

Reactivating Colonial Heritage

Adaptive Reuse as a Tool for Urban Regeneration in Karachi

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Abstract

Karachi's Saddar Bazaar Quarter (SBQ) is one of South Asia's most prominent ensembles of British-era architecture. Planned in the nineteenth century as a civic and commercial hub, it includes churches, arcades, civic halls, and residences that once gave Karachi its reputation as the "Star of the East." Despite legal protection under the Sindh Cultural Heritage Act of 1994, many of these structures face neglect, insensitive alterations, and underuse today. Existing conservation frameworks privilege material fabric while overlooking the intangible associations and everyday adaptations that continue to animate the quarter. Based on doctoral research, this paper examines adaptive reuse as a strategy for reconnecting colonial heritage with contemporary urban life. Using a mixed-method approach, the study reassesses the condition and value of SBQ's protected buildings. Resurveys reveal a significant decline, particularly in commercial and residential typologies. Yet, fieldwork also documents informal adaptive reuse, including incremental repairs, continued inhabitation, and locally driven alterations, which sustain the quarter's genius loci and reinforce its character as an urban palimpsest. Building on international frameworks such as the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), the Quebec Declaration (2008), and UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (2011), the research introduces expanded assessment criteria that incorporate social, cultural, and economic dimensions alongside architectural form. This reframing highlights buildings of modest design but substantial community value as vital urban assets, while exposing the limitations of fabric-focused approaches. Instead of static preservation, the paper advocates a flexible, value-based, and inclusive approach. By aligning conservation policies with local practices and design innovation, adaptive reuse can transform colonial heritage from underutilised relics into active contributors to cultural continuity, resilience, and sustainable regeneration in postcolonial cities.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Colonial Heritage, Karachi

Introduction

Across postcolonial cities, the question of managing inherited colonial architecture remains a contentious issue. On one hand, these structures embody histories of domination; on the other, they form integral parts of urban identity and daily life. International debates in heritage conservation increasingly emphasise the need to move beyond object-based preservation and towards adaptive reuse, where heritage is not frozen as a relic but reactivated as a living asset within contemporary urban development (Plevoets and Cleempoel 2019). This approach has gained momentum in cities across

Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where colonial-era districts are being repositioned as drivers of cultural continuity and regeneration (Jokilehto 1998, 2007; Boussaa 2018). Karachi, Pakistan's largest metropolis, exemplifies these challenges and possibilities. Now a megacity of more than sixteen million people, it expanded under British rule in the nineteenth century into South Asia's most important colonial port (Lari and Lari 2001; Hasan et al. 2015). The Saddar Bazaar Quarter (SBQ) was at the heart of this transformation, laid out as a European civic and commercial hub. Distinguished by its churches, arcades, civic halls, and residences, SBQ reflected the architectural imprint of colonial authority and the cosmopolitan aspirations of a globalising port city (Akbar et al. 2023). Reactivating Colonial Heritage Today, SBQ still contains a remarkable ensemble of structures from the British-era. Many are legally recognised under the Sindh Cultural Heritage (Preservation) Act, 1994, yet their survival is precarious. Protection has slowed demolition, but neglect, encroachment, and underuse remain pervasive. Rigid regulations and weak enforcement have, paradoxically, preserved the shells of buildings while alienating them from contemporary urban life (Naeem 2004; Naeem and Ahmed 2019). Karachi's urban landscape is best understood as a palimpsest of cultural layers. From the Indus Valley Civilisation to Mughal forts and British colonial architecture, successive imprints have shaped its form and identity. Once celebrated as the "Star of the East," it is now struggling with commercialisation, informality, and weak heritage management. This paper investigates adaptive reuse as a strategy to reactivate colonial heritage and reintegrate it into the contemporary city. Based on doctoral research conducted at Hasselt University (2018–2024), it combines building documentation, condition surveys, archival research, and stakeholder engagement to reassess the role of SBQ. It argues for a flexible, value-based, and inclusive approach that recognises tangible and intangible dimensions, addressing a critical research gap in Pakistan where conservation remains rigidly object-focused.

Literature and Theoretical Framework

Adaptive reuse has emerged as a central strategy within heritage conservation, emphasising the continuity of function and meaning by allowing historical buildings to serve new purposes. Rather than freezing structures as static monuments, adaptive reuse integrates heritage into cities' social, cultural, and economic life (Plevoets and Cleempoel 2019). International charters shaped this shift. The Venice Charter (1964) emphasised material authenticity, while the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) expanded the concept of authenticity to encompass cultural contexts (ICOMOS 1994). The Quebec Declaration (2008) emphasised the spirit of place, recognising intangible associations as integral to heritage (ICOMOS 2008). UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (2011) promoted integration of heritage into wider urban development (Bouchenaki 2003).

