

Reviving Heritage for a Resilient Urban Future

The Heart of Sharjah Project in the UAE

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Abstract

The Heart of Sharjah project exemplifies an integrative approach to adaptive reuse in heritage urbanism, where sensitive architectural strategies and community engagement converge to transform historic structures. As the largest heritage revitalization initiative in the Gulf region, this multi-phase project harmonizes contemporary design with traditional urban fabric to preserve cultural significance while accommodating modern functions. Architectural interventions prioritize continuity, embracing the concept of historical layering while challenging the idea of “authenticity”. Vernacular elements like wind-towers and courtyards are restored, while a new minimalistic intervention echoes Emirati heritage forms, maintaining the footprint of the old town’s urban fabric. Equally central is community involvement of local stakeholders and cultural institutions that activate the restored district through museums, cultural venues, and art spaces. The Sharjah Art Foundation’s galleries, for example, repurpose historic houses for contemporary exhibitions, reanimating the area’s socio-cultural life. This collaborative process fosters social inclusivity by opening heritage places to innovation and new possibilities for cultural, social, environmental, and economic sustainability. It also embodies sustainable urban development, conserving built heritage and its embodied energy while revitalizing the city core to avert disuse and sprawl, and providing an economic catalyst through heritage tourism. The Heart of Sharjah case demonstrates how adaptive reuse can build resilient, inclusive urban environments by layering past and present: it serves as a model for blending modern functionality with historical integrity, offering insights into designing future cities that honor and incorporate their heritage.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse; Adaptive Authenticity; Performative Reuse

Introduction

Adaptive reuse, defined as the practice of repurposing existing buildings for new functions while retaining cultural significance, has emerged as a crucial strategy in contemporary heritage management across the globe (Stone 2023). In the context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), characterized by a rapid urbanization and profound socio-economic transformation following the discovery of oil, the strategy of adaptive reuse serves a dual function: preserving cultural memory while accommodating relentless growth (Radoine 2013). This practice acts as a bridge between a distant, traditional past and a highly modernized present.

Sharjah, the cultural capital of the UAE, is an interesting case study to understand the heritage dynamic in the UAE better. As Todd Reisz (2021) highlighted, the contemporary city is a stratification of different developments that began in the late 1950s. This built landscape that tells the story of its fast changes and improvements. The urbanization trajectory began with transformative plans, notably the 1963 Town Plan by Sir William Halcrow & Partners. He envisioned wide roads and modern infrastructure for the new modern city. The masterplan designated the historic urban core, composed of traditional coral-stone and mud-brick houses, as being in poor conditions and designated it for demolition, paving the way for concrete mid-rises and new infrastructure. This modernization effort, prevalent across Gulf cities from the 1970s to the 1990s, often led to the loss of urban memory and traditional architecture. Sharjah's current heritage response is exemplified by two interconnected, emblematic adaptive reuse projects: the government-led Heart of Sharjah (HoS) project, which revitalizes the traditional pre-oil town fabric, and the redevelopment of the modernist Bank Street buildings, which highlights the value and vulnerability of "recent" mid-20th-century heritage.

The HoS project, initiated in the 2010s, is one of the largest heritage developments in the Gulf, focused on restoring and reconstructing the city's historic urban core to resemble its pre-oil appearance around the 1950s. By contrast, Bank Street, a contiguous strip of functional modernist buildings built during the 1970s oil boom, represents a critical layer of the UAE's modern architectural heritage. The juxtaposition of these two cases reveals a fundamental tension in Gulf heritage policy: the inclination to resurrect the pre-oil vernacular heritage, perceived as more authentic (Fabbri and Al-Qassemi 2022), conflicts with the recent desire to preserve the 20th-century modernism. This conflict is manifested in plans to demolish the 1970s Bank Street structures to make way for newly built traditional-style structures intended to complete the HoS vision. This approach reveals a complex mechanism of self-correction against the effects of earlier, unrestricted modernization. The current effort to restore the pre-oil past requires the demolition of the subsequent modern layer that resulted from the very forces HoS seeks to counteract, in a continuous, cyclic pattern of architectural rejection in Sharjah's urban history. The policy choice to favor historical identity and townscape over chronological continuity is an inherently socio-political act rooted in what scholars term the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) (Smith 2006). The state-led focus on the pre-oil heritage reflects a selective narrative of national history, often neglecting the complex recent history embodied by the post-oil modernization era. Therefore, sustainable heritage practice in the UAE necessitates an inclusive, layered approach that integrates the traditional city core with the modern fabric, supported by a responsive heritage ecosystem.

Adaptive Reuse and the UAE Context

Adaptive reuse is more than a technical solution; it is defined by Liliane Wong (2017) as the continuation of cultural phenomena through built infrastructure, connections across the fabric of time and space and preservation of memory. The core of the practice is the successful change of use, giving new purpose to an unused or underutilized structure while retaining its heritage value. For adaptive reuse projects to succeed in contexts like the Gulf, where legal protections for heritage are often limited, is essential an enabling ecosystem that includes supportive policies, funding, stakeholder support, and community acceptance.

