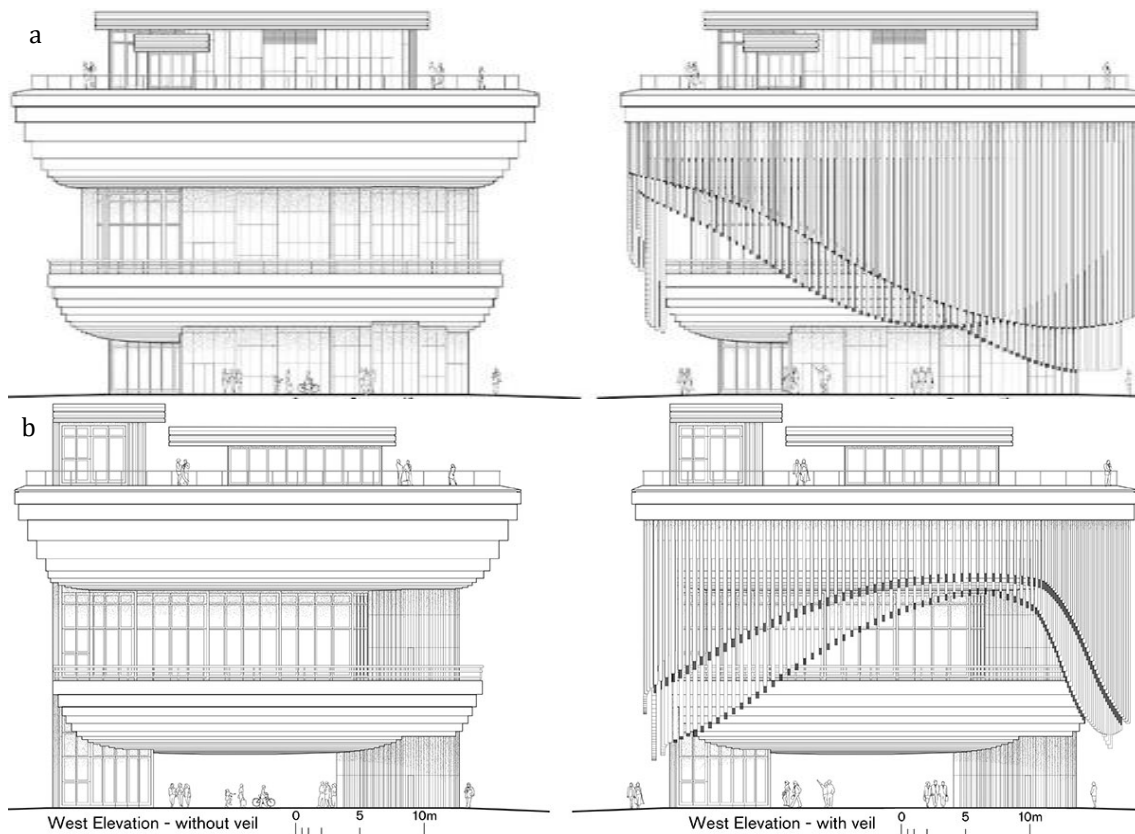


Fig. 4. (a) South elevation of cultural center (without & with veil); (b) West elevation of cultural center (without & with veil) (ArchDaily, 2017)

### 3.1.2 Material use

Further reinforcing this cultural grounding is the use of Bronze-toned metals, and stone, materials historically embedded in Chinese craftsmanship. According to 68% of participants, these materials conveyed a sense of authenticity and traditional artisanship counterbalancing the steel-and-glass modernism prevalent in much of contemporary Shanghai (Greenspan, 2011; Cody, 1999). The stone elements used in the colonnade are carved with deep, sculptural detailing, reflecting the fusion of digital fabrication and hand-carving techniques to maintain a sense of cultural tactility (Heatherwick Studio, 2025). Each tassel is clad with coloured stainless steel sleeves. Inspired by patterns of Chinese weaving, ropes and knots, the studio worked with local craftsmen to develop embossed textures for the sleeves. The textures vary in scale and become more diffuse as the tubes rise, reducing the sense of weight (Heatherwick Studio, 2025).

