

Layers of Meaning

Adaptive Reuse, Cultural Continuity, and the Spirit of Place in Pakistan's Heritage Architecture

Mahwish Ghulam Rasool^a, Syed Hamid Akbar^b

^aIndus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi, Pakistan, Mahwish.rasool@ivs.edu.pke-mail;

^bHasselt University, Hasselt, Belgium, Hamidakbar5@gmail.com

Abstract

Adaptive reuse has emerged as a pivotal architectural strategy that preserves the cultural, spatial, and material integrity of historical structures while reimagining them for contemporary relevance. Grounded in the concept of the palimpsest, where the built environment accumulates and expresses layered narratives over time (Machado 1976). This approach advocates for both historical continuity and creative reinterpretation. Central to this discourse is the concept of the spirit of place (*genius loci*), which emphasises the importance of preserving the intangible cultural essence and values embedded in architectural sites (Norberg-Schulz 1980). In modern times, adaptive reuse has evolved into a dynamic process of recontextualising heritage through design, rather than preserving it statically. This paper critically examines adaptive reuse as both a theoretical paradigm and a pragmatic conservation strategy through two emblematic case studies from Pakistan: The Shahi Hammam in Lahore and the Baltit Fort in Hunza. Both projects, undertaken by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC 2011), exemplify how context-sensitive interventions guided by international conservation principles and local cultural knowledge can uphold authenticity and the spirit of place while enabling new uses. The Shahi Hammam illustrates the transformation of the Mughal-era urban bathhouse as a vibrant public cultural space. In contrast, the Baltit Fort showcases living heritage, reimagined as an ethnographic museum that reinforces community identity. These projects align with international frameworks, such as the Venice Charter 1964 and the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), offering transferable models for the Global South. By bridging theory and practice, this research contributes to rethinking the role of adaptive reuse in fostering resilient, inclusive, and culturally embedded urban futures. The purpose of the study is to reposition these projects not merely as adaptive reuse projects, but as a living palimpsest, a collective memory and community identity.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Cultural Continuity, Community Revitalisation

Introduction

Adaptive reuse has experienced significant growth in both practical application and academic research since the mid-20th century. It has become increasingly prominent in architecture and heritage discourse as an emblematic approach to addressing complex issues of history, identity, memory, and material culture in the built environment. (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel

2019). Unlike traditional conservation that treats buildings as static artefacts, the approach emphasises reinterpretation, continuity, and transformation, fostering a dynamic link between past and present (Sally Stone, 2020). It encourages viewing structures as valuable repositories of cultural memory and identity, rather than as obsolete edifices. (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel 2019; Stone, 2022).

A key concept is the building as a palimpsest, a metaphor introduced by Rodolfo Machado (1976) that illustrates its layered meanings, time, and functions. Scholars such as Brian Dillon (2005) and Edward Hollis (2009) view palimpsests as a means to understand how memory and history persist through layers of space and text, with architecture gaining richness from overlapping histories. Adaptive reuse strategies enable buildings to reflect their past and present identities, creating continuity and allowing heritage to be experienced, reinterpreted, and reimagined (Stone 2022). This process involves reviewing both physical forms and intangible qualities, such as memory and cultural associations (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel 2019; Stone 2022). Viewing buildings as palimpsests, adaptive reuse becomes a dialogue between past and present, maintaining continuity while meeting current needs. Another key concept is the spirit of place, “genius loci,” originating in Roman thought as the protective spirit of a location and later emphasised by Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980). It highlights a place's unique character through its form, materials, and context.

Plevoets and Van Cleempoel (2019) view genius loci as a guide for engaging with a building's tangible and intangible qualities, such as its memory and atmosphere, thereby ensuring that new uses respect the place's identity and continuity. When combined with interior design, genius loci emphasises inhabitation and sensory experience, allowing adaptive reuse to respond holistically to layered meanings and lived contexts.

Adaptive Reuse and Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Intangible Cultural Heritage comprises the vibrant living traditions, skills, practices, and knowledge systems that are essential to the identity and continuity of communities (UNESCO 2003). Recently, studies have highlighted the importance of adaptive reuse not only in tangible building elements but also in its intangible ones, such as community narratives, craft knowledge, traditions, collective memory and the sensory qualities that truly define a place and its heritage value. (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel 2019). In South Asia, where vibrant built heritage coexists with local traditions and festivals, these strategies empower communities as active custodians of their Culture (Bandarin & van Oers 2012). Inclusion of intangible aspects into reuse projects transforms conservation into a dynamic cultural inquiry that nurtures both the tangible and intangible dimensions of our heritage (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel 2019).

