

Preserving heritage for Iraqi cities: Urban modernization approaches according to expert opinions

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Abstract

Iraqi historic cities possess a wealth of architectural and cultural heritage, yet this legacy is increasingly threatened by rapid urbanization, weak institutional coordination, and outdated preservation approaches. This study examines expert perspectives on the effectiveness of existing conservation frameworks for safeguarding urban heritage amid modernization in Iraq. Employing a mixed-method design, the research included a survey of 90 professionals in architecture, urban planning, and cultural preservation, complemented by a review of policy documents and scholarly literature. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were thematically coded to identify key challenges and solutions. Results reveal that most experts view current heritage policies as ineffective, citing unclear legal regulations, inadequate funding, and limited inter-agency collaboration. Recommended reforms include updating heritage laws, promoting digital preservation, providing economic incentives for adaptive reuse, and fostering community participation. Experts also emphasized the importance of international collaboration to strengthen technical expertise and institutional capacity. The study proposes a comprehensive reform strategy integrating legal, economic, technological, and participatory measures to enhance governance and sustainability in heritage conservation. Its findings aim to guide policymakers, planners, and conservation agencies in Iraq and comparable contexts toward preserving cultural assets in rapidly modernizing urban environments.

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1. Introduction

Most historic urban environments contribute to preservation for cultural identity and collective memory. In Iraq, heritage cities such as Najaf, Karbala, Samarra, as well as Kadhimiya have developed over centuries, encompassing diverse religious, social, as well as cultural dimensions [1]. However, threat to this built heritage from urban expansion, haphazard construction, along with population growth pressures, requires addressing, or at very least, monitoring, the most important strategies for dealing with the city's institutional as well as design framework [2]. Modern changes in older areas are a result of development activities within the context of internal marginal structure, as well as traditional arterial belts that characterize most historic city centers. Urban transformations at city centers result in a clear shift in the city's overall functions [3]. Balance between the city center's activities as well as its surroundings must be taken into account when considering the future of urban life, and calculating its structural changes [4].

The other, more important aspect for driving as well as defining direction for urban transformations is how to market, present, or activate investment-related activities via individuals and institutions correctly, as well as work to engage and activate them within the existing city fabric [5]. These economically based variables (primary and secondary) play a significant role in shaping or creating activities within the city's overall fabric, but also contribute to the transformation of the city's traditional character [6]. Thus, transformations carry a dual importance: protecting world heritage is a priority in many countries. It is also a basis for developing any traditional urban cultural environment that prioritizes sustainability and community participation. In Iraq, adherence to laws, ambiguity for certain institutional roles in the development process, as well as controlling changes, and the absence of public engagement can hinder serious conservation efforts. This issue warrants careful consideration of expert perspectives [7].

Despite bold measures and interventions in traditional urban environments, implementing these initiatives will require careful insight and expertise to ensure continuity and sustainable growth within these historic settings, as well as to address the issues identified in the research. It seeks to find out that through stakeholder insights, there are key gaps in policies, institutional challenges, and untapped opportunities. The study leads to emerging discussions on sustainable heritage governance in the Global South, as well as suggests context-related solutions to bridging the policy practice gap at Iraqi traditional cities.

2. Research methodology

Mixed-method research design was extensively used in this study as a way for assessing policies in preserving urban heritage in historical cities in Iraq, in a way that considers both quantitative and qualitative research methodology to be able to get various perspectives from stakeholders. Sources for data collection included both a structured questionnaire containing 12 closed-ended questions (Likert scale), along with five open-ended questions, which focused on perceptions of experts concerning the effectiveness of policies, their coordination, funding, involvement, and technology. It also focused on a review of documents concerning laws for preservation in Iraq, planning texts, as well as scholarly literature to contextualize results and achieve triangulation.

A non-probability sampling method was used to select 90 professionals from the fields of architecture, urban planning, heritage management, and policy. The selection was based on professional relevance and diversity, ensuring representation from government, academia, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Adequacy for sample size was considered due to saturation for themes, but shortcomings were observed.

Closed-ended questions were analyzed using a five-point Likert scale, with descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations. Microsoft Excel was used to assess attitudes toward preservation policies and tools, and the results were verified through reliability checks. A total of 120 open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's coding framework. Intercoder reliability was established to ensure consistency in identifying key themes (e.g., legislative gaps, adaptive strategies), thereby enhancing interpretive validity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and both anonymity and confidentiality were maintained in accordance with ethical research standards. Figure 1 illustrates the methodology employed in this study.