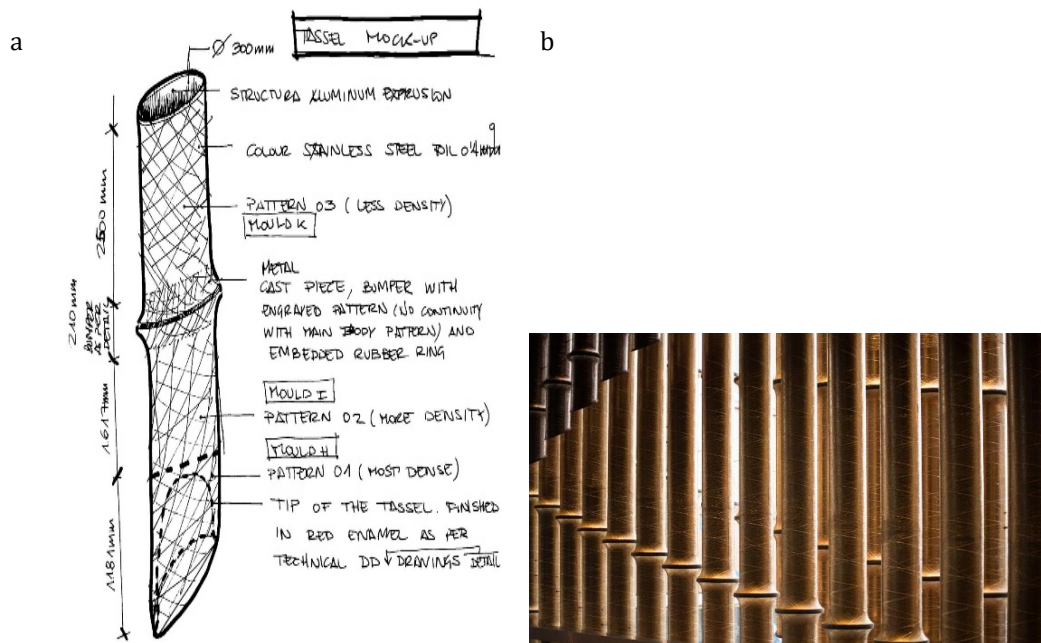


Fig. 5. (a) Pattern of metal tassel; (b) Bronze-toned metal tassels (Heatherwick Studio, 2020)

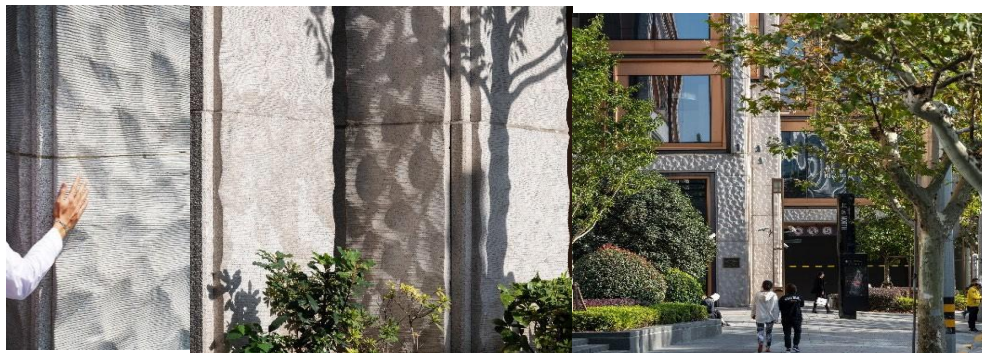


Fig. 6. Hand-crafted granite stone (Foster + Partners, 2017)

### 3.1.3 Dynamic form

The dynamic form of the BFC extends beyond its kinetic elements. The staggered building masses shift in scale and geometry as they respond to surrounding urban forms and the curvature of the historic Bund. The transitions between light and shadow on these volumes evoke spiritual concepts of balance and transience rooted in Taoism and Buddhism (Arkaraprasertkul, 2007; Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022). These qualities further amplify the performative and symbolic dimensions of the structure.