In recent decades, critical heritage studies have expanded the definition of heritage beyond static architectural monuments to include intangible values and the perspectives of diverse communities. Scholars like Tim Winter and Emma Waterton (2013) advocate for post-Western understandings of heritage that move beyond Eurocentric preservation models and address contemporary regional and global transformations (Rizvi 2018). This approach encourages questioning “what” heritage is preserved and “whose” heritage is valued, emphasizing that heritage is a social and political process (Smith 2006). This critical lens is vital in the UAE, where heritage definitions are contested. The debate over Bank Street is a direct example of the conflict between the state-led, selective heritage narrative (AHD) and the push for a more pluralistic approach that includes recent modern architecture and “living memory” (Kather, Al-Lehabi and Saad 2025). Critical heritage theory asserts that cultural significance must encompass a building’s meaning to people, its identity, history, memories, and uses over time. Therefore, a 1970s concrete office block, if it holds collective memory for the community, can be deemed as culturally meaningful as a 19th-century coral stone house, demanding critical appraisal and adaptive strategies for its survival.

The Heart of Sharjah. Heritage and Adaptive Reuse

The Heart of Sharjah project, led by the Sharjah Investment and Development Authority (Shurooq), is a vast, district-scale exercise in “urban heritage adaptive reuse”. Its primary goal is to restore and revitalize the historic urban core and surrounding neighborhoods, aiming to recapture the ambiance of the old town as it existed in the 1950s. The strategy employs a comprehensive mix of interventions: restoration, reconstruction, and selective new additions. Genuine historic structures are preserved or restored, such as surviving traditional courtyard houses and parts of the souqs. Key components like Souq Al Shanasiyah have undergone careful restoration, reviving traditional elements like wind towers and narrow alleys. At the same time, symbolic landmarks like Al Hisn Fort, which was demolished in the 1970s to give space to the Bank Street development, have been reconstructed to provide a physical and symbolic link to Sharjah’s origins. Where structures were missing or unusable, new structures are designed in a traditional Gulf architectural style to blend in and maintain visual coherence. This approach prioritizes historical identity over the strict material authenticity of every existing structure. Project developers rely on extensive archival research, including old photographs and maps, to guide the rebuilding effort. While this approach is pragmatic for reviving cultural memory and supporting tourism, preservation purists critique the creation of a “new old” cityscape as an invented history that is arguably more simulacrum than reality.

A cornerstone of the HoS project is ensuring its economic viability and continuous public use. This is achieved through highly specific models of adaptive reuse. The project successfully converted a cluster of restored heritage houses and courtyards into the Al Bait Hotel. This luxury boutique hotel retains original walls and fixtures while incorporating modern upgrades, embedding guests in an authentic historic atmosphere. This conversion ensures the economic longevity of the heritage structures, positioning the initiative within the heritage-led regeneration approach where conservation acts as a catalyst for urban revival. Equally critical is the partnership with the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF), which has acted as a powerful engine for cultural activation. SAF renovated several dilapidated historic courtyard houses in the Al Mureijah Art Spaces area, converting them into

interconnected contemporary art galleries. This repurposing required significant interior modifications to accommodate modern exhibitions while retaining the historic building footprints and external appearance. The presence of SAF ensures that the heritage area is not frozen as an open-air museum but is dynamically utilized by artists and audiences. This model demonstrates that the most potent form of adaptive reuse is often not restoration for passive historical display, but repurposing for contemporary utility. This intervention significantly strengthens the building's chances of physical survival by guaranteeing ongoing relevance and community use.



Fig. 1. Heart of Sharjah and Sharjah Art Foundation buildings in Al Mureijah (Irene Pasina, 2025)

The HoS project's comprehensive vision necessarily entailed difficult choices regarding later historical layers. The most controversial aspect is the plan to demolish two entire blocks of mid-century buildings, the Bank Street complex, to allow for the completion of the low-rise, traditional streetscape reconstruction. The official narrative views these 1970s structures as obstacles to be removed to liberate the older heritage underneath. This choice to erase a four-decade history reinforces the project's central philosophy: prioritizing a selective historical identity associated with the pre-oil past over the material continuity of all built heritage. The complexity is that while the project responds to the history of loss initiated by 1960s modernization, the reversal of that process ironically necessitates another act of destruction, perpetuating a cycle of architectural self-rejection in the city's urban history.

The Bank Street Development. The UAE Modern Heritage and Its Value

Bank Street (Al Hisn Avenue) stands in stark opposition to the vernacular architecture of the Heart of Sharjah, representing the city's modernist era. Constructed in the late 1970s during Sharjah's first oil boom, these mid-rise buildings were among the city's earliest multi-story commercial and residential structures. Designed by firms such as *Tecnica y Proyectos* (TYP SA), they are two lines of functional concrete structures typical of 1970s modernism: the Córdoba complex and the Granada complex.

They rose on land cleared from the historic town and quickly became the new heart of the city, symbolizing progress and prosperity. The area was a prestigious address, attracting affluent residents and international businesses, reflecting the cosmopolitan character

of Sharjah as the UAE Federation was taking shape in 1971. Critically, for the current generation, this 1970s and 1980s environment represents familiar history, a living memory that often resonates more strongly than the recreated pre-oil environment, which exists beyond living memory. As such, these structures possess clear architectural, historical, and social value, documenting the socio-cultural and economic developments of the recent past.