Therefore, adaptive reuse transcends mere refunctioning or prolonging the lifespan of structures. It positions architectural heritage as a living palimpsest shaped by accumulated use, cultural practices, and community engagement, where each intervention contributes to an evolving spatial narrative. This understanding aligns with Rossi's conception of the city as collective memory and with Nora's notion of lieux de mémoire, in which spatial continuity sustains cultural meaning. Within this framework, interiors play a critical role. As Suzi Attiwill (2004) argues, interior spaces act as repositories of memory and lived experience, and their cultural significance must be actively engaged rather than subordinated to external form-making. The Park Avenue Armoury in New York exemplifies this approach,

preserving interior volumes, material patina, and spatial atmospheres while introducing new interior typologies that coexist with historical layers. Conversely, many prominent adaptive reuse projects adopt strategies that minimise or replace existing spatial narratives. The redevelopment of Les Halles in Paris disrupted spatial memory by removing historic layers in favour of a commercially driven identity. Similarly, the Tate Modern in London, despite its architectural acclaim, prioritises formal and programmatic transformation over the retention of industrial and community memory. The Royal Ontario Museum's extension further demonstrates an intervention approach that limits spatial dialogue with the historic fabric, reinforcing contrast rather than continuity.

Adaptive Reuse and Heritage in Pakistan

The architectural landscape of Pakistan is a complex amalgamation of cultural, religious, and political histories, shaped by millennia of shifting empires, spiritual traditions, traditional knowledge systems, vernacular settings and colonial legacies (Lari 1989; Khan 1998; Qureshi 2010), from the Buddhist remnants at Taxila, to the Indus Valley civilisation in Harappa, to the grandeur of Mughal-era Lahore, and from the British colonial influences in Karachi and Rawalpindi to the vernacular landscape of Hunza Gilgit Baltistan and Kashmir, Pakistan is a landscape where nature, built environment, Culture and traditions are in perfect symphony. (Lari 1992; Cheema 2008).

In recent decades, heritage conservation practices and policies in Pakistan have faced numerous pressures from rapid urbanisation, infrastructure development, land politics, and, primarily, neglect. (Akbar 2024). The need for sustainable revitalisation and to safeguard our heritage treasures has led adaptive reuse to gain importance not only as a practical response to building obsolescence but also as a strategy for cultural continuity, community revitalisation, and historical identity. In South Asian heritage, adaptive reuse as a conservation approach is significant in regions where formal preservation efforts are underfunded or politicised, and where community participation is essential for the adaptive reuse and conservation process. (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019; Menon 2012; Lari 2017; Bandarin and van Oers 2012).

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), work in Pakistan exemplifies a conservation model which is rooted international charters (e.g., the Venice Charter 1964; the Nara Document 1994) and also involve the local cultural practices, context-sensitive heritage reuse, privileging the intangible aspects of heritage ritual, memory, and use alongside physical restoration and value on community participation as a main essence for conservation and restoration efforts. This paper examines the above theoretical discourses and ideas through two characteristic case studies from Pakistan: The Shahi Hammam in Lahore and the Baltit Fort in Hunza Baltistan. These serve as rich examples of adaptive reuse that conserve layered histories while accommodating new interior typologies and contextual needs that honour local identities.

Shahi Hammam, Lahore: Conservation and Adaptive Reuse

The Shahi Hammam, constructed in 1635 CE by Wazir Khan during the rule of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, exemplifies Mughal civic architecture. Located along Lahore's historic Royal Trail, which stretches from Delhi Gate to Lahore Fort, the site served as a public bath and a cultural, ritual, and meditative space. Positioned near Delhi Gate, it was

strategically placed. (Abid 2018; Aga Khan Cultural Service – Pakistan 2019) The bath had three chambers for hot, warm, and cold water, as well as scrub and massage areas, inspired by Persian and Turkish wellness traditions, arranged sequentially to provide a thermal and sensory experience. The hypocaust floor system showcased Mughal engineering mastery. (Abid 2018). Its architectural features, such as domed ceilings, clerestory lighting, Mughal frescoes, and muqarnas, showcase Mughal grandeur and craftsmanship. The interiors create a visual and acoustic retreat, enriching the user experience. Over the years, the Royal Bath has been used as a stable, dispensary, Primary school, and warehouse. (Abid 2018). These superficial interventions altered its structure and damaged its interior fabrics, impacting its architectural and cultural narrative. Restoration by AKTC