Adaptive reuse is not only a technical process but also a socio-cultural one. Factories reused as cultural centres, warehouses as housing, or churches as community spaces illustrate how built heritage can remain relevant while retaining integrity (Bullen 2010; Günçe and Misırlısoy 2019). This dual role positions adaptive reuse as both a conservation method and an urban strategy (Vafaie et al. 2023). Conceptually, Corboz's metaphor of the urban palimpsest describes the city as a layered text, where colonial, modern, and contemporary traces coexist (Corboz 1983). Norberg-Schulz's idea of *genius loci* emphasises place identity rooted in form and lived practices (Norberg-Schulz 1980). These perspectives support

viewing heritage as dynamic and living.

In postcolonial contexts, colonial architecture embodies ambivalence, being both tied to domination and yet integral to identity. Adaptive reuse offers a way to re-signify colonial legacies, reframing them as resources for development (Boussaa 2018; Gabriel 2020). Value-based conservation (Avrami et al. 2000; Avrami and Mason 2019) reinforces this, urging the inclusion of architectural, social, cultural, and economic dimensions. Yet in Pakistan, policies remain object-focused. The Sindh Cultural Heritage Act (1994) provides a listing framework; however, enforcement is weak, and adaptive reuse is largely absent (Akbar et al. 2023; Akbar 2024). SBQ exemplifies this gap: legally protected but socially disconnected, highlighting the need for adaptive reuse strategies aligned with regeneration.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach, combining archival research, field surveys, and stakeholder engagement to assess SBQ's heritage. Architectural documentation recorded a range of colonial-era structures providing a baseline for analysis. Site surveys and photographic documentation (2018–2023) assessed deterioration, alterations, and use patterns, comparing them with earlier surveys conducted by Heritage Cell-DAPNED (2006–2009). Stakeholder interviews with heritage officials, architects, shopkeepers, and residents revealed contrasting perceptions of heritage, ranging from official preservation narratives to everyday adaptation strategies. A policy review of the Antiquities Act 1975, the Sindh Cultural Heritage Act (1994), and other regulations highlighted the gaps between policy intent and implementation. Finally, analytical tools such as the Nara-Grid authenticity criteria and value-based conservation approaches enabled integration of material, cultural, and social dimensions. By triangulating documentation, surveys, interviews, and policy review, the methodology provided a holistic foundation for evaluating SBQ's adaptive reuse potential.

Case Study: Saddar Bazaar Quarter (SBQ). Historic context

Karachi's history reflects successive transformations that shaped it into a global port city. Annexed by the British in 1839, it developed rapidly into a hub for trade, shipping, and military strategy. The Saddar Bazaar Quarter (SBQ), as shown in Fig. 1, was laid out as the colonial civic-commercial core, featuring broad streets, arcades, churches, and civic buildings that symbolised authority and cosmopolitan ambition. Landmarks such as Holy Trinity, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Frere Hall, and the Empress Market defined the area, contributing to Karachi's image as the "Star of the East." After independence in 1947, SBQ remained central but faced pressures of commercialisation and population growth. Encroachments, informality, and weak enforcement of the Sindh Cultural Heritage Act (1994) have strained its heritage fabric. Today, SBQ embodies Karachi's colonial legacy and its postcolonial challenges, making it a key site for testing adaptive reuse strategies.

Current Condition

Resurveys of the Saddar Bazaar Quarter (SBQ) highlight the fragility of its colonial-era fabric Reactivating Colonial Heritage 2). Many structures recorded as stable in the 2006–2009 Heritage Cell–DAPNED survey are now altered, endangered, or demolished.

Commercial and residential-commercial types are particularly vulnerable, reflecting the combined pressures of urban growth, commercialisation, and weak enforcement. At the same time, SBQ is not only a story of decline. Despite material deterioration, many buildings remain inhabited and informally adapted by residents and shopkeepers. Incremental repairs, subdivided interiors, and ground-floor conversions for trade and services sustain the genius loci of the quarter, revealing a form of bottom-up adaptive reuse that formal policies rarely acknowledge. Reactivating Colonial Heritageig. 3)



Fig. 1. Historic Colonial Buildings in Saddar Bazaar Quarter



Fig. 2. Map showing Comparison of 2009 and 2020-2021 Survey



Fig. 3. Panoramic View of Bohra Street in Saddar Bazaar Quarter (author)

Discussion

These observations demonstrate that heritage in SBQ cannot be assessed solely through fabric. The quarter is an urban palimpsest, where colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary layers coexist. Its significance is equally embedded in intangible values—social ties, cultural practices, memorial meanings, and economic functions—that connect communities to place. Frameworks such as the Core Data Index Form and the Nara-Grid authenticity criteria offer systematic ways to incorporate these dimensions into heritage evaluation.

