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The role of “An ensemble of differences” in promoting the development of China’s independent bookstores

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of the digital age and the impact of online e-reading, offline physical bookstores have gradually developed a diverse range of business models, and independent bookstores are no exception. By investigating four independent bookstores in (Southwest) China to summarize the distinctive features and spatial benefits of the “spatial turn” of independent bookstores that have created multiple spaces. The survey shows that the spatial turn of independent bookstores in China is mainly based on crossover business as a spatial medium of “ensemble of differences”. Finally, it is suggested that independent bookstores should maintain an active independent cultural character in the context of industry and commercialized market competition.

Keywords: Crossover business; ensemble of differences; independent bookstores; multiple spaces; spatial turn.
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1. Introduction

The concept of independent bookstores, often referred to as “indies” or “independents,” originated in the United States in the 1970s. Initially, all bookstores in the U.S. were small, independent establishments catering primarily to urban and university populations. However, the rise of chain bookstores in the late 20th century significantly impacted these smaller entities (Baidis et al., 2019; Lu, 2017).

In the period of relative lack of information and knowledge, bookstores were initially centered on “goods”, which corresponded to different kinds of books, just as people had to go to school to receive education, and had to go to bookstores to buy books, while today's bookstores are centered on “scenes”, “people”, ‘intelligence’ - that is, by focusing on creating spatial scenarios, connecting people in different scenarios (community, schools, scenic spots, etc.) through rich and diversified cultural activities, and effective complementation of the single function of bookstores in the past through the intelligentization of services (Zhang & Yang, 2023). Today, globally, the number of independent and online bookstores is increasing, and independent bookstores with specialties are evolving into

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multicultural spaces (Lee & Ko, 2024). In fact, the significance of the existence of independent bookstores is not limited to a mode of book business; it also marks the transformation of public space in society and culture (Fan, 2009).

In China, physical bookstores can be categorized into state-owned, private chain, and independent bookstores. State-owned bookstores are government-operated, while private chain bookstores are managed by enterprises and may consist of multiple locations. Independent bookstores, on the other hand, operate with complete autonomy over their book selections and the ambiance of their reading spaces, often reflecting the operator's cultural and spiritual values.

The development of independent bookstores in China has undergone four distinct phases: the rise (1980-2005), a wave of closures (2005-2012), a period of blossoming (2013-2015), and the current transition phase (2016-present). State policies have played a crucial role in these transformations, with significant support emerging in 2016 when 11 governmental departments issued the "Guidance on Supporting the Development of Entity Bookstores" (The State Council, 2016). This policy aimed to transform physical bookstores into multi-functional cultural venues. Further support came in 2017 from the National Radio and Television Administration, emphasizing the role of bookstores in public cultural services and national reading initiatives (National Radio and Television Administration, n.d.). As new services, technologies and ideas continue to emerge and the consumer marketing environment changes, the design of each physical bookstore's efforts, both in terms of services and products, changes, which are necessary for the physical bookstore to quickly adapt to the new environment and meet these challenges, and it is critical that operators are able to target their marketing approach to consumers to get the best results (Christou & Thrasyvoulou, 2022).

This study aims to bridge the gap in international research regarding the development trends and business models of independent bookstores in China. By integrating spatial theory with practical insights, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the unique characteristics and contemporary dynamics of China's independent bookstores.

The methodology employed is both objective and realistic, incorporating spatial analysis and empirical data. The main findings indicate that the transformation of independent bookstores in China results from a synergy between state policy support and market economy dynamics. The contribution of this paper lies in its detailed examination of these factors, offering valuable insights into the evolving landscape of independent bookstores in China.

The remainder of this manuscript is structured as follows: Section 2 carries the statement of the problem and introduction of the theory, Section 3 reviews the relevant literature, Section 4 outlines the research methodology, Section 5 provides a case analysis of four bookstores, Section 6 presents the findings, and Section 7 discusses the implications and conclusions of the study.