Fig. 7. Dynamic architectural elements of the cultural center (Behance, 2020)



Fig. 8. The Bund Finance center complex  
(Heatherwick Studio, 2020)

### 3.1.4 Courtyard-like layout

Additionally, 56% of respondents identified the semi-open ground layout as evoking the spatial characteristics of the traditional courtyard house, or *siheyuan*, suggesting a continuity of form that anchors modern urban design in historical domesticity (Yu, 2008; Bai, 2023). The open public plaza at the base of the BFC is not only a space of transition but also a communal gathering ground that mirrors traditional concepts of shared space in Chinese architecture (Mairs, 2017). The design encourages pedestrian movement, cultural performance, and visual permeability, all of which contribute to its symbolic reading as a contemporary reinterpretation of historic community spaces (Heatherwick Studio, 2025).

Together, these elements show that the BFC achieves cultural symbolism not through replication, but through abstraction, inviting interpretation while maintaining authenticity. These findings align with theoretical frameworks asserting that architecture can function as a cultural text, expressing memory, ritual, and identity in built form (Heatherwick Studio, 2025; Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022; Greenspan, 2011).



Fig. 9. The Bund Finance Center complex layout  
(Heatherwick Studio, 2020)

## 3.2 Architectural identity and hybrid integration (RQ2)

Building upon the cultural symbolism explored in the previous section, the Bund Finance Center's (BFC) distinctiveness emerges from its hybrid architectural identity. Rather than strictly preserving tradition or embracing globalized modernism, the BFC synthesizes both into a unified form. This hybridity situates the BFC as a transcultural work

simultaneously representing Shanghai's rich historical identity and its future oriented urban narrative (Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022; Heatherwick Studio, 2025).

Occupying a prominent site at the southern end of the Bund along the Huangpu River, the BFC serves as both a visual and symbolic gateway between Old Shanghai including the Bund and Old Town and modern Shanghai, notably the Pudong skyline and Lujiazui financial district. The 420,000-square metre masterplan is highly permeable for pedestrians and was designed to connect the old town with the new financial centre (Heatherwick Studio, 2025). According to Gerard Evenden of Foster + Partners, the massing strategy was developed to reflect the scale and rhythm of the nineteenth-century landmarks along the Bund while engaging with the dynamic skyline of modern Shanghai (Heatherwick Studio, 2025).

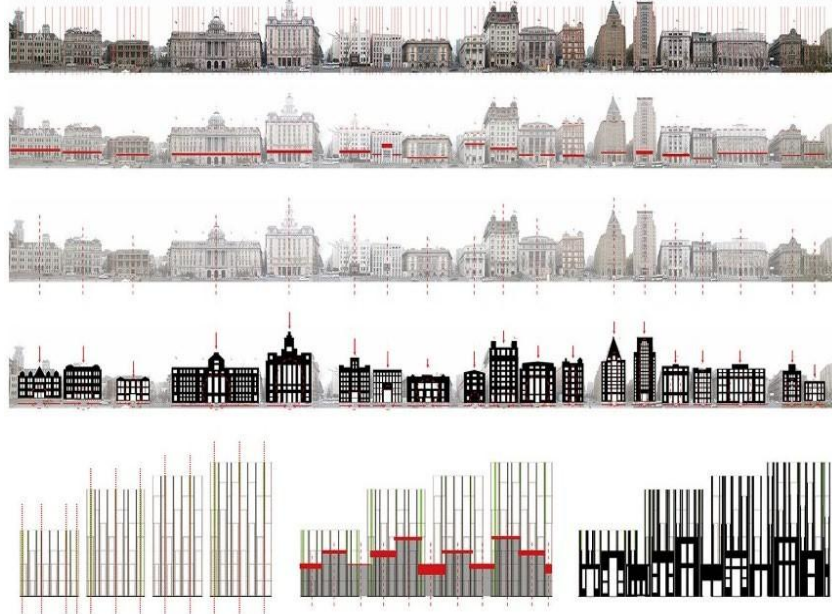


Fig. 10. Architectural harmony inspired by The Bund's colonial architecture (Heatherwick Studio, 2020)



Fig. 11. The Bund Finance Center preserving the skyline harmony of The Bund (Heatherwick Studio, 2020)



Fig. 12. The Bund Finance Center as architectural bridge between old and new Shanghai (Heatherwick Studio, 2020)

Two 180-metre towers define the south of the site, while the buildings along the waterfront are staggered in height to mirror the historic rhythm of the Bund. At its heart lies the Fosun Foundation, a flexible cultural centre inspired by the open-air stages of traditional Chinese theatre. This central structure reinforces the scheme's identity as a civic and cultural link bridging architectural history with contemporary urban life (Bai, 2023; Arkaraprasertkul, 2007). To evaluate how this identity is perceived, both professionals and the public were surveyed. Their responses are summarized in the Table 3 below.