At the same time, key challenges persist, including congestion and encroachment on public space, neglect of protected structures, rigid conservation rules that restrict new uses, weak governance, and the absence of financial incentives. For many shopkeepers and residents, heritage is often seen as a burden. Yet their everyday adaptations—incremental alterations

and continued inhabitation—demonstrate that informal adaptive reuse is already happening. By recognising and integrating these practices into heritage inventories and management, conservation can move from rigid, fabric-focused preservation toward value-based, inclusive strategies. This provides the basis for reclassifying SBQ’s building inventory, where tangible and intangible values shape a more inclusive understanding of significance.

Informal Changes as an Inventory Tool

Fieldwork in the Saddar Bazaar Quarter (SBQ) revealed that, despite deterioration, many buildings continue to be inhabited and adapted by residents and shopkeepers. Incremental repairs, interior subdivision, façade changes, and ground-floor conversions for commercial activity demonstrate that informal adaptive reuse is already underway, even if unacknowledged by official policy. These everyday practices sustain the genius loci of the quarter and reaffirm its role as an urban palimpsest, where colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary layers coexist.

Recognising this vitality requires moving beyond assessments focused solely on fabric and style. International frameworks, such as the Core Data Index Form, the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), and the Quebec Declaration on the Spirit of Place (2008), emphasise that authenticity also resides in lived associations, community memory, and cultural practices. Building on these principles, this research expanded the SBQ inventory criteria to integrate intangible values, genius loci, and urban palimpsest as key indicators of heritage significance. (Table 1)

Dimension	Conventional Criteria (Earlier Surveys)	Expanded Criteria (This Research)
Tangible Values	•Architectural style and integrity •Construction material and techniques •Structural condition	•Building typology and adaptability •Degree of continuity with urban fabric •Evidence of incremental, community-led modifications
Intangible Values	*Rarely considered*	•Social use and everyday practices •Cultural and memorial associations •Economic functions (shops, markets, livelihoods) •Symbolic role in collective identity
Urban Context	•Visual prominence •Location in historic core	•Contribution to genius loci (spirit of place) •Role in the urban palimpsest (colonial, postcolonial, contemporary layers) •Embeddedness in streetscape continuity

Table 1. New Criteria based on Akbar 2024 (author)

When applied, these criteria reshaped the evaluation of buildings. Modest structures with strong community functions, such as residential-commercial blocks, hotels, or long-standing shops, emerged as anchors of local identity. In contrast, architecturally distinguished but socially detached buildings ranked lower in terms of reuse potential. This process reclassified examples, such as the Nusserwanjee Building and Old Ilaco House, into higher

value categories due to their enduring social and cultural relevance. By embedding informal adaptations and intangible values into heritage inventories, SBQ's buildings are repositioned not as static relics but as dynamic urban resources. This inclusive approach aligns with international conservation frameworks and provides a locally grounded model for adaptive reuse in postcolonial contexts. These findings underline that the future of SBQ's heritage lies not in preserving buildings as static monuments. With the conclusion, emphasizing the importance of embracing adaptive reuse as a dynamic strategy for cultural continuity and urban regeneration.

Conclusions

The Saddar Bazaar Quarter (SBQ) illustrates the fragility and resilience of colonial heritage in a postcolonial metropolis. While many buildings face material decline, the district remains sustained by everyday adaptations that preserve its unique spirit of place. These dynamics demonstrate that heritage cannot be defined solely by fabric but must also be understood through its intangible values, genius loci, and layered urban palimpsest. The study shows adaptive reuse provides a way to bridge the gap between rigid, object-focused preservation policies and the lived realities of SBQ. By expanding evaluation criteria, socially and culturally vital buildings can be recognized as significant despite physical alteration, reframing heritage as an evolving urban resource rather than a static monument. These proposed value-based assessment criteria are transferable to other postcolonial contexts where informal adaptive reuse and intangible associations sustain colonial-era heritage. By foregrounding lived practices alongside material fabric, this approach provides a flexible framework that is adaptable to diverse urban, cultural, and regulatory settings. The study advocates a value-based, people-centred approach, where flexible reuse, community engagement, and design innovation enable historic buildings to serve new purposes while retaining authenticity.

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