2. Problem statement and theoretical approach

The "2020-2021 China Physical Bookstore Industry Report" that was released by the China Bookstore Conference in 2021, revealed that 4,061 new physical bookstores opened in China in 2020. No longer viewed simply as a place to sell books, physical bookstores have been transformed into new public cultural spaces – as new cultural landmarks in cities or regions, they attract a large number of local readers and even tourists. Accordingly, it has been asserted that "the future of physical bookstores lies in reading service innovation, and the realization of the value of reading service innovation is embedded in the public cultural service system and structure (Jiang, 2021)." In the macro context of various domestic support policies and national development plans in China, both private bookstores that have been operating for decades and new, modern independent bookstores are trying to Crossover Business.

In referring to early studies of spatial theory, Lefebvre saw space as purposefully produced, with the result that it was no longer limited to physical properties and was instead replete with various ideologies. The "city-oeuvre" appears as one of the key aspects of his theory of "The Production of Space", as embodied in his assertion that "[t]he city attracts 'everything' ('fruits and objects, products and producers, works and creations, activities and situations')." From the perspective of this research, this is significant because the independent bookstore has become a cultural complex and landmark in the modern city. It is a new public space in the sense of spatial production and is a composite carrier; it

functions as a complex of cultural, creative and industrial agglomerations, is filled with various spatial displays and provides special reading services, so offers more than the sale of books. It has been transformed into a cultural space invested with emotion and value. It therefore creates an opportunity in space where all of these different things can come into contact with each other. The “city-oeuvre” creates many sites and moments for encounters by generating spatial and temporal opportunities for encounters between differences and, to this extent, can be said to be literally an “ensemble of differences” (Chiodelli, 2013). This is a concept that this study will apply and develop. “Differential space” refers to the future space that can embody differences and fresh experiences, and is the seed of a new type of space that is contained in the abstract space itself – by definition, it is unable to be born or generated if a new type of space cannot emphasize differences (Lefebvre, 1991). This study will apply and develop this insight. The study will engage and develop this relationship by examining the spatial layout of four representative independent bookstores in China (objective physical space). It analyzes the personal expressions presented by the operators in their spatial practices (subjective spiritual space) with the aim of summarizing and deducing the kind of social space that independent bookstores in China currently reproduce.

Since the 1980s, Soja proposed the concept of “thirdspace”. “Thirthing” is a gesture that always remains open, and the study of it always captures the ensemble of spaces constituted by differences (Soja, 1996). Today’s independent bookstores, as cultural complexes, have become the “third space” of urban cultural space. This is different from the previous understanding because it offers a spatial medium that transmits the products and outcomes of social practices, and provides a logical and epistemological space. As we enter the 21st century, the question of space is raised in various forms, including in the guises of architecture, feminism, globalization and urbanization. “Space”, whether as a concept, keyword or proposition, has been formally presented as a problem to be analyzed in real social life and various academic fields. Its significance, both as a research preoccupation and a practical priority, is therefore clearly understood and appreciated.

3. Literature review

International research on independent bookstores has predominantly focused on European countries and regions, manifesting in various forms. First, much of the existing literature examines the strategies adopted by independent bookstores in response to external environmental pressures. Noel (2022) utilizes the theory of symbolic goods to analyze how French independent bookstores counteract the dominance of book-selling giants like Amazon and chain stores. Through interviews with small and medium-sized bookstore owners and observations at events, Noel highlights the adaptive strategies employed. Similarly, Li (2010) investigates the spatial design strategies of uniquely designed independent bookstores in Sydney amidst retail consolidation policies, offering insights into the spatial aspects that this study applies. Baidis et al. (2019) demonstrate the increase in the number of independent bookstores in the United States as a result of competitive strategies and advantages adopted under market pressures. These case studies provide a foundation for understanding the strategic responses of independent bookstores, which this study builds upon by examining four independent bookstores in China.

Second, the regional impact and benefits of independent bookstores have been a focal point in research. O’Brien (2016) analyzes the diversity and geographies of UK-wide independent bookstores through observations and interviews with booksellers, providing a comprehensive view of their regional influence. Dong-Yeon Ku and Ryu (2020) analyze large data on the increase in the number of independent bookstores in Korea, while Laing (2020) examines the business practices and cultural status of independent bookstores in Scotland. In analyzing the four independent bookstores in China, this study explores how local cultural elements are integrated into their location and spatial design, consistent with national policies that position physical bookstores as public cultural services. This regional analysis aligns with the research theme and highlights the cultural significance of independent bookstores in urban spaces.