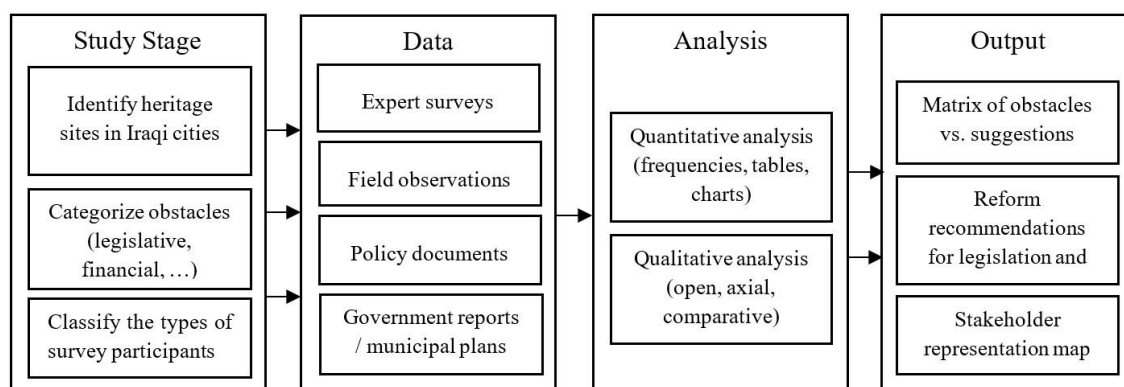


Figure 1. Research methodology

3. Literature review

Preservation for urban heritage has emerged as a major study topic, particularly in cities undergoing rapid transformations [8]. They are demanding the inclusion of cultural heritage in urban policy, which is participatory as well as sustainable and values-based [9].

Other international heritage guidelines, such as the Burra Charter (ICOMOS) and other UNESCO guidelines, claim to have a holistic strategy of heritage that not only recognizes intangible values, but also the participation of local communities [10]. It is possible to break the mystique of heritage as a type of attribute for a commodity that refers to and/or responds to societies, and heritage will always need explaining to the subsequent generation [11]. During recent years, this concept has gained significant importance concerning its connection not only with cultural symbolism but also with everyday life, as well as being a tool for the promotion of sustainable development and city resilience [12].

Nonetheless, it is possible to introduce the concept of heritage into urban policies to stimulate inclusive development, promote local identity, as well as facilitate effective sustainable tourism [13]. More importantly, the capacity to foster heritage will be able to spur urban renewal through linking past with present, and looking squarely towards the future [14].

The majority of world frameworks offer a common picture for a heritage-based urban development, but their realization can be different in terms of cultural, social, and even political situations [15]. Such comparison shows flexibility of global models towards local situations, resources at hand [16], as well as nature in their interests [17]. This deviation highlights the significance of exploring international case applications in order to better understand how heritage integration is negotiated in practice.

Central transformation plans for cities are based on both large as well as small-scale projects that should be compatible with other locations for life, that emphasize on partnerships with private sector, offer a vision for how both architectural forms and designs can engage with physical environment for city, as well as how heritage protection can be incorporated into urban growth strategies [18], [19], [20]. Figure 2 shows urban master plans for Istanbul in Turkey, Cairo in Egypt, and Marrakech in Morocco.

Deviating views on heritage, which are developed through individual as well as cultural systems for values, lead to sophisticated issues, such as access, authenticity, appropriation, and gentrification [21]. Such issues often emerge in the form of localized case studies, including those in both France and Morocco [22]. Ubiquity for heritage issues, in terms of traditionality like Turkish coffee as well as in terms of safety-led choices in France, reflects conflict between cultural continuity and modern forces [23]. The idea for heritage consciousness is older than formal conservation, as it appeared in ancient and medieval practices concerning interpretation, veneration, and even imitation of style [24]. This indicates that there is always an urge among humans to interact with the past, be it by conservation or recreation [25]. Multi-dimensional values for heritage assets are beyond any ownership to benefit local and international communities, as well as future generations [26]. This renders conservation a shared and not an individual mandate [27]. The al-Azhar Park project in Cairo shows how the transition from isolated building restoration to a more holistic, as well as community-oriented development can contribute to amplification of social impact for heritage development [28]. These international examples confirm that heritage-based regeneration can achieve success when it incorporates the needs of locals, infrastructure, and participative governance.

As explained through A. J. Yarza (2022), the adaptive reuse model frames heritage as a sustainability resource, not an obstacle [29]. With diversity in both terms, heritage experience as well as interpretation, it is easy to understand that heritage cannot be detached from its social and political contexts. Although there are models that show transformative potential for integrated, community-based approaches, a number of long-standing problems for ownership, and, to a lesser degree, representation reflect the need to enhance more critical and participatory models in influencing the future of heritage.

