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REIMAGINING CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION IN AN URBAN TRANSFORMATION CONTEXT IN THE AGE OF SUSTAINABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Rapid urban transformation has intensified the tension between contemporary development imperatives and the long-term safeguarding of cultural heritage values, particularly in historic urban areas of outstanding significance. Diriyah, home to the At-Turaif District—inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List—represents a complex case where large-scale urban development, national identity construction, and global heritage protection intersect. This paper argues that conventional heritage protection approaches, primarily focused on regulatory control and physical conservation, are no longer sufficient in contexts of accelerated urban change. Instead, cultural heritage protection must be reimagined as an integrated, value-based, and sustainability-oriented governance process embedded within urban transformation frameworks. Drawing on international heritage doctrines, sustainability agendas, and the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, this paper conceptualizes a renewed framework for heritage protection in Diriyah. It critically examines the challenges and opportunities posed by contemporary urban development and articulates guiding directions to strengthen cultural heritage protection in alignment with sustainability principles and long-term urban resilience.

KEYWORDS: Cultural heritage protection; urban transformation; sustainability; Historic Urban Landscape; Diriyah; At-Turaif District; heritage governance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rapid urban transformation has intensified the pressure on cultural heritage sites, particularly those embedded within expanding metropolitan regions. Contemporary urban development is no longer limited to incremental growth; rather, it is characterized by large-scale, vision-driven projects that fundamentally reshape spatial, social, and economic structures. In this context, traditional heritage protection approaches—largely focused on monument preservation and regulatory control—have proven insufficient to address the complexity of change affecting historic urban areas (Pendlebury, 2013).

Diriyah represents a critical case where heritage protection intersects with national development ambitions. As the birthplace of the first Saudi state and the location of the At-Turaif District, Diriyah possesses outstanding historical and symbolic significance, formally recognized through its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2010 (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2010). Simultaneously, Diriyah is undergoing extensive urban transformation aligned with Saudi Arabia's national development strategies, positioning it as a cultural, tourism, and lifestyle destination (Vision 2030).

Objectives:

- Conceptualizing the Reimagining of Cultural Heritage Protection in Diriyah within the Context of Sustainable Urban Transformation
- Discussing the Challenges and Opportunities Posed by Contemporary Urban Development for Heritage Management in Diriyah
- Articulating Guiding Directions for Strengthening Cultural Heritage Protection in Diriyah in the Era of Sustainability

2. CONCEPTUALIZING THE REIMAGINING OF CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION IN DIRIYAH

2.1 From Monument-Centered Protection to Value-Based Management

Heritage protection theory has progressively shifted from an object-centered paradigm toward a value-based approach that recognizes cultural significance as socially constructed, multilayered, and dynamic (Mason, 2002). Cultural heritage is no longer understood solely in terms of physical fabric but also in relation to historical meanings, social practices, spatial relationships, and identity formation.

In Diriyah, the significance of At-Turaif extends beyond its architectural typology to encompass its urban morphology, its relationship with the Wadi Hanifah landscape, and its role as a symbol of political and cultural continuity. Protecting such a site therefore requires managing development processes in ways that sustain these values rather than isolating the heritage fabric from its evolving context (Smith, 2006).

2.2 The Historic Urban Landscape Approach

The UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) provides a comprehensive framework for reimagining heritage protection within urban transformation contexts. The HUL approach advocates for integrating heritage conservation into urban planning and development policies, emphasizing landscape-scale analysis, stakeholder participation, and the management of change rather than the prevention of change (UNESCO, 2011).

This approach is particularly relevant to Diriyah, where heritage values are inseparable from broader environmental, visual, and socio-economic systems. By adopting the HUL framework, heritage protection becomes a strategic instrument that informs planning decisions, development controls, and sustainability objectives, rather than a reactive mechanism applied after development pressures emerge (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012).

3. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES POSED BY CONTEMPORARY URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN DIRIYAH

3.1 Challenges

3.1.1 Development Pressure and Commercialization

Large-scale urban and tourism development can lead to the commodification of heritage, where cultural assets are reduced to aesthetic backdrops for consumption-oriented activities. Such processes risk undermining authenticity, local meanings, and community attachment to place (Ashworth, Graham & Tunbridge, 2007). In Diriyah, the challenge lies in ensuring that economic valorization does not eclipse cultural significance.

3.1.2 Visual Integrity and Cultural Landscape Disruption

Urban transformation frequently introduces new building forms, infrastructure, and spatial configurations that may disrupt historic visual corridors and landscape relationships. The integrity of At-Turaif is closely linked to its spatial dialogue

with its surrounding topography, making visual impact a critical concern in heritage management (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2010).