The strongest agreement (85%) centered around the notion that the BFC represents a successful fusion of Eastern and Western design principles. This hybridity is particularly visible in the interplay between solid stone masses, evoking permanence and tradition, and the lightweight kinetic veil that suggests motion and progress. Participants often described this as a "balanced blend of past and future," demonstrating how form can reflect dual temporalities and dual cultural allegiances (Heatherwick Studio, 2025; Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022).

Table 3. Perceptions of architectural identity and integration

Aspect of Identity	Design Characteristic	Public/Expert Interpretation	% Agreement in Responses	NVivo Theme
East-West Fusion	Modern massing + traditional motifs	"Balanced blend of cultural past and future"	85%	Architectural Identity
Shanghai's Global Image	Landmark presence along the Bund	"Represents new era of Chinese design on global stage"	77%	Urban Branding & Legacy
Cultural Continuity	Referencing heritage in a modern skyline	"Not forgetting our roots"	66%	Cultural Engagement
Identity Through Innovation	Moving façade + smart urban interface	"Futuristic, yet meaningful"	71%	Identity via Innovation

Further, 77% of respondents stated that the BFC reinforces Shanghai's image as a forward-facing global metropolis. The building's location on the historically charged Bund makes its presence even more meaningful: it operates as a symbolic threshold between

colonial memory and contemporary innovation (Bai, 2023; Arkaraprasertkul, 2007). In this way, the BFC becomes a tool for place-branding, contributing to the broader discourse of urban identity formation in the post-globalization era (Greenspan, 2011). Meanwhile, 71% praised the building's innovative identity particularly the kinetic façade as a fusion of technology and tradition. Its responsive, performative function goes beyond engineering; it acts as a visual script of cultural continuity (Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022). Lastly, 66% of respondents appreciated that heritage had not been abandoned. Instead of mimicking traditional architecture, the BFC reinterprets historical patterns, forms, and philosophies through a contemporary design language (Bai, 2023; Arkaraprasertkul, 2007). In summary, the BFC stands as an emblem of architectural hybridity. Through form, context, and symbolism, it integrates Shanghai's past and future establishing itself as a meaningful icon in the city's evolving skyline.

### 3.3 Emotional impact and urban branding potential (RQ3 & RQ4)

While the formal and symbolic attributes of the Bund Finance Center (BFC) are significant, their deeper impact emerges through the emotional responses they evoke and the meanings they activate among viewers. Architecture, as discussed in contemporary urban theory, does not only organize space but also mobilizes pride, identity, and emotional attachment (Greenspan, 2011; Fernsebner, 2010). This emotional resonance becomes a powerful dimension of cultural storytelling and city branding, where architecture becomes a vehicle for public memory and symbolic meaning.

Participants in this study expressed strong feelings toward the BFC's materiality, symbolism, and overall atmosphere. These responses are not incidental; they emerge because the BFC acts as a cultural landmark that articulates both the history and future of Shanghai. The summary of these affective and perceptual responses is presented in Table 4. As shown in Table 4, 80% of respondents described the BFC experience as emotionally meaningful, often using language such as "pride," "belonging," and "inspiration." The comment, "It made me feel proud of Chinese culture again," exemplifies the building's symbolic capacity to stir identity and cultural confidence. This supports the argument by Greenspan (2011), who refers to the "power of spectacle" in architecture's ability to produce visceral and shared experiences of place and meaning.

Table 4. Emotional and legacy impact of BFC

Impact Area	Observed Response or Statement	Qualitative Examples from Responses	% of Respondents	NVivo Code
Emotional Connection	"Inspiration," "Pride," "Sense of belonging"	"It made me feel proud of Chinese culture again"	80%	Emotional Connection
Cultural Awareness Boost	Sparked curiosity in Chinese traditions	"I looked up Chinese bamboo architecture after visiting"	67%	Cultural Engagement
Iconic Urban Presence	Seen as symbol of modern Shanghai	"Like a postcard of Shanghai's future"	74%	Urban Branding & Legacy
Heritage Awareness	Raised recognition of traditional values in new forms	"Now I see how buildings can preserve culture"	63%	Cultural Symbolism

Furthermore, 74% of participants regarded the BFC as an iconic visual of modern Shanghai. Descriptions like "a postcard of Shanghai's future" suggest that the BFC functions as more than a building, it becomes a spatial emblem of aspiration. This role reflects Fernsebner (2010) analysis of Expo 2010, where architectural spectacle was used to articulate national narratives. The BFC similarly operates as an urban brand, a visual shorthand for Shanghai's evolving identity (Greenspan, 2011; Fernsebner, 2010).