Third, research on independent bookstores in China has primarily focused on their cultural and political symbolism. Liu (2020) addresses how Chinese cultural enterprises engage in “cultural politics” using data from 55 independent bookstores. However, these studies often overlook the role of national

policies in guiding independent bookstores and fail to adequately consider their cultural significance as part of urban spaces. This study fills this gap by providing a detailed analysis of the development, business models, and spatial significance of independent bookstores in China. Additionally, it offers a comparative perspective by examining independent bookstores from various countries.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research object selection

Given the vast number of cities in China (over 300), the study initially focused on the 15 "New First-tier" cities as per the 2020 "China City Level" ranking. From these, Chengdu and Chongqing, the top two cities, were selected. To identify representative independent bookstores, we referred to the ranking list on the popular review website "dianping.com". Despite recognizing the platform's limitations and potential subjectivity of individual reviews, we chose independent bookstores with the highest number of reviews and positive feedback in each city. The search was conducted on January 3, 2023.

4.2 Selection criteria and process

The survey revealed that some highly-ranked bookstores were branches of larger chains. To ensure the study's focus on truly independent bookstores that reflect local culture, we excluded chain branches unless they originated in the city. This approach enhanced the study's objectivity and alignment with the research theme. Consequently, four independent bookstores were selected: Wuzao Bookstore and Dubenwu (Shaocheng Store) in Chengdu, and NBooks Club and Clessence Bookstore in Chongqing.

4.3 Data collection methods

To develop a comprehensive research methodology, we employed a combination of textual analysis and surveys. To ensure the authenticity and objectivity of online reviews and mitigate the impact of emotional user evaluations, we adopted a mixed-method approach that combined online and offline data collection.

4.3.1 Spatial analysis

Online Analysis: We examined the spatial layout, planning, and design of the four bookstores using online resources, including virtual tours and website information.

Offline Analysis: Field visits were conducted to observe the physical layout, design, and activities of the bookstores. This hands-on approach provided first-hand insights into the reader experience and the bookstores' ambiance.

4.3.2 Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with bookstore staff to gather qualitative data on operational strategies, challenges, and customer engagement practices.

We also interviewed customers to obtain feedback on their experiences and perceptions of the bookstores.

4.3.3 Case study method

The collected data from surveys, spatial analysis, and interviews were analyzed using the case study method. This approach allowed for a detailed examination of each bookstore's development and business models, highlighting their unique contributions to the local culture and community.

By integrating these methods, the study aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the role of independent bookstores in Chengdu and Chongqing, and their impact on local cultural development.

5. Independent bookstores: "Ensemble of Differences"

The study analyzed the four bookstores' multiple spatial layouts. First, their spatial composition (the spaces each bookstore possesses) is examined (Table 1). An overview that highlights the spatial special features of the four bookstores by drawing on a spatial attributes perspective demonstrates that these spaces enable the construction of multifunctional spaces for independent bookstores.

Second, it is demonstrated that the construction of multifunctional spaces is actually a guided service for readers, and the achievements of these four bookstores (in terms of reading guidance) are assessed. Finally, the characteristics of independent bookstores that are reflected in the construction of multifunctional spaces are highlighted.

Table 1.

Multiple spaces of independent bookstores.

City	Independent Bookstores	Book Display	Reading	Other Functional Spaces				
				Coffee / Drinks	Cultural and Creative Derivatives/ Merchandise	Dining	Accommodation	For Events or Exhibitions
Chengdu	Wuzao bookstore	Y	Y	Y	Y			Y
	Dubenwu (Shaocheng Store)	Y	Y	Y				
Chongqing	NBooks Club	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Clessence Bookstore	Y	Y	Y	Y			Y

*Note: If a space is available in the bookstore, it is marked with a ‘Y’.

The survey and statistics show the four bookstores in the two cities are consistent in their construction of the three spaces (book display, reading and drinks area). Dubenwu Bookstore only has these three functional areas and no other spatial extensions. NBooks Club bookstore is, with seven areas, the most multifunctional bookstore. Of these, the restaurant and accommodation are unique.