3.1.3 Institutional Fragmentation

Heritage governance in large development contexts often involves multiple institutions with overlapping mandates. Without clear coordination mechanisms, heritage protection risks becoming fragmented, inconsistent, or subordinated to development priorities (Pendlebury, Townshend & Gilroy, 2009).

3.1.4 Environmental and Climate-Related Risks

Traditional earthen architecture, such as that found in Diriyah, is particularly vulnerable to moisture, temperature fluctuations, and extreme weather events. Climate change intensifies these risks, necessitating proactive conservation strategies and environmentally sensitive urban planning (Fatorić & Seekamp, 2017).

4. OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE HERITAGE PROTECTION

Despite the considerable challenges associated with rapid urban transformation, such processes also generate substantial opportunities for strengthening cultural heritage protection when approached through a sustainability-oriented framework. Unlike conventional conservation contexts—often constrained by limited funding, fragmented institutional capacity, and reactive interventions—large-scale urban development initiatives can act as catalysts for more comprehensive, systematic, and forward-looking heritage management strategies (Labadi, 2013).

4.1 Mobilization of Financial and Technical Resources

One of the most significant opportunities arising from urban transformation lies in the mobilization of financial capital and technical expertise at a scale rarely available to heritage conservation alone. Major development projects typically allocate substantial budgets for planning, construction, infrastructure, and environmental management. When heritage protection is embedded within these processes, it can benefit from sustained funding streams that support documentation, conservation works, monitoring systems, and capacity building (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012).

In the case of Diriyah, development-driven investment enables comprehensive archaeological recording, architectural documentation, and material analysis prior to and during intervention phases. Such systematic approaches enhance the scientific basis of conservation decisions and reduce the risks associated with ad hoc or emergency-driven preservation practices. Moreover, access to advanced technologies—such as digital documentation, environmental monitoring, and conservation science—supports preventive conservation strategies that are essential for the long-term safeguarding of earthen architecture and fragile historic fabrics (Fatorić & Seekamp, 2017).

4.2 Institutional Capacity Building and Governance Innovation

Urban transformation initiatives often necessitate the creation of new governance structures, planning authorities, and inter-institutional coordination mechanisms. While such complexity can pose challenges, it also provides opportunities to strengthen heritage governance through clearer mandates, integrated decision-making, and enhanced professional expertise (Pendlebury, Townshend & Gilroy, 2009).

In Diriyah, the scale of transformation creates conditions for institutional learning and capacity building in heritage management. Dedicated heritage units, advisory committees, and interdisciplinary teams can be established to ensure that cultural heritage considerations are systematically incorporated into urban planning, design review, and development approval processes. This institutionalization of heritage protection reduces reliance on individual expertise and contributes to long-term governance resilience.

4.3 Advancing Preventive and Value-Based Conservation

Urban transformation offers an opportunity to shift from reactive conservation—focused on repairing damage after it occurs—to preventive and value-based conservation approaches. By integrating heritage protection into early planning stages, potential impacts on cultural significance can be anticipated and mitigated before irreversible changes take place (Mason, 2002).

For Diriyah, this shift enables conservation strategies that prioritize cultural significance, authenticity, and integrity rather than solely material preservation. Preventive measures such as controlled access, environmental management, regular maintenance cycles, and risk preparedness plans can be systematically implemented, reducing long-term conservation costs and minimizing loss of heritage values (Smith, 2006).

4.4 Linking Heritage Protection to Sustainable Development Agendas

Aligning cultural heritage protection with international sustainability frameworks represents a critical opportunity for reinforcing its relevance within urban transformation processes. Sustainable Development Goal 11.4 explicitly calls for strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage, thereby positioning heritage as a core component of sustainable cities rather than a peripheral concern (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018).

In practical terms, this alignment enables heritage protection in Diriyah to be evaluated through measurable indicators related to public and private investment, institutional commitment, and long-term outcomes. It also facilitates the integration of heritage objectives into broader agendas of urban resilience, social inclusion, environmental responsibility, and economic diversification. By framing heritage protection as a contributor to sustainability performance, decision-makers are more likely to justify long-term investment and policy support (Labadi, 2013).

4.5 Community Engagement and Social Sustainability

Urban transformation initiatives frequently emphasize place-making and cultural identity as drivers of social cohesion and economic vitality. This emphasis creates opportunities to strengthen community engagement in heritage protection, particularly through the recognition and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage, local narratives, and traditional knowledge systems (Smith, 2006).