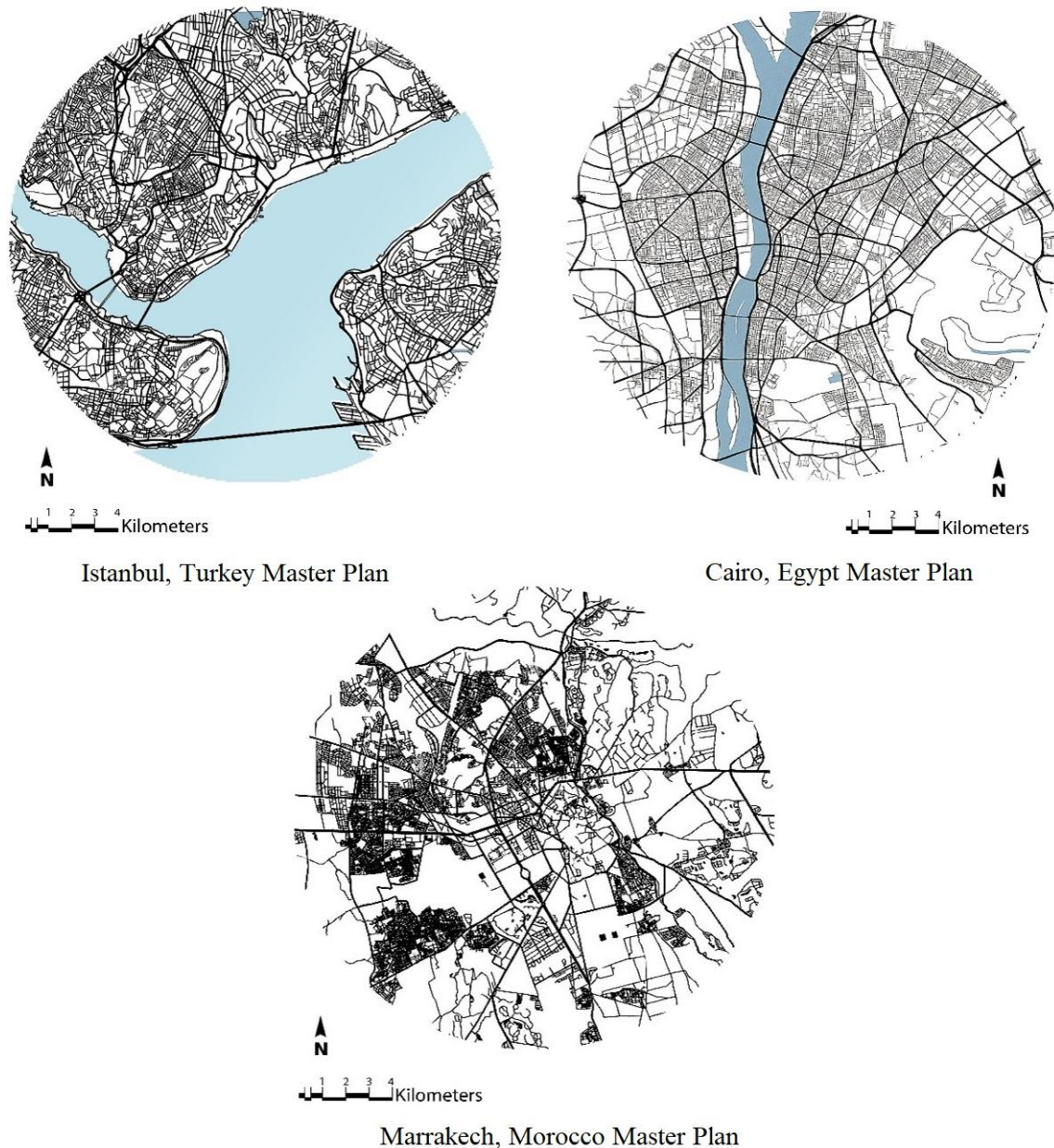


Figure 2. Urban master plans for Istanbul (Turkey), Cairo (Egypt), and Marrakech (Morocco) (Source: Google Maps-edited via the Authors with Adobe Photoshop 2024)

However, in Iraq, heritage studies have been mainly directed to architectural documentation or site-related restoration. There have been very few publications dealing with systemic assessment for preservation policies, stakeholder attitudes, or institutional processes. Besides, a dearth of empirical studies exists on way professionals determine effectiveness in both legal as well as economic systems concerning heritage management for Iraqi cities.

The implications of this study extend far beyond the national context, as it is grounded in the historical cities of Iraq. The challenges it addresses—fragmented politics, limited funding, outdated legislation, and weak civic engagement—are shared by many other nations undergoing modernization and rapid urbanization. As an example, in Syria and Yemen, the current conflict has greatly hindered institutional coordination and protection of heritage. On the same note, in states for sub-Saharan Africa like Sudan and Mali, historic cities confront bad policy implementation, lack of resources, as well as a lack of heritage integration for development planning. This research will present a comparative analysis that can contribute to international debate for sustainable heritage management by using international models such as community-led conservation in Morocco and adaptive reuse projects in Turkey.

With its stakeholder-based informed solutions, such as legislative reform, interagency coordination, adaptive reuse, and even public participation, it proposes transferable policy solutions, which can be adapted to context-specific solutions for heritage preservation projects in a variety of different contexts, especially in the Global South.

4. Theoretical framework

This work takes into consideration three theoretical frameworks, which aid in explaining how heritage could be preserved in historic cities that are facing a rapid urbanization process. Theory for urban governance can be used to elucidate how overlapping institutions and fragmentation of jurisdictions can restrict protection for heritage [30]. Adaptive reuse provides a good solution through repurposing old buildings into other uses without damaging the spirit, which has been demonstrated to be successful in the lifespan extension for buildings, as well as creating new jobs in the local economy by use for tourism other than community activities [31]. In the case of Iraq, there are numerous heritage sites that lack proper use. Civic or cultural uses for these spaces can help conservation and meet demands on sustainable urban development.

Urban governance theory emphasizes that effective management of urban areas requires cooperation among government agencies, the private sector, and local communities [32]. Goals must be mutually reinforcing to ensure benefits for all stakeholders. Consequently, aligning public and private interests is essential, as it not only serves society at large but also provides individual benefits [33]. This approach applies to balancing tourism with residential needs, while simultaneously promoting social cohesion and economic development. In Iraq, heritage preservation faces challenges due to centralized decision-making and unclear stakeholder responsibilities [34]. Citizen engagement in planning and rehabilitation efforts is currently the least influential factor and requires additional support and reinforcement to strengthen the built environment [35].