5.1 Wuzao Bookstore

The Wuzao Bookstore focuses on independent magazines and brochures, and features hundreds of domestic and international magazines on art, design, food and lifestyle, along with books with innovative content. The magazines and books are well designed and printed. The bookstore’s development of cultural and creative derivatives is the second most important feature and main functional area space that attracts consumers, and female consumers in particular. Floor space constraints however mean the creative derivatives and book display areas are, unlike the separate coffee area and the exhibition area on the second floor, mixed and crossed in the same relatively enclosed common space. On the second floor of the bookstore, a SPACE exhibition hall that hosts niche and interesting exhibitions has been created. This space is confined and aggregated.

5.2 Dubenwu Bookstore

The publications sold at the Dubenwu bookstore are mainly the latest and most popular literature, art, and philosophy books. The bookstore space is small and homogenous. The bookstore, with the exception of two areas (of a few square meters of space) that include reading chairs and tables, consists almost entirely of book display shelves and aisles. The bookstore therefore resembles a traditional independent bookstore and is focused on providing excellent humanities books to readers. This bookstore therefore focuses on reader reading behavior and book quality.

5.3 NBooks Club

NBooks Club is one of the larger independent bookstores in China and it has a wide range of operations, the design and layout of the functional space is very comprehensive. The bookstore’s spatial characteristics are typical of a multifaceted space, and illustrate the concept of “ensemble” very clearly. The books are mainly classified into Art, History, Literature and social sciences, and a special music audition area features a CD reading area with vinyl records. The music audition area is also a reading area, and this establishes the diversity of reading areas as the first key feature of the bookstore’s diverse spatial layout areas. The use of the natural landscape as a backdrop is the most significant advantage of the reading area. The bookstore’s unique location on a hill in the city (South

Mountain View) and the design of the reading area also serve to highlight the natural landscape of the mountain view. Second, the reading area intersects with the events and exhibitions area, and the same space is utilized in multiple ways. For example, the bookstore's largest reading area of the bookstore can host performances, parties and weddings, in addition to other activities. Other functional spaces are also densely packed, and this was one of the first independent bookstores in the country to introduce a dining and accommodation function space. Both spaces are relatively independent and closed. In addition to reflecting the spatial layout within the building, the outdoor space expansion also reflects the bookstore's open space.

The bookstore's overall plan also creates a highly encompassing and multiple space with a strong functional mix. The business concept focuses on the use of other functional spaces to introduce books and reading-oriented approaches. The bookstore is built with the most functional spaces, but the spaces are not closely connected and the remaining five spaces are, with the exception of the book display and reading area, more independent and isolated. With regard to reading guidance services, the bookstore has almost no main creator communication activities, and is more of a venue rental service for the reading area. With the exception of the improved use of mountain scenery and outdoor natural environment to encourage readers to read, the rest of the spaces, and especially the restaurant and accommodation areas, do not have the function of guided reading, but are instead a kind of gimmick that guides reader consumption. The NBooks Club bookstore is successful as a cultural card for the city and it also meets the needs of the competitive market; however, as an independent bookstore with a reading influence, it lacks some cultural dimensions.

5.4 Clessence Bookstore

First, Clessence Bookstore, just like the NBooks Club, is located in the downtown area of Riverside Road. The mountain and river view provide both bookstores with two outstanding geographical advantages. This bookstore is highly acclaimed for selecting and recommending good books, and for trying to inherit and promote the local history and culture. With regard to interior space layout and design, the introduction of the stilted building, which is an architectural style of local folk houses and also a feature of the city's humanistic landscape, is perhaps the most significant feature. With regard to cultural atmosphere, it is instructive to refer to the book display, coffee and public activity areas along with local folk houses with many staircases and undulating terrain. The second significant feature is the integration of science-related elements and the arrangement of related installations, such as Mobius Band and the hypercube. The bookstore's spatial layout also includes a separate (more enclosed) tea room and a reading area for children. The bookstore's multiple spaces feed into and sustain a rich cultural atmosphere.