In Diriyah, involving local communities, cultural practitioners, and heritage professionals in interpretation, storytelling, and management processes can reinforce social ownership of heritage and enhance the authenticity of visitor experiences. Such participatory approaches contribute to social sustainability by ensuring that heritage protection supports local identity and intergenerational continuity rather than displacing or marginalizing existing cultural relationships.

4.6 Sustainable Cultural Tourism as a Conservation Tool

When carefully managed, cultural tourism associated with urban transformation can provide a sustainable financial basis for heritage protection. Revenue generated through tourism can be reinvested into conservation, maintenance, training, and research, creating a virtuous cycle between use and protection (Ashworth, Graham & Tunbridge, 2007).

For Diriyah, the challenge—and opportunity—lies in developing tourism models based on carrying capacity, quality of experience, and cultural authenticity rather than visitor volume alone. Such models support both economic sustainability and the long-term conservation of heritage values**.**

5. GUIDING DIRECTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION IN DIRIYAH

This paper proposes the following guiding directions:

1. **Institutionalizing the Historic Urban Landscape approach** within urban planning regulations and development approval processes.
2. **Embedding Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA)** as a mandatory tool for evaluating the effects of new development on cultural significance.
3. **Adopting value-based conservation strategies** that prioritize cultural significance over material replication.
4. **Developing sustainable tourism management frameworks** based on carrying capacity, visitor experience quality, and reinvestment in conservation.
5. **Strengthening community engagement and intangible heritage integration** to reinforce social sustainability and local identity.
6. **Establishing monitoring indicators aligned with SDG 11.4**, linking heritage protection outcomes to broader sustainability performance.

6. SIMULATING THE BALANCE BETWEEN HERITAGE PRESERVATION AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT DEMANDS

Simulating the balance between cultural heritage preservation and contemporary urban development demands has emerged as a central challenge in rapidly transforming historic urban contexts. In such environments, heritage protection can no longer be conceptualized as a static or defensive practice aimed at freezing sites in time. Instead, it requires a dynamic and integrative approach that accommodates change while safeguarding cultural significance (UNESCO, 2011).

Within this framework, "simulation" should be understood not as mere physical replication or stylistic imitation, but as a strategic planning process that embeds heritage values into the design and governance of urban development. This involves aligning new interventions with the spatial, morphological, and visual characteristics of historic

environments, while ensuring that authenticity and integrity are not compromised through superficial reproduction (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012).

A key foundation for achieving this balance lies in adopting a value-based approach to heritage management, which recognizes that cultural significance extends beyond material fabric to include intangible meanings, social practices, and identity-related dimensions (Mason, 2002). In the case of Diriyah, the significance of At-Turaif is not limited to its earthen architecture but encompasses its relationship with Wadi Hanifah, its urban morphology, and its symbolic role in the formation of the Saudi state. Consequently, development strategies must be designed to sustain these interconnected values rather than isolate the heritage site from its evolving urban context (Smith, 2006).

The Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach provides a comprehensive methodological framework for operationalizing this balance. By integrating heritage conservation into broader urban planning processes, the HUL approach promotes landscape-scale analysis, stakeholder participation, and the proactive management of change (UNESCO, 2011). In practical terms, this enables the use of planning tools such as Heritage Impact Assessments (HIA), visual corridor analysis, and context-sensitive urban design guidelines, all of which contribute to aligning development trajectories with heritage protection objectives.

Moreover, simulation in this context involves anticipating potential impacts of urban development on cultural significance and incorporating mitigation strategies at early planning stages. This shift from reactive conservation to preventive, forward-looking governance enhances the capacity to reconcile economic development, urban growth, and long-term heritage sustainability (Pendlebury, 2013).

Ultimately, simulating the balance between preservation and development requires repositioning heritage not as a constraint on urban transformation, but as an active structuring element that informs design, planning, and policy decisions. In doing so, heritage becomes a driver of sustainable urban development rather than a residual consideration.

7. DISCUSSING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES POSED BY CONTEMPORARY URBAN DEVELOPMENT FOR HERITAGE MANAGEMENT IN DIRIYAH

Contemporary urban development in Diriyah presents a complex set of challenges and opportunities for cultural heritage management, reflecting the broader tensions inherent in large-scale, vision-driven urban transformation processes. As Diriyah evolves into a major cultural and tourism destination, the need to reconcile development imperatives with the protection of the At-Turaif World Heritage Site becomes increasingly critical.