Efforts to preserve a limited number of historically important buildings through expropriation have inadvertently turned sections of the city center into static, museum-like spaces lacking public and economic vitality. Although homeowners and residents are encouraged to obtain free technical guidance and apply for restoration loans, these measures have had a limited impact. Drawing on governance theory, this study critically assesses how structural challenges—namely, centralized decision-making and unclear stakeholder responsibilities—undermine the effectiveness of heritage conservation in Iraq.

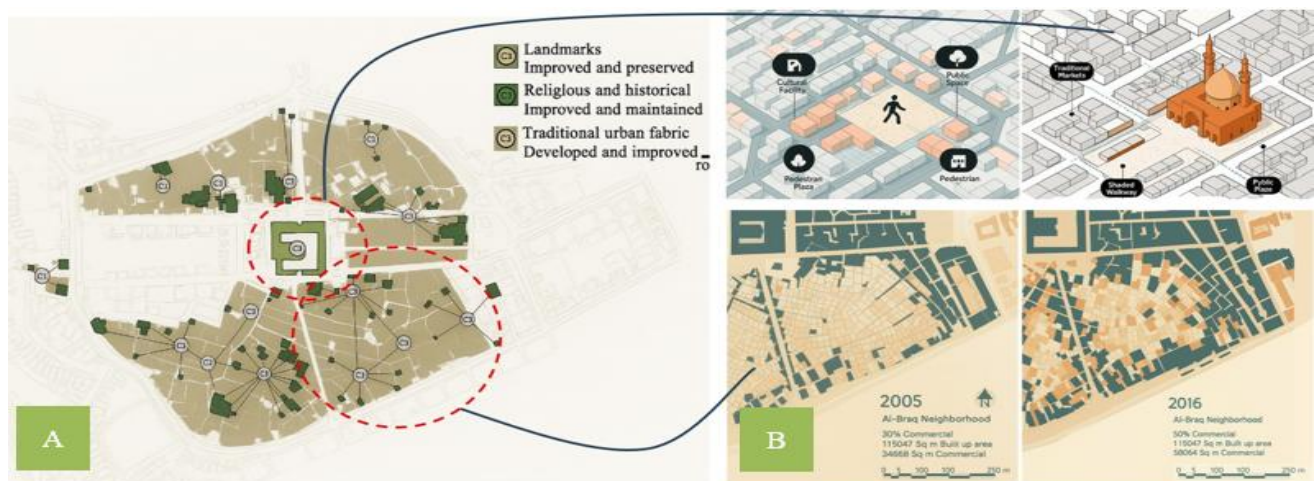


Figure 3. Transformations at activities that occurred between 2005 and 2016 at Al-Buraq neighbourhood in Najaf; (A) Shubber M. Falah fieldwork [36]; (B) four neighborhoods of the old city of Najaf, including the Al-Buraq neighborhood [36]. The work was mainly based on Shubber M. Falah's fieldwork, with modifications made in Photoshop and with the use of 3D Max to modify maps at the researcher's discretion.)

As an example, significant urban changes were made at the center of Najaf (a conventional Iraqi city), namely

at Al-Buraq neighborhood, in 2005 and in 2016. Figure 3 shows key developments in commercial applications, enhancing conventional urban texture as well as preserving both historical and religious locations, in the context of urban policies that emphasize spaces for people and pedestrians. It is necessary to consider these policies as well as their appropriateness for Iraqi historic cities. Figure 4 illustrates the historical trail in Najaf, highlighting its significance and the transformation of traditional activities into commercial uses. These changes have altered the human-scale character and spatial dynamics of the area, underscoring the need to reassess policies and strategies for managing urban transformation in historic city centers.



Figure 4. A historical trail at Najaf clarifying the transformations of activities into commercial ones (A) Sadiq Abid's fieldwork in 2015, showing devastation at a randomly selected alleyway [37]; (B) Shubber M. Falah's fieldwork, devastation of traditional fabric in the city of Najaf, in the Al-Buraq neighbourhood (2014) [36]; (C) Place right near shrine, 2025 (Source: Authors)

This system takes into consideration both cultural and social dimensions for heritage as most significant, as well as components with collective identity, not just physical form for the built environment [38]. Based on frameworks that focus on community participation in conservation, the proposed model highlights the significance of this concept at the local level as well as how priorities for conservation can be established according to the views of experts [39]. Considering both religious and cultural values for cities in Iraq, it is a viable strategy to streamline planning in accordance with local culture [40]. It will assist in striking the right balance between environmental and socio-economic factors in rehabilitating traditional cities. Table 1 presents three key concepts for the model: urban governance, values-based conservation, and adaptive reuse, as well as justifying their relevance to heritage challenges in Iraq.