Notably, 67% of respondents stated that their exposure to the BFC sparked curiosity

about Chinese traditional architecture, especially bamboo and wood construction. This response reveals how symbolic design can reawaken interest in heritage, which aligns with studies on architectural form as a trigger for cultural engagement (Bai, 2023; Yu, 2008). Additionally, 63% of respondents noted that the building enhanced their understanding of how architecture can help preserve cultural values. These observations echo the work of Den Hartog & González Martínez (2022), who stress the role of design in re-signifying memory within rapidly urbanizing contexts, and Arkaraprasertkul (2007), who examines symbolic layering in Shanghai's contemporary built form.



Fig. 13. The Bund Finance Center in urban context (Arch Daily, 2017)

Altogether, the data reinforce that the BFC's emotional and branding power is deeply embedded in its architectural language. Through a careful blend of tradition, innovation, and narrative, the building evokes powerful affective responses that position it as both a personal and collective landmark. In doing so, it contributes not only to the city's physical skyline, but also to its emotional and cultural landscape.

#### 3.4 Multilayered meaning from public and expert insights (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3 & RQ4)

Beyond symbolic references, architectural identity, and emotional response, the Bund Finance Center (BFC) reveals a deeper novelty through the convergence of public and expert interpretations. When thematic data from NVivo coding are viewed holistically, the BFC emerges as a richly layered artifact simultaneously a site of memory, innovation, civic interaction, and cultural storytelling. This aligns with broader academic discourse suggesting that the true cultural value of contemporary architecture lies in its interpretive flexibility and public resonance (Arkaraprasertkul, 2007; Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022). The integration of multiple user perspectives ranging from design professionals to casual visitors, enables a broader understanding of the building's cultural performance. The comparative coding results are outlined in Table 5 below.

As seen in Table 5, cultural symbolism remained a dominant theme across all coded responses, with 81% of participants identifying traditional motifs embedded in modern design features. Architectural identity was the most frequently coded theme (85%), reflecting strong public awareness of how heritage and innovation coexist through material expression and design form. One respondent poetically referred to the BFC as a "dancing house blooming along the Bund," capturing the metaphorical layering embedded in its formal language. This supports the view that contemporary Shanghai architecture often employs symbolic layering to articulate historical meaning in an evolving urban context (Arkaraprasertkul, 2007).

Table 5. Thematic NVivo coding summary – public &amp; expert responses

Theme (Node)	Code Description	Supporting Evidence (Quotes/ Observations)	% of Sources Coded	Linked Research Question(s)
Cultural Symbolism	Use of traditional motifs such as the kinetic curtain inspired by bamboo blinds and theatre curtains.	“Inspired by bridal headdress... moving veil like traditional Chinese stage curtain.” “Fusion of tradition and modernity.”	81%	RQ1, RQ4
Architectural Identity	Juxtaposition of old and new materials (stone vs. steel); modern facade rooted in historical meaning.	“Hand-carved granite with smart glazing.” “Dancing house blooming along the Bund.”	85%	RQ1, RQ2
Urban Legacy & Branding	Designed as a gateway between the historic Bund and modern Shanghai; acts as a visual and symbolic anchor.	“Postcard of Shanghai’s future.” “Symbolic connection between old and new China.”	78%	RQ2, RQ3
Emotional Connection	Visitors feel pride, amazement, cultural reawakening through the BFC experience.	“I felt proud of Chinese culture again.” “It inspired me to research Chinese bamboo design.”	74%	RQ4
Public Engagement	Open plaza, accessible spaces, and rotating veil enhance interaction and public enjoyment.	“You can come up here with friends... open to all.” “Cultural center offers shows, exhibitions, art.”	69%	RQ3
Sustainability & Innovation	LEED Gold certification, earthquake-resistant kinetic façade.	“Fusion of craftsmanship and sustainability.” “Technologically advanced yet rooted in heritage.”	63%	RQ2

Moreover, 78% of respondents perceived the BFC as a symbolic bridge between old and new Shanghai, validating its role in heritage-driven place branding. This observation ties directly to the urban branding discourse explored by scholars who emphasized the role of spectacle in shaping global perceptions (Greenspan, 2011). Emotional connection (74%) and public engagement (69%) also featured prominently, underscoring how accessible, interactive spaces generate not only admiration but active participation in cultural life (Fernsebner, 2010; Bai, 2023).