Fig. 1. The Shahi Hamman Central chamber (Rabab, 2024)

and WCLA since 2013 exemplifies adaptive reuse guided by international charters, such as the Venice Charter (1964) and the Nara Document (1994, 2013). The strategy prioritised minimal, reversible interventions, traditional lime materials, and the renewal of craftsmanship. Norwegian experts stabilised vaults and excavated subfloor layers to reveal the hypocaust system (Aga Khan Cultural Service Pakistan 2019). Encroachments around 52 shops were relocated prior to façade restoration (Aga Khan Development Network 2016; The Express Tribune 2013).

The Hamman was repurposed as a public museum, featuring interpretive panels, visitor walkways, lighting, climate control systems, and new facilities such as AV rooms, an auditorium, a café, and a souvenir shop, all while preserving its authenticity (Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Plevoets & Van Cleempoel 2019). As a palimpsest, it retains traces of Mughal, colonial, and post-colonial eras, illustrating continuity and change. Excavations reaffirm architecture as a temporal embodiment, requiring careful negotiation of historical layers (Stone, 2020; Aga Khan Cultural Service Pakistan, 2019). The interior approach emphasises thermal spaces, clerestory lighting, and sensory atmospheres, connecting visitors to the original spatial sequence through interpretive tools and curated walkways. The project promotes community revitalisation through adaptive reuse and active participation, views conservation as a socially inclusive process, and provides training programs for local artisans in traditional techniques.

Baltit Fort, Karimabad: Restoration, Adaptive Reuse, Community Revitalisation

Baltit Fort, situated in Karimabad, overlooking the Hunza Valley in Pakistan's northern region, is among the highest fortifications in the world. It was built in the 14th century AD; however, radiocarbon dating revealed early archaeological traces dated to the 8th century. It was initially designed as a fortified structure and residence, and since 2004, it has been on UNESCO's tentative list of World Heritage Sites. (Akbar, Plevoets, and Iqbal 2022) A key point for the fort, it is a testament to centuries of Culture, architectural ingenuity and community identity. Its architectural style is derived from the Tibetan-Ladakhi style, with various cultural influences due to its historical position at the crossroads of China, Kashmir, and Central Asian cultures. (Hughes and Lefort 1986).

Baltit Fort is a three-tiered structure, built on a mountain with a substantial stone base; all elevations are designed differently to meet the fort's functional needs. The interior layout has been designed with a vertical social hierarchy in mind, ranging from public to private spaces, and incorporating storage cells, stables, staff quarters, administrative areas, audience halls, ritual spaces, a central courtyard, and private quarters with balconies. Circulation depicts the labyrinth with interlinked chambers, designed for defence and climate control. (Akbar, Plevoets, and Iqbal 2022)

The interior fabric of the fort is rich in intricate details, period craftsmanship, stone, mud plaster, cedar wooden columns, ceiling murals inspired by traditional Kashmiri crafts, and fireplaces that serve both functional and ceremonial purposes. The combination of pragmatic seismic-resistant construction and aesthetic expression highlights the Fort's stronghold as both a cultural locus.

By the late twentieth century, the fort had deteriorated due to neglect, environmental degradation, political transitions, and power shifts. (Akbar, Plevoets, and Iqbal 2022); In line with its exceptional heritage value and a rich cultural landscape, the restoration and reuse project was initiated by the Agha Khan Trust for Culture through its historic cities support program, in collaboration with the Government of Pakistan, UNESCO, and the Baltit Heritage Trust, in the 1980s, with a comprehensive documentation that includes not only the structure's physical aspects but also the community's art, crafts, rituals, and traditions. (Hughes and Lefort 1986; Aga Khan Cultural Service – Pakistan 2019).