Table 1. Summary of theoretical frameworks for urban heritage preservation in Iraq

Theoretical Framework	Key Concepts	Relevance to Iraqi Context
Urban Governance Theory	Coordination among institutions, stakeholder alignment, and policy enforcement.	Explains fragmented responsibilities and the need for inter-agency collaboration.
Values-Based Conservation	Cultural as well as social meanings, community participation, and inclusive valuation.	Addresses the lack of societal awareness and the need for public engagement.
Adaptive Reuse & Sustainability	Functional transformation for heritage buildings, sustainability, and economic reuse.	Provides practical strategies to reuse neglected heritage sites while preserving identity.

5. Results

The questionnaire contained 12 closed-ended questions as well as five open-ended questions. Results are split into three parts (numerical data, participants' opinions, observations, and analysis for theoretical frameworks). This organization strives to give a bigger picture in regards to existing challenges as well as opportunities.

In order to measure opinion for experts, the survey questions were closed-ended, and they pertained to economic policies, civil society, and technology used in heritage work. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale and were analyzed descriptively. The sample included 90 experts. Economic policies: 75% (66 for 90) perceived existing policies as weak to support heritage ($M = 2.1$, $SD = 0.8$), which is a definite policy gap. Modern technologies: 87% (78/90) confirmed that modern technologies like 3D documentation as well as digital mapping can do wonders in the preservation process ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.6$), which is optimistic to such a degree. Civil society engagement: responses were more or less equal, as well as close to 2 to 3 ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 0.9$), indicating a moderately weak view about civic engagement in heritage decision-making processes.

The findings indicate that current economic systems are insufficient and point toward opportunities for technological transformation. Furthermore, the limited recognition of civil society's role corresponds with urban governance theory, which underscores stakeholder coordination as essential for addressing institutional constraints. Quantitative results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Quantitative survey results on heritage preservation

Question	Mean	SD	Agreement (4-5)	Disagreement (1-2)
Economic policy effectiveness	(M)	0.8	10%	75%
Role for modern technologies	2.1	0.6	87%	5%
Civil society engagement	4.2	0.9	20%	60%

Note: Agreement = Likert scores 4–5; Disagreement = Likert scores 1–2

Qualitative data derived from detailed open-ended questionnaire responses provided comprehensive insights into both structural and contextual challenges related to heritage conservation in Iraq's traditional cities. A total of 120 responses from 90 heritage professionals were analyzed using thematic coding in NVivo 12, following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach to thematic analysis.

Five key themes emerged as major barriers: outdated or weak legislation, lack of public awareness, insufficient funding, institutional fragmentation, and policy inconsistency. These were complemented by five solution-oriented themes proposed by participants, reflecting a shared vision for integrated heritage governance, as illustrated in Figure 5.

The findings align with the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study, including urban governance, values-based conservation, adaptive reuse, and sustainable urbanism. Together, they offer valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with preserving cultural heritage in Iraq.

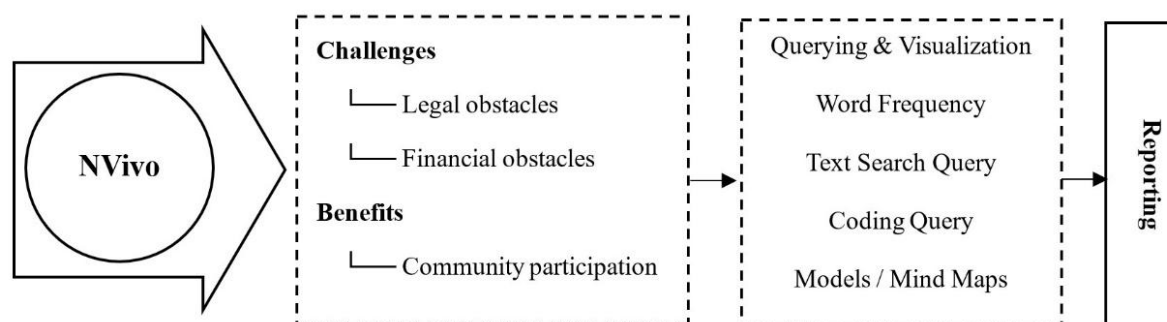


Figure 5. NVivo data analysis process

Experts have pointed out a bunch of hurdles getting in the way of effective heritage conservation in Iraq.

Investing both physically and socially in existing city structures offers a fresh chance to make smart decisions about reshaping the city landscape. It is very vital, especially for larger cities experiencing quick changes in their urban fabric. One of the problems is that there is no coherent set of laws. The ones that exist are old and not enforced well. This approach contradicts current efforts to use historic buildings to attract tourists. In addition, services should be provided in a manner that is compatible with the character and environment of the city center.

Heritage is something that people do not see as their responsibility to maintain. So, public awareness must be raised for our local cultural values in the city center, despite all commercial interests and investments. The other common statement was the issue of funding, or the lack of it. Government funding is pretty scarce, and there aren't many incentives for private investors, so a lot of projects are half-baked.

A balance is needed in city centers that respects historic structures while accommodating the demands of the modern technological era, without causing discomfort or frustration for residents and visitors. Furthermore, inconsistencies between local and national policies highlight the fragmented nature of heritage planning.

Experts also identified five key areas that could improve heritage conservation in the country. First of all, they are calling for legal reforms by updating urban legislation. It is not enough for the law to just be updated; experts also call for the coherence between these new urban local laws as well as national heritage laws, including environmental and social laws. The laws also have to be enforceable so that national policies can actually work in real local situations.