Notably, 63% of participants highlighted sustainability and innovation, recognizing the building’s LEED Gold certification and earthquake-resistant kinetic design. This reveals a novel dimension: BFC is not only a monument of memory but also a technologically progressive structure. As noted in recent scholarship, modern architecture in heritage districts must adapt to contemporary needs while preserving historical resonance (Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022). The BFC achieves this through performative surfaces, material innovation, and environmental responsibility merging function with meaning.

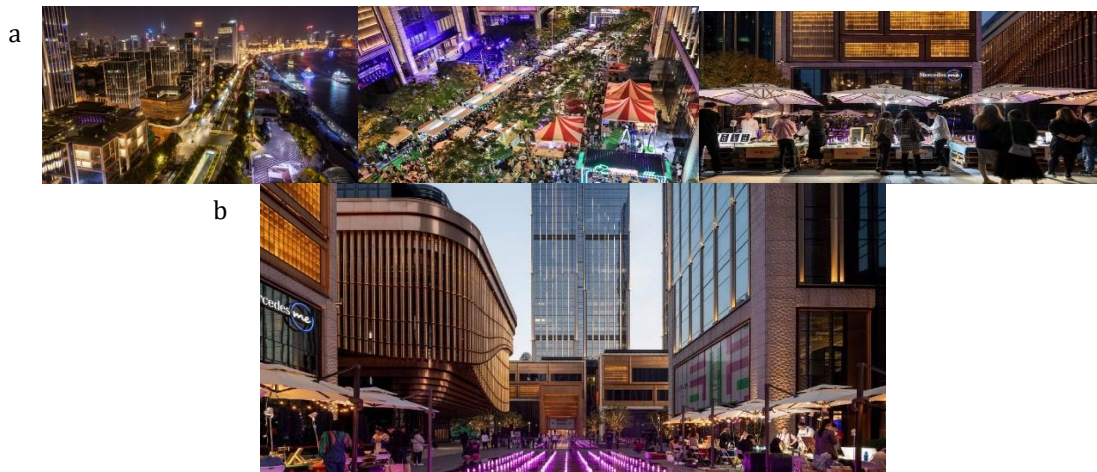


Fig. 14. (a) Aerial night view of the Bund Finance Center within the urban context of Shanghai; (b) public engagement activities in the open plaza of the Bund Finance Center (Foster + Partners, 2017)

Thus, the novelty of the BFC lies in its plurality of meaning: it is seen as a cultural archive, a civic space, a sustainable model, and an architectural narrative. Its ability to elicit multiple interpretations across different audiences reflects its success not only as a design object, but as a meaningful urban actor contributing to Shanghai’s contemporary cultural identity.

### 3.5 Visual framework of cultural integration and architectural significance

The conceptual diagram below illustrates the interconnected dimensions that define the Bund Finance Center (BFC) as a culturally symbolic and architecturally expressive landmark. Synthesizing insights from the thematic findings in Tables 2 through 5, the diagram visualizes the dynamic interplay between cultural references, design identity, emotional resonance, and interpretive meaning across both public and expert perspectives.