One of the primary challenges lies in development pressure and commercialization, where heritage risks being commodified and reduced to a consumable asset within tourism-driven economies. Such processes can undermine authenticity and weaken the cultural meanings embedded in historic places (Ashworth, Graham & Tunbridge, 2007). In Diriyah, ensuring that economic valorization does not eclipse cultural significance is a central concern.

Another critical challenge relates to visual integrity and landscape disruption. The introduction of new architectural forms, infrastructure, and large-scale developments may alter historic visual corridors and the spatial relationship between At-Turaif and its surrounding landscape, particularly Wadi Hanifah. Maintaining the visual coherence and integrity of the cultural landscape is therefore essential for preserving the Outstanding Universal Value of the site (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2010).

In addition, institutional fragmentation poses a governance challenge, as heritage protection within large development contexts often involves multiple stakeholders with overlapping mandates. Without effective coordination mechanisms, heritage considerations may become secondary to development priorities, leading to inconsistent or fragmented decision-making processes (Pendlebury, Townshend & Gilroy, 2009).

Environmental and climate-related risks further complicate heritage management. Traditional earthen architecture, such as that found in Diriyah, is particularly vulnerable to environmental factors including moisture, temperature variation, and extreme weather events. Climate change intensifies these vulnerabilities, necessitating the integration of environmental management strategies into both conservation and urban planning frameworks (Fatorić & Seekamp, 2017).

Despite these challenges, contemporary urban development also generates significant opportunities for strengthening heritage protection when approached through a sustainability-oriented framework. Large-scale development projects mobilize substantial financial and technical resources, enabling comprehensive documentation, advanced conservation techniques, and long-term

monitoring systems that are often unavailable in conventional conservation contexts (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012).

Urban transformation also facilitates institutional capacity building and governance innovation, as new planning authorities, interdisciplinary teams, and coordination mechanisms are established. These developments can enhance the integration of heritage considerations into planning and decision-making processes, contributing to more resilient and effective governance structures (Pendlebury, Townshend & Gilroy, 2009).

Furthermore, there is a growing opportunity to advance preventive and value-based conservation approaches, shifting from reactive interventions toward proactive management of change. By embedding heritage protection into early planning stages, potential impacts can be anticipated and mitigated before irreversible damage occurs (Mason, 2002; Smith, 2006).

Importantly, aligning heritage protection with sustainability agendas, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 11.4, reinforces its relevance within broader urban development frameworks. This alignment enables heritage to be positioned as a key contributor to urban resilience, social cohesion, and economic diversification, rather than as a competing priority (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018).

Finally, contemporary development creates opportunities for community engagement and sustainable cultural tourism, both of which can strengthen the social and economic foundations of heritage protection. When carefully managed, tourism can generate revenue streams that support conservation while enhancing public awareness and appreciation of cultural heritage (Ashworth, Graham & Tunbridge, 2007).

In conclusion, while contemporary urban development in Diriyah introduces substantial risks to cultural heritage, it also provides a unique opportunity to reframe heritage protection as an integral component of sustainable urban transformation. The challenge lies not in resisting change, but in governing it in ways that preserve cultural significance while enabling long-term urban development.

8. FINDINGS

The analysis of Diriyah's ongoing urban transformation reveals a set of critical findings that redefine the relationship between cultural heritage protection and contemporary development processes.

First, the study demonstrates that **conventional heritage protection models are insufficient** in rapidly transforming urban contexts. Approaches primarily focused on regulatory control, physical conservation, and site boundaries fail to address the dynamic and multi-scalar nature of urban change. In Diriyah, such models risk isolating heritage from its broader spatial, social, and economic context, thereby weakening its long-term sustainability (Pendlebury, 2013).

Second, the findings confirm that **heritage protection must shift toward value-based and landscape-oriented frameworks**. Cultural significance in Diriyah extends beyond material fabric to include spatial relationships, symbolic meanings, and identity-related dimensions. As a result, effective protection requires integrating these values into planning and development processes rather than treating heritage as a separate sector (Mason, 2002; Smith, 2006).

Third, the research highlights that **the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach provides a viable operational framework** for managing the interaction between heritage and urban transformation. By promoting the management of change, cross-sectoral coordination, and stakeholder participation, the HUL approach enables a more adaptive and resilient form of heritage governance (UNESCO, 2011; Bandarin & van Oers, 2012).

Fourth, the findings reveal that **urban transformation simultaneously generates risks and opportunities**. While development pressures, commercialization, and visual disruption pose significant threats to heritage values, large-scale development also mobilizes financial resources, technical expertise, and institutional capacity that can significantly enhance conservation outcomes when properly managed (Ashworth et al., 2007; Bandarin & van Oers, 2012).