Next, the need to raise public awareness is emphasized. Community initiatives can foster a sense of collective responsibility among residents, encouraging them to protect and value the rich cultural heritage of historic areas. The importance of adaptive reuse is also highlighted; heritage conservation is not solely about preserving old buildings, but also about meeting contemporary needs and generating economic benefits through their sustainable use.

Fourth, institutional reform is needed. Stakeholders need to be involved, and continuous evaluations based on measurable indicators have to be maintained while minimizing similarities in powers, along with international cooperation and capacity building. This means that certain intervention areas are legalized so that rehabilitation can take place smoothly and effectively, usually through cooperation with international organizations and the use of digital tools for increased efficiency. When all these strategies are summed up, a balance between heritage preservation and sustainable urban development is essentially called for, which means that public interests come before private interests, bringing together the region's potential as well as challenges. Table 3 shows the major challenges faced in heritage preservation as identified by experts based on their experience, highlighting the major weaknesses in legislation and public awareness that impact heritage preservation. These results highlight the challenges posed for preserving heritage in the face of rapid urban modernization in the historical cities of Iraq.

Table 3. Thematic frequency

Theme (Challenge or Suggestion)	Frequency (No. for Mentions)	Type
Weak Legislation	66	Challenge
Lack of Societal Awareness	66	Challenge
Funding Shortfalls	54	Challenge
Institutional Fragmentation	42	Challenge
Policy Absence or Conflict	36	Challenge

With both quantitative and qualitative data combined, a mixed methods approach is employed in this research that incorporates descriptive statistics and thematic coding with NVivo 12. What experts believe about the condition of heritage in Iraq's old cities in the face of modernization can be revealed by descriptive statistics. Grounded in theoretical frameworks for urban governance theory, values-based conservation, adaptive reuse,

and sustainable urbanism, gaps in legislation, institutional coordination, as well as public engagement are identified. Finally, clear directions for reform are proposed.

Digital technologies are generally viewed with excitement by most people. Interestingly, though, it is believed by a few experts that the economy is not doing well. Another theme that emerged in both quantitative and qualitative results was the absence of civil society. The need for stronger public participation and public awareness was mentioned repeatedly by people. This really reinforces the call for people.

It was mentioned by experts that weak infrastructure and limited technical capabilities are some of the main issues that prevent the implementation of these strategies in practice. It seems that any digital tools need to be grounded in the local context. Previous solutions were suggested: legal reforms, public involvement, reuse strategies, in addition to better institutional coordination. Primary challenges can be identified. It is implied that for something that will last, stronger laws, more public involvement, and systems that truly reflect circumstances for people are needed in Iraq.

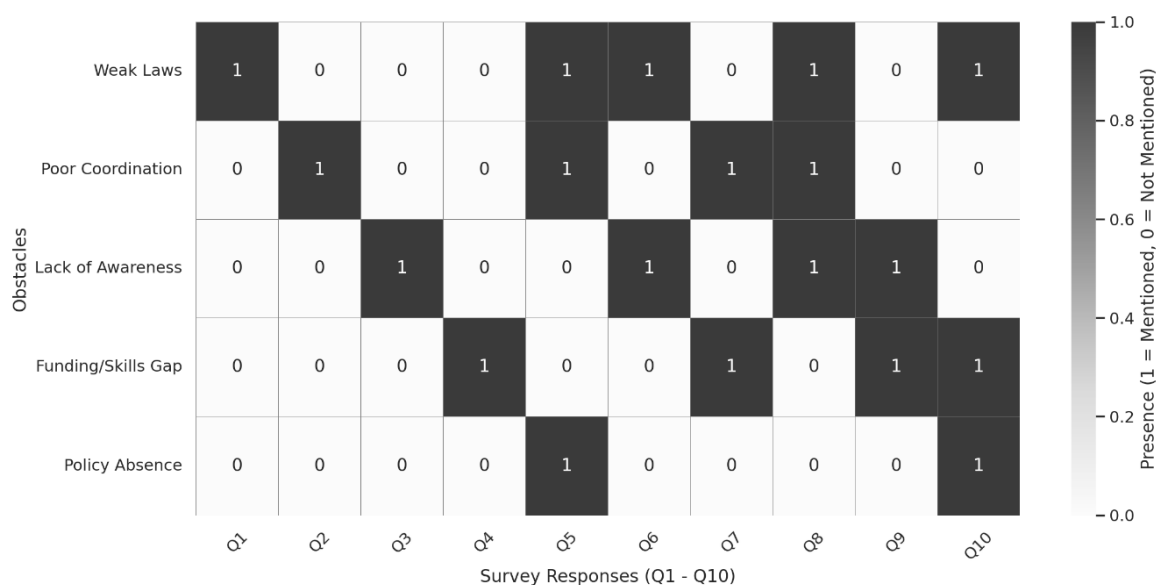


Figure 6. Challenge-solution cross matrix for heritage preservation

Figure 6 shows how different challenges lead to calls for different types of actions, based on expert opinions. Some of the problems that have been identified by these experts are touched on, such as how the obsolescence of legislation might lead to a call for both legal reform and increased civic engagement. A matrix that connects five broad heritage challenges to the types of solutions identified by experts is also present. Strategic integration is highlighted as the only type of strategy that is said to address all of the challenges. The need for a comprehensive and integrated policy reform strategy is emphasized.