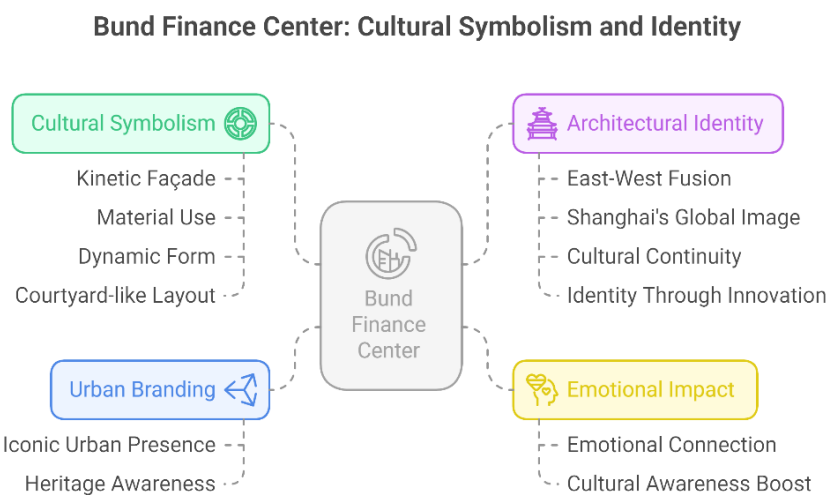


Fig. 15. Conceptual diagram of cultural symbolism and architectural identity in the Bund Finance Center

At the core of this framework are specific architectural gestures such as the kinetic façade, the use of bronze and stone, and the semi-open courtyard-like layout which were consistently interpreted as representations of Chinese tradition, craftsmanship, and spatial philosophy (Heatherwick Studio, 2025; Bai, 2023). These design choices contribute to a broader narrative of transformation and continuity, aligning with philosophical concepts of impermanence and renewal found in Taoist and Buddhist traditions (Arkaraprasertkul, 2007; Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022).

Beyond symbolism, the building's hybrid identity emerges through its seamless integration of modern massing with heritage motifs, a quality that 85% of respondents recognized as a successful East-West fusion. This architectural synthesis reinforces Shanghai's dual role as a global metropolis and a culturally rooted city (Greenspan, 2011; Fernsebner, 2010). The BFC thus operates not only as a physical landmark but also as a communicative symbol of evolving identity. Emotional engagement further amplifies its impact. Survey responses indicated that the building evokes pride, inspiration, and curiosity; feelings that reflect the power of architectural form to activate cultural awareness and foster a sense of belonging (Yu, 2008; Bai, 2023). These affective responses position the BFC as a living urban narrative, one that connects its users to both historical memory and forward-looking vision.

The diagram also captures how both professional and public audiences interpret the BFC through multilayered lenses associating it with legacy, innovation, accessibility, and sustainability (Cody, 1999; Den Hartog & González Martínez, 2022). Features such as LEED-certified design elements and earthquake-resistant construction demonstrate that cultural relevance and environmental performance are not mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing. This integrated model affirms the study's central argument: that architecture, when deeply embedded in cultural symbolism and public consciousness, becomes a powerful medium for expressing, shaping, and sustaining urban identity. The Bund Finance Center stands as a contemporary exemplar of this synthesis communicating meaning through form, fostering emotional connection, and anchoring place identity within the evolving fabric of Shanghai.

The visual framework of cultural integration in architecture operates as a critical mechanism through which cities articulate identity, project authenticity, and assert distinctiveness in an increasingly competitive global landscape (Gönüllüoğlu & Arslan Selçuk, 2025). Architecture is never merely a built form; it is a communicative device—one that encodes historical memory, cultural values, and social aspiration into spatial and aesthetic experience (Lee, 2022). When understood through the lens of city branding, architectural significance transcends aesthetic judgment and becomes a strategic asset in shaping how a place is perceived, remembered, and valued by diverse audiences, including tourists, investors, residents, and the diaspora community.

Cultural integration within architectural frameworks refers to the deliberate incorporation of indigenous visual languages, material traditions, ornamental vocabularies, and spatial philosophies into contemporary built environments (Cameron & Eiman, 2025; Zheng, 2024). This process is neither simple mimicry of historical forms nor uncritical adoption of global modernist conventions; rather, it constitutes a thoughtful negotiation between continuity and transformation. Cities that successfully navigate this negotiation produce architectural environments that feel simultaneously rooted and forward-looking—a quality that resonates deeply with authenticity as understood in place branding discourse (Donald et al., 2009; Mbinza, 2025). Authenticity, in this context, is not a static condition but a relational achievement, constructed through ongoing dialogue between a city's material heritage and its contemporary cultural expression.