Independent bookstores have tried to create multiple spaces with the aim of effectively meeting the challenges of transformation. The independent bookstore has gradually changed from a "viewing and browsing" space, where readers are often active, to a new stage of "information experience in a multi-dimensional space." The survey suggests bookstores are arranging regular reading and sharing events, which are usually held once a month. The bookstore operators fully integrate planned thematic activities into each space, such as traditional Chinese tea demonstrations, tea culture recommendations and tea-related book tastings in the tea room; other activities include new book recommendations, author-reader meetings, classical poetry readings, immersion theater experience training and small individual concerts in the activity area. Of these activities, inviting famous scholars and reading promoters into the bookstore's public activity space to give narrations and communicate with readers accounts for the space's highest usage rate. Although Clessence Bookstore does not, of the four bookstores, contain the most multifunctional spaces, it has the most and most sustainable reading activities, and this has been enabled by its multifunctional space layout and the two main features of the bookstore's spatial design (humanities + technology) that engage readers and prompt them to understand the knowledge released by the features. Clessence Bookstore is therefore one of the most successful "ensemble of differences" of diverse spaces and is also the one that most effectively guides readers to read. The contemporary bookstore should draw on spatial changes and the design of multi-dimensional reading styles and experience areas to become a space that promotes inspiration, access, display and gathering. It should place a stronger emphasis on building a service

platform for the city and society by drawing on user participation. Clessence Bookstore’s multifaceted space is therefore the communication medium that can best facilitate this service platform.

6. Results and discussion

6.1 Results and findings

At a time of ongoing (economic, social and technological) development, mobile internet, data and informatization have emerged as key environmental factors that affect the development of independent bookstores. In addition, readers’ bookstore-related needs have also become more diversified and personalized. Readers enter the bookstore, and enjoy, (re)use and transmit resources in what can be described as a process of resource recycling and optimization. As an extension of the traditional reading function of independent bookstores, the “ensemble” and diversification of space appears as an integration and re-creation of the resource recycling process undertaken in the current era of multicultural development, and also as a guiding benefit that leads readers to actively participate in the extension of functional space and the multicultural experience. The survey of this study found that, in addition to the less functional space layout of the bookstore at the Dubenwu, the spatial layout of the other three bookstores above shows diversity and crossover in the use of space functions, and this is especially true in the case of the NBooks Club, which includes other functional areas that are far larger than the physical space committed to bookstore display and reading. Second, Dubenwu Bookstore has not expanded its traditional reading space, and Wuzao Bookstore’s space was built to sell design and cultural and creative products. The preceding analysis suggests that, of the four bookstores, Clessence Bookstore is, in terms of the construction of diverse spaces, the most inclusive and open.

While multiple spaces in urban independent bookstores have increasingly been constructed, the constraints of traditional business models and management habits have hitherto prevented a positive development from being achieved. Most innovations bring leisurely lifestyle pastimes and other business industries into the premises, and to this extent are essentially concerned with decoration and the aims of increasing user consumption methods and achieving means of consumption, as opposed to real planning.

6.2 Independent bookstores have revealed new characteristics

In being influenced by the industry’s new concept and atmosphere, independent bookstores have revealed new characteristics.

The first is crossover business. The independent business operation model is the largest difference that distinguishes it from chain bookstores, companies or group operations. In order to gain a foothold in the industry, it is necessary to form interoperable (cultural, physical and spiritual) relationships with the outside world, and to broaden business channels to meet the intermingling of modern society and life. At the physical, and more precisely the profitability, level, the crossover strategies of Wuzao Bookstore and NBooks Club Bookstore are well integrated, and the focus on creating a consumer space has produced considerable revenue. At the cultural and spiritual level, Dubenwu and Clessence bookstores are representative, and they demonstrate the independent humanistic character of recommending and selling knowledge that has been maintained during independent bookstores’ transition phase.

Second, the use of multiple spaces to guide reading and consumption. The needs and contents of readers’ requests for space change, and there is a desire for the variety of choices offered by bookstores. In comparison to other bookstores, independent bookstores provide a more liberal way of doing business. They choose specific book categories, product services and decoration styles on the basis of their own consciousness, and also provide a cultural space in which private bookstores (properties) are a carrier and cultural complex that gathers multiple businesses. With regard to the layout of the functional space in the current transition period, the operator’s choice is free and the purpose of space construction is set in accordance with its own need – it can actively guide readers to attain knowledge or encourage readers to spend money in pursuit of their own leisure.