The restoration and reuse process began with structural repairs, preserving the legibility of the original fabric while allowing the Fort's atmospheric qualities, such as light, texture, temperature, Smell, sounds, and materiality, to remain palpable. Baltit fort design strategy reflected the concept of "building as a Palimpsest", where layers of history are visible and celebrated, enabling the coexistence of different historic eras and regional influences, depicting different era crafts and design details as rich landmark layers. The approach was not just to save an old building from decay but to strongly reactivate the region's cultural identity, to preserve the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the region, its culture, traditions, rituals, oral histories, seasonal practices, skills, techniques, arts and crafts, and to encourage the locals to sustain their cultural identity and connect to the spirit of the place. The adaptive reuse of Baltit Fort as an ethnographic museum and cultural centre embodies the coexistence of heritage conservation, reuse, and community revitalisation, drawing on lived experience from the site's dynamic landscape. Interior spaces, particularly audience halls and ritual areas, have been repurposed to facilitate museum exhibitions, educational



Fig. 2. Baltit Fort front elevation Hunza, AKTC 2019 (Akbar, 2022)

programs, library and community events.(Akbar, Plevoets, and Iqbal 2022). The original organisation of the Fort, with its atmospheric qualities, has been preserved. In conclusion, the restoration of Baltit Forts provides a valuable model for heritage interventions in fragile, culturally sensitive contexts, highlighting how adaptive reuse can transform historical monuments into active, meaningful civic spaces while preserving their profound poetic and spiritual essence.

Conclusion

This paper has critically repositioned adaptive reuse not merely as a design solution or architectural afterthought, but as a culturally rooted and strategic conservation methodology. Drawing on the Venice Charter (1964), Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), and the Burra Charter (1999, revised 2013), the study emphasised a shift from traditional preservation towards a more holistic approach to conservation and adaptive reuse. Referring to the theoretical frameworks of palimpsest (Machado 1976; Plevoets & Van Cleempoel 2019), spirit of place (Norberg-Schulz, 1980), and lived experience (Pallasmaa 2005; A tiwill 2004), Adaptive reuse is redefined as a layered and dynamic process. This perspective recognises the accumulative nature of space, encompassing both its tangible and intangible aspects, as well as its evolving relationships with users, communities, and cultural and spatial narratives. The case studies of Shahi Hammam in Lahore and Baltit Fort in Hunza offer compelling evidence of this evolved, multi-layered phenomenon. Both the projects extend beyond technical restoration to incorporate community engagement, interpretive layering, and the integration of intangible values, community traditions, rituals, and memories as active design catalysts. These examples from the Global South, along with Nizamuddin Basti, Delhi, Shigar Fort, Karimabad, and Khalpu Palace, Baltistan, challenge Eurocentric paradigms by offering alternative conservation models that are culturally rooted, contextually sensitive, and historically layered.

Bibliography

- Abid, Mehwish. "The Meaning-Making Walkthrough of Shahi Hammam." *Architecture Design Art* 11 (42), 36–41, 2018.
- Aga Khan Cultural Service – Pakistan (AKCS-P). *Conservation and Adaptive Reuse of the Shabi Hammam, Lahore*. Islamabad: Aga Khan Cultural Service – Pakistan, 2019.
- Akbar, Syed Hamid, Bie Plevoets, and Naveed Iqbal. "Preserving the Tangible and Intangible Values of the Baltit Fort in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, through Adaptive Reuse." *SPACE International Journal*

- of *Conference Proceedings* 2 (1), 1–9, 2022.
- Attiwill, Suzie. “Towards an Interior History.” *IDEA Journal* 5 (1), 18, 2004.
- Bandarin, Francesco, and Ron van Oers. *The Historic Urban Landscape: Managing Heritage in an Urban Century*. Chichester: WileyBlackwell, 2012.
- Cheema, Yasmin. *The Historical City of Lahore: An Introduction to Its Conservation*. Lahore: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Dillon, Brian, ed. *Ruins: Documents of Contemporary Art*. London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery / MIT Press, 2011.
- Hughes, R., & Didier Lefort. “At the Roof of the World: The Baltit Fort.” *Mimar* 20, 10–19, 1986.
- International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter 1964). Venice: ICOMOS, 1964.
- Lari, Yasmeen. *An Overview of the Architecture of Pakistan*. Karachi: Mimar Book Series, 1989.
- Machado, Rodolfo. “Old Buildings as Palimpsest: Towards a Theory of Remodelling.” *Progressive Architecture* 11 (72), 46–49, 1976.
- Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. Roma: Rizzoli, 1980.
- Nora, Pierre. “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”. *Representations*, 26, 7–24, 1989.
- Plevoets, Bie, and Koenraad Van Cleempoel. *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline*. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Stone, Sally. *Undoing Buildings: Adaptive Reuse and Cultural Memory*. New York: Routledge, 2020.
- UNESCO. *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2003. <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-safeguarding-intangible-cultural-heritage>