Fifth, the study identifies **integrated governance as a critical success factor**. The complexity of Diriyah's transformation necessitates coordinated, multi-level governance structures that align heritage authorities, urban planners, developers, and sustainability institutions. Without such integration, heritage protection risks becoming fragmented and subordinate to development priorities (Pendlebury et al., 2009).

Sixth, the findings emphasize that **aligning heritage protection with sustainability frameworks strengthens its policy relevance**. Linking heritage management to Sustainable Development Goal 11.4 enables the use of measurable indicators, enhances accountability, and supports long-term investment in

conservation as part of broader urban resilience strategies (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018; United Nations, 2015).

Finally, the analysis demonstrates that **heritage can function as a driver of sustainable urban transformation rather than a constraint**. When integrated into planning and governance systems, heritage contributes to place identity, social cohesion, economic diversification, and environmental sustainability. In this sense, heritage becomes a generative force shaping urban futures rather than a passive element requiring protection.

9. CONCLUSION

Reimagining cultural heritage protection in Diriyah necessitates a profound conceptual and operational shift in the way heritage, urban development, and sustainability are framed, negotiated, and governed. The findings of this paper demonstrate that conventional heritage protection models—largely centered on regulatory control, material conservation, and site-based boundaries—are insufficient within contexts of accelerated urban transformation. In Diriyah, where heritage is embedded within a large-scale national development vision, such models risk reducing cultural heritage to a residual constraint rather than recognizing it as a strategic asset.

This paper argues that cultural heritage in Diriyah should not be understood as a passive entity threatened by urban change, but rather as an active agent capable of shaping sustainable urban futures when appropriately integrated into planning and governance frameworks. By adopting value-based management approaches, heritage protection can guide development trajectories in ways that preserve cultural significance, reinforce place identity, and enhance social cohesion (Mason, 2002; Smith, 2006). In this sense, heritage becomes a generative force—informing urban form, land-use decisions, landscape management, and public realm design—rather than a sectoral concern addressed in isolation.

The analysis further highlights the critical role of integrated governance in reconciling heritage protection with ambitious urban transformation agendas. The complexity of Diriyah's transformation underscores the necessity of coordinated, multi-level governance structures that align heritage authorities, urban planners, developers, and sustainability institutions. The Historic Urban Landscape approach provides a particularly relevant framework in this regard, as it explicitly promotes the management of change through cross-sectoral coordination, stakeholder participation, and landscape-scale thinking (UNESCO, 2011; Bandarin & van Oers, 2012). Institutionalizing such an approach within planning regulations and development approval processes is essential to ensure that heritage considerations are embedded early and consistently across all stages of urban transformation.

Aligning heritage protection with international sustainability frameworks—most notably Sustainable Development Goal 11.4—emerges as another key mechanism for strengthening long-term protection outcomes. Framing heritage protection as a measurable component of sustainable development enhances its policy relevance and accountability, enabling decision-makers to justify sustained investment and institutional commitment (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018). In Diriyah, this alignment creates opportunities to link heritage conservation with broader objectives related to urban resilience, environmental responsibility, and inclusive economic growth.

Beyond its local implications, the case of Diriyah offers broader lessons for heritage management in the Global South, where historic urban areas are increasingly subject to rapid transformation driven by state-led development, tourism, and globalization. The Diriyah experience illustrates that heritage protection need not be positioned in opposition to development; rather, when grounded in value-based, landscape-oriented, and sustainability-driven frameworks, heritage can play a central role in shaping equitable and culturally grounded urban futures (Labadi, 2013; Pendlebury, 2013).

Finally, this paper contributes to ongoing scholarly debates by reinforcing the need to move from reactive conservation toward proactive governance of change. Future research could build on this work by empirically evaluating the implementation of heritage impact assessments, sustainability indicators, and participatory governance mechanisms in Diriyah and comparable contexts. Such research would further clarify how reimagined heritage protection models perform in practice and how they can be adapted to diverse socio-political and cultural settings.

In conclusion, Diriyah stands at a critical juncture where decisions made today will define not only the physical survival of its heritage but also its capacity to function as a living cultural landscape within a rapidly transforming urban environment. Reimagining cultural heritage protection as an integral component of sustainable urban transformation is therefore not merely desirable—it is essential for ensuring the long-term cultural, social, and environmental resilience of Diriyah and similar heritage-rich cities worldwide.

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