6. Discussion

Urban heritage governance, particularly in Iraq, is understood through this study based on institutional weaknesses and a high rate of urban changes. It is interesting how stakeholder assessments are aligned with the urban governance theory, values-based conservation, and adaptive reuse. However, some significant challenges still need to be faced. For example, policy fragmentation, a lack of funding, and weak engagement from the sectors are prominent issues. In fact, it is noted that only 10% of experts agree that economic policies in Iraq are effective, which is similar to findings observed in Egypt. Funding mechanisms like tax incentives are lacking in Iraq, which complicates the situation. The use of digital tools is supported by experts, aligning with global trends.

However, qualitative data highlights significant gaps in capacity and readiness, similar to other countries in the Global South. A top-down style of governance is prevalent. The top-down style of governance that Iraq has is

really limited in how much civil society can be involved, which is seen as going against the participatory goals of the Burra Charter. Legal reforms and better coordination, are reflected in how importance integrated policies are. Voices for practitioners have been brought in by this study, and the spotlight has been shifted onto the systemic policy gaps, but caution needs to be taken when interpreting the results; the expert sample was limited, and there was a lack of validation as well as longitudinal data. The recommendations from this research are seen as pretty solid: they include updating heritage laws (ICOMOS 2013), setting up a national council, securing funding through partnerships, increasing public engagement, investing in digital training (Della Torre 2019), as well as aligning efforts with UNESCO and ICOMOS. This is a step toward sustainable governance, and we'll need to keep evaluating its impact in the long term.

A recommendation summary for improving urban heritage preservation proposals is shown in Table 4. It acts as a road map that addresses legal and social issues on one side, as well as technical issues on the other. Expert inputs are the basis for them, and global frameworks are supported, with the aim of contributing to both academic knowledge and local policy-making in Iraq.

For better laws and greater public participation awareness, legal changes and increased public participation are vital and must continue to be pushed for. Both legal changes and participation are truly at the heart of both urban governance theory and values-based conservation. This response comes from 75% who are tired of doing the same old thing and are not impressed with current economic policies. Heritage preservation should incorporate economically sustainable, incentive-based programs and public-private partnerships, as exemplified by the principles of adaptive reuse, which bring the significance of the past into meaningful use in the present.

Table 4. Strategic recommendations linked to core challenges, in addition to relevant theories

Recommendation	Target Challenge	Frequency	Theoretical Alignment
Legislative Reform	Weak Legislation	(66 mentions)	Urban Governance Theory
Institutional Coordination	Institutional Fragmentation	(42 mentions)	Urban Governance Theory
Financial Mechanisms	Funding Shortfalls	(54 mentions)	Adaptive Reuse Theory
Community Engagement	Lack of Societal Awareness	(66 mentions)	Values-Based Conservation
Technological Integration	Capacity Gaps	(36 mentions)	Adaptive Reuse Theory
International Collaboration	Collaboration Needs	(24 mentions)	Urban Governance Theory

Institutional coordination (14 mentions) and technological integration (12 mentions) are shown to be a concern regarding the problem of fragmented governance and capacity constraints, which are also apparent in survey results (e.g., low average results for civil society engagement as well as qualitative critiques for technical infrastructure). International collaboration (8 mentions) is included to complete a holistic reform proposal by embedding Iraq's heritage governance into international networks for practice and support.

Thematic consistency with the empirical results is shown by these recommendations, along with a robust theoretical basis, making them well-positioned for both practical implementation and academic contribution. Their applicability for policymakers as well as urban planners seeking context-sensitive and sustainable solutions is also enhanced by the alignment with international heritage governance agreements.

An integrated framework embedding key challenges in heritage preservation is illustrated by the diagram, with theoretical models and policy recommendations being connected through this study. These issues, like weak law, lack of awareness, and fragmented institutions, are shown to align with academic frameworks such as urban governance theory, adaptive reuse, and values-based conservation. For each challenge, specific interventions like law setting, involvement of local communities, or inclusion at an international level are linked. This way, the logical relationship between diagnosis, theory, as well as solution for developing a sustainable heritage governance strategy is embedded.

To embed the literature review with current global perspectives, this study reviews recent publications between 2023 and 2025 in Global South contexts. A 2024 study, based on a 1,600-resident survey in Aleppo, highlights community perceptions of modernization-related heritage reconstruction, reinforcing this study's emphasis on participatory governance. A 2024 Loughborough University analysis focuses on digital observatories for documentation, mapping, and monitoring, which resonates with expert support for technological integration. El Khoury, as well as Aouad's 2025 research on Wadi Hanifa, advocates for identity-driven, values-based conservation, complementing this study's theoretical orientation.

A 2025 Springer chapter on Benghazi calls for integrated governance frameworks in fragile contexts, mirroring the multi-dimensional approach proposed here. Zara's 2024 report for Turquoise Mountain presents a model for private sector-led, community-focused preservation, aligning with this study's recommendation for improved stakeholder coordination. Figure 7 illustrates an integrated diagram for heritage preservation dynamics as well as response strategies.