Third, consider the dissemination of urban regional culture. Independent bookstores have developed to the point where they gradually occupy culturally important territories in cities, and

present a number of defining features, including the integration of resources with a characteristic literature, superior regional locations and novel decorative styles. Each feature is aligned with the development of the city and the advancement of civilization. It should be noted that NBooks Club and Clessence Bookstore built their spaces by taking advantage of their superior locations and incorporate natural and humanistic landscapes, which should be understood as a form of cultural communication that responds to the city and region. The independent bookstore enhances the style of the cultural space and focuses on the user experience; together with other cultural spaces in the city, such as museums, art galleries and theaters, they have a value and spatial significance that benefits the whole city and region.

7. Conclusion

In the contemporary field of culture and art, there are many forms of space – they are not just embodied in the artworks created by architects and interior designers in art galleries/centers and museums, but are also presented in commercial spaces, public spaces and even the countryside, nature and Earth itself. The questions of how to see, understand and use space, and break the limitations of spatial planning, have become topics worth thinking about that merit further exploration. The study introduces the development and transformation of independent bookstores in China, and identifies the proposition that independent bookstores are experiencing a crossover business model. In referring to space theory and drawing on the theoretical support of “The Production of Space” and the “Thirdspace”, it explores the current development path of independent bookstores in China by examining four independent bookstores that have created multiple spaces. Each bookstore is taken as a case study, and this makes it possible to evaluate the extent to which they have successfully realized the paradigm of an “ensemble of differences” space; And this also makes it possible to summarize the distinctive features of independent bookstores in the stage of spatial transformation.

The impact of digitalization led readers to view unique independent bookstores from the perspectives of cultural image and space, with the result that anxiety about the fading of independent bookstores was superseded by the “spatial turn”, a path of salvation based on cultural dissemination and the construction of multiple spaces. This transformation has occurred to the extent that this transformation to an experiential and multifaceted space has become established as a defining characteristic of independent bookstores. In referring to the intersectionality and inclusiveness of spatial concepts, we see that the three key characteristics of representative independent bookstores (crossover business, multiple spaces guiding reading and consumption, dissemination of urban regional culture) also reflect the question of whether the concept of “ensemble” of spaces should be sustained over time. At present, some of China’s independent bookstores are trying to cater to the consumers and the market by over-exalting the subject with consumption power, and are only “stacking” and “superimposing” the multiple spaces, while failing to acknowledge the bookstores’ cultural connotations. This is a mistake.

Cultural consumption is one of the most promising areas of consumption. Under the condition of knowledge economy, it shows the characteristics of mainstreaming, high-tech, popularization and globalization. It is an important means to improve people’s spiritual realm and the level of social civilization, as well as an important lever to adjust the economic structure and promote economic growth. In the face of escalating demand for cultural consumption, independent bookstores are adjusting their supply system to be more adaptable and flexible, and are actively creating a diversified and multi-dimensional space collection system with the aim of enhancing their consumer appeal and market competitiveness. However, the selling of books or, in our own formulation, the “recommend knowledge”, is a most basic and essential business purpose and value embodiment that bookstores should consider to be core, irrespective of the competitive situation. The “spatial turn” of the four bookstores has been successful, and is confirmed by the fact that each one has expanded their spatial consumption areas beyond sales and reading provision. However, only Dubenwu and Clessence Bookstore succeeded in maintaining their independent cultural character after this “turn.”

While the focus on the concept of an “ensemble” of spaces provides a path to successfully respond to industry and market demand, the creation of multiple spaces requires other factors (that are aligned with bookstores’ essential development requirements) to be taken into account – by doing this, independent bookstores will maximize the value of the “spatial turn.” While the four independent

bookstores engaged in this study are representative, regional cultural differences that can manifest between cities and regions should also be acknowledged and taken into account as a potential weakness. In addition, only one bookstore has a positive reading guidance benefit as a result of its multifunctional space, which means the study lacks related case studies. The subsequent study will use the model of big data analysis to examine quality independent bookstores in each city, and this will enable it to summarize some business approaches and characteristic paths that the industry can use as reference points. We will focus on the paradigm of creating collection spaces with the aim of promoting reading interests both in China and internationally, and will focus on independent bookstores that use such spaces with the aim of promoting a guiding concept of space construction.

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