The architectural significance of this integrative process is most legible in how it shapes place identity (Saker, 2025; Shi & Tan, 2025). Buildings, urban corridors, and public spaces that bear the imprint of local cultural syntax function as anchors of collective memory and engines of communal pride (Zhang et al., 2025). They signal to external audiences that a place possesses depth, narrative coherence, and irreducible particularity—attributes that distinguish it from generic, placeless urbanism. This distinction is foundational to effective city branding. When a city's built environment communicates a coherent and credible cultural story, it strengthens the overall brand proposition, enhancing its appeal as a destination for cultural tourism, creative investment, and international recognition.

Furthermore, the visual framework of cultural integration carries significant implications for reputation management. Cities that leverage their architectural heritage as a branding instrument—through conservation policies, heritage trail development, culturally responsive urban design guidelines, and the promotion of vernacular construction knowledge—

demonstrate a governance orientation that values authenticity over superficial spectacle (Aldossary et al., 2025; Lei & Zhou, 2022; Nwafor et al., 2020). This approach cultivates trust among global audiences who are increasingly skeptical of manufactured place identities. In this respect, architecture functions as tangible evidence of a city's brand promise, grounding abstract claims about cultural richness in concrete, inhabitable experience.

The interdisciplinary nature of this inquiry is also worth underscoring. A comprehensive understanding of how architectural significance contributes to city branding requires integration of perspectives from urban studies, cultural geography, heritage management, marketing theory, and social anthropology (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020; de Jong & Lu, 2022). Each discipline illuminates a different dimension of the relationship: how form encodes meaning, how heritage is mobilized in competitive place strategy, how communities negotiate the terms of cultural representation in built form, and how policy frameworks enable or constrain culturally sensitive architectural development.

Ultimately, the visual framework of cultural integration positions architecture as a living instrument of place authenticity. Its significance lies not only in the aesthetic coherence it lends to the urban environment but in its capacity to function as a credible, enduring, and emotionally resonant medium through which cities communicate who they are—and why that distinctiveness matters—to the world. This understanding is central to advancing both the theory and practice of city branding in culturally diverse contexts.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that the Bund Finance Center (BFC) is more than a contemporary architectural achievement, it is a cultural landmark that bridges tradition and innovation in one of Asia's most rapidly evolving urban environments. Through qualitative case study analysis and thematic coding, the research uncovered how the BFC integrates symbolic design, material expression, emotional resonance, and urban branding into a coherent architectural narrative. Key findings indicate that the building's kinetic façade, rotating bronze elements, and material choices such as stone and wood evoke strong cultural associations with traditional Chinese theater, craft, and courtyard architecture. These elements were consistently interpreted by participants as metaphors of transformation and continuity echoing Taoist and Buddhist philosophies of impermanence and change. Rather than replicating tradition, the BFC reinterprets it through abstraction, creating a dialogue between heritage and modernity.

The building's fusion of traditional motifs and modern massing recognized by 85% of respondents emphasizes its hybrid architectural identity. As a symbolic gateway along the historic Bund, it represents Shanghai's simultaneous commitment to cultural preservation and global relevance. Public perceptions further confirmed the BFC's role in shaping the city's image, aligning with urban branding literature that views architecture as a tool for identity projection. Beyond its formal attributes, the BFC was shown to activate deep emotional responses. Eighty percent of respondents expressed feelings of pride, inspiration, and belonging when engaging with the building. Many reported a renewed curiosity about Chinese design traditions, demonstrating architecture's potential to reawaken cultural awareness. These emotional outcomes support theories that emphasize architecture's affective role in cultural memory and collective identity.

Crucially, this study introduced a conceptual framework synthesizing symbolic design, identity formation, emotional engagement, and interpretive plurality. Thematic coding of both public and expert responses revealed shared recognition of the BFC's sustainable innovation and civic openness. With LEED Gold certification and earthquake-resistant technologies, the BFC exemplifies how heritage consciousness can coexist with environmental responsibility.

The originality of this research lies in its integrated method combining semiotic interpretation, public perception, and architectural analysis to generate a multidimensional understanding of cultural architecture. The model developed here can inform future design evaluations across heritage-rich global cities. In conclusion, the Bund Finance Center

demonstrates that architecture can serve as both a visual emblem and a cultural instrument. It anchors memory, evokes emotion, and shapes Shanghai's evolving identity. As a symbolic and spatial entity, the BFC reinforces the essential role of culturally embedded design in creating meaningful urban futures.

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