Together, these contemporary studies reinforce global relevance for the proposed framework as well as contribute both theoretically and practically to the field of urban heritage governance. This paper can be developed further by modern techniques [41, 42], statistical approaches [43, 44], or other strategic approaches [45, 46] to preserve sustainable urban cities.

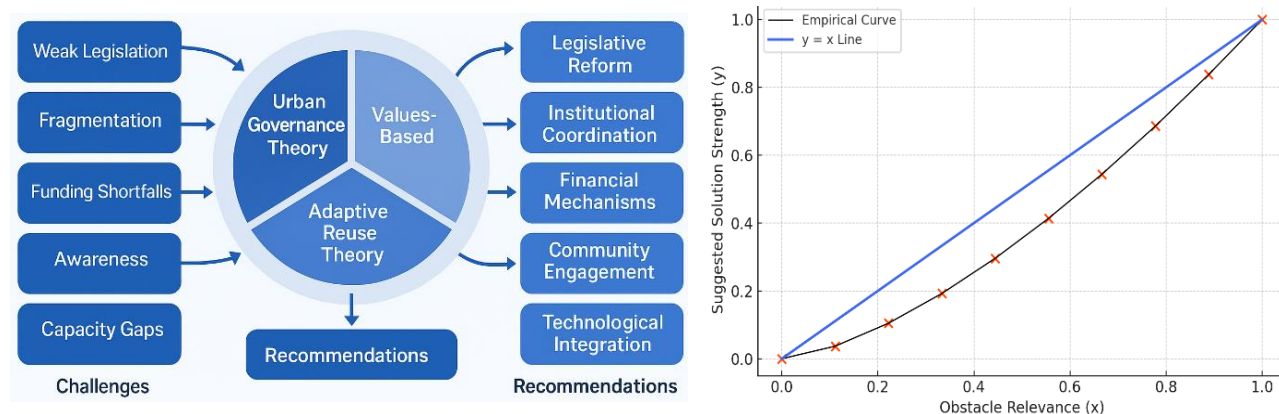


Figure 7. Integrated diagram for heritage preservation dynamics and response strategies

7. Conclusions

An in-depth, hard look at heritage preservation policies in the old cities of Iraq is presented in this article. It is an example of mixed methods, which is a way of saying it mixes numbers with personal insights. For example, they got quantitative responses from 90 experts; only 27% of respondents expressed satisfaction with existing economic policies, whereas a substantial 87% supported the adoption of technological initiatives.

About 120 qualitative responses were received as well. Some real systemic issues were revealed. Old legislation was mentioned 22 times, fragmentation among institutions was noted with 14 mentions, not enough engagement was indicated (with an average of 2.7), and technological gaps were identified (12 mentions). It is shown by all of this that real dissatisfaction with the status quo exists. Values-based conservation and adaptive reuse are no longer given attention to individual sites, but to heritage in a wider policy and planning context. Unlike what has been seen previously, a new and growing discourse on how heritage can be managed in a coherent, participatory, and context-sensitive manner is focused on by this research. How urban governance theory can be a call for coordinated reforms is highlighted by this research, while how communities value their heritage is drawn to by values-based conservation. Tech-driven solutions are called for by adaptive reuse.

Nevertheless, some limitations are present. The expert sample was comprised of only 90 people, and some urban bias exists, because most of the data comes from cities such as Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra. Long-term validation or follow-up data is not available. The findings highlight the need for multi-dimensional reforms, including

legislative updates, enhanced inter-agency collaboration, community engagement initiatives, investment in technology, and the development of international partnerships.

The policy gaps in Iraq are really bridged by the insights and the global conversation about modernizing heritage, is contributes to. Models are even provided, which can work in places such as Syria. Future research would be great to see focused on implementation through long-term research or pilot projects in Baghdad, along with Mosul. After all, the fabric of Iraq and its urban planning is considered very important for recovery, and a good model for future academic and policy work can be served.

8. Recommendations

The urgent need for a solid heritage governance strategy in Iraq is highlighted by this study. When it is thought about, a difference could really be made by updating the legal framework. If the focus is placed on refreshing laws to better attract public as well as private sector involvement, doors could be opened for more community engagement, especially when it comes to promoting ownership among locals. Digital training could be offered, and tech could be integrated into everyday life, which could shift how heritage is viewed by local communities.

Overlooking the significance of teaming up with international organizations like UNESCO as well as ICCROM cannot be done. These groups bring valuable expertise to the table and encourage community participation, not to mention they can help with funding. All these collaborative efforts work together to empower Iraqi cities, allowing them to safeguard their unique urban and cultural heritage. It is a big task, but with the right strategies, there's so much potential for positive change.

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Author contribution

Husam Sachit Senah: Conceptualization, practical work, writing a literature review, and methodology.

Haider Majid Hasan and Kareemm Alabdali: original draft preparation, data curation, and visualization.

Adil Mahdi Jabbar: Reviewing and editing, interpretation, and preparing according to the journal template.

Ethical approval statement

Our institution does not require research ethics approval for reporting individual cases or case series.

Declaration for competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known financial or non-financial competing interests at any material discussed in this paper.

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