Fig. 2. Bank Street buildings and Al Hisn Fort (Irene Pasina, 2025)

Despite their intrinsic value, the Bank Street blocks were until recently not officially recognized as heritage. Their fate became a focal point for heritage advocacy when the HoS masterplan confirmed their scheduled removal. The primary forces driving this vulnerability included the lack of comprehensive federal heritage protection and market pressures. Property owners, anticipating demolition, often deferred maintenance, accelerating the structures' perceived obsolescence. But the transformation plans changed course along the way, as attention to modern heritage broadened, especially with the recent launch of the UAE Modern Architectural Heritage in February 2025.

Alongside the new federal initiatives, the intellectual and artistic community played a crucial role in articulating the value of Bank Street. This attention effectively shifted the heritage debate from old-versus-new to one of top-down ideology versus lived community memory. For instance, the temporary adaptive reuse of a vacant bank building for the Sharjah Biennial 11 in 2013, which hosted installations like SUPERFLEX's "The Bank," demonstrated the building's potential for cultural repurposing. Subsequently, the Failed Architecture workshop in 2014, supported by the Maraya Art Centre, brought together architects and researchers to document the street and its inhabitants. The intervention publicly questioned the legitimacy of erasing a vibrant, active urban area. By framing the issue as a loss of familiar, current history, advocates leveraged the principles of critical heritage theory focused on social value to challenge the official state narrative.

Community Engagement and Heritage Ecosystem in the Adaptive Reuse Processes

Successful adaptive reuse relies on a robust heritage ecosystem, a collaborative network involving governmental bodies, cultural institutions, the private sector, academic experts, and the local community. Community engagement is fundamental, ensuring that heritage

regeneration avoids isolation and becomes a living, integrated part of the urban and social fabric. The philosophical underpinnings of this holistic approach are formally recognized in frameworks such as the Gunma Declaration on Heritage Ecosystems (2025). This declaration champions the interconnectedness of heritage and emphasizes the critical importance of recognizing local communities as rights-holders in the preservation process. This alignment between policy and practice confirms the theoretical necessity identified by Vafaie et al. (2023), who classify socio-cultural value and public support as indispensable factors for long-term viability and success. In Sharjah, cultural institutions like SAF utilize a performative approach to engage residents and visitors, effectively countering the risk of “museumification” and transforming sites into “arenas for collective experience”. Cultural programming activates heritage spaces through contemporary use.



Fig. 3. Old Bayti and Heritage Village (Irene Pasina, 2025)

ocio-economic inclusivity is another critical measure of successful engagement. HoS attempts to mitigate gentrification by hosting affordable retail and events like the annual Sharjah Heritage Days, which attract local families and schoolchildren to engage with Emirati culture. This understanding that a lived-in area is more sustainable than a mere tourist spot reflects the importance of ensuring that the heritage ecosystem serves the needs of its rights-holders. Governmental and institutional support form the backbone of the ecosystem. In Sharjah, agencies like Shurooq provide the investment and project management necessary for large-scale adaptive reuse. Crucially, the establishment of cultural institutions and the integration of academic input have ensured a high level of professional and intellectual rigor. The confluence of these factors shows that adaptive reuse in Sharjah is most effective when it is a shared responsibility.

Conclusions

The adaptive reuse initiatives in Sharjah, spanning the Heart of Sharjah project and the critical case of Bank Street, encapsulate the complex choices faced by rapidly modernizing societies in the UAE. This analysis demonstrates that heritage preservation in this context is an evolving continuum that recognizes both the enduring legacy of the pre-oil past and the crucial milestones of modern development. The Heart of Sharjah project exemplifies how adaptive reuse, supported by large-scale investment and strategic planning, can successfully

revitalize traditional urban cores. It provides economic sustenance through tourism and hospitality, and cultural vitality through integration with the Sharjah Art Foundation. However, the project's success is tempered by the contentious decision to pursue historical identity through the reconstruction and erasure of the recent past, specifically the 1970s Bank Street architecture.

The advocacy around Bank Street, bolstered by academic and artistic intervention, highlights the growing importance of modern architectural heritage as a repository of collective memory and the history of post-oil state formation. The scholarly findings confirm that sustainable heritage conservation must adopt an integrated, layered approach. Drawing on critical heritage studies, the practice must validate all historical layers, treating them as continuous parts of the city's narrative, and continually engage with community values. Adherence to the theoretical success factors of adaptive reuse, particularly the socio-cultural components articulated in frameworks such as the Gunma Declaration, is paramount. The Heart of Sharjah and Bank Street teach that sustainable urban development must involve weaving a richer tapestry that allows both the pearls of the past and the milestones of modernity to coexist. Adaptive reuse, when leveraged as a tool for cultural literacy and capacity building, ensures that the UAE's rapid progress does not result in the costly loss of cultural continuity, thereby rooting its modern identity in its entire history.

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