

# Conservation of Urban Heritage Landscapes: Lessons from Souq AlSaffarin in Baghdad, Iraq

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## Abstract

For centuries, traditional bazaars, or Souqs have been integral to urban life and the economic landscapes of Arabic-Islamic regions. The tangible and intangible heritage that shapes the identity of a place and contributes to its economy is essential to the functioning of these bazaars. With appropriate spatial configurations, they could foster creative industries, handicrafts, and customs, which can generate new services, create jobs, diversify a city's economic distribution and promote small businesses.

This paper explores Souq alsaffarin, which is also known as the copper market in old Rusafa in Baghdad. It is a heritage urban landscape and has a role in shaping the sense of place in this area. It has been subject to many socio-economic and political events that have influenced the importance and character of its profession, in terms of production and selling. It is a landmark of Baghdad that has maintained its position despite difficulties. The distinctive handicrafts produced and their relationships with people's social practices highlight their impact on tourism and their role as an economic source for the region. They provide economic permanence that helps to develop the historical core of the city, preserve its historical identity, and promote cultural tourism. However, the market faces a significant problem of declining numbers of shopkeepers and craftsmen, which threatens the continuation of its local small businesses.

This research examines this issue. It employs site observations, questionnaires, and interviews with craftsmen and shop owners who still run the market, as a research methodology. SWOT analysis is employed to identify the best solutions to develop the souq and preserve its identity.

The paper concludes that the significance of Souq AlSaffarin lies in its deep connection to the rich history and culture, which defines the identity and heritage of the community. Thus, it argues that preservation and conservation are essential. This requires an approach that considers both tangible and intangible aspects of the souq, engaging the local community, and promoting sustainable practices, so that this souq can thrive as a living testament to its rich history and culture.

**Keywords:** Urban network analysis, Traditional Bazaar, Handicrafts, Intangible heritage, Historic core, Baghdad, Iraq.

## Introduction

Heritage urban landscapes, as defined by UNESCO, encompass both tangible and intangible elements that are inherited from previous generations and are representative of a society's culture and way of life (UNESCO.org, 2003). The tangible aspects of heritage include physical structures such as buildings, historical sites, monuments, and artifacts, while the intangible elements include customs, rituals, carnival events, knowledge, and practices related to Nature and the universe, as well as the skills that produce traditional crafts (UNESCO.org, 2003; Laurajane Smith, 2006; Haldrup and Børenholdt, 2015). These elements are essential in understanding the past, its stories, and the experiences derived from it.

Bazaars, or souqs, in old Arabic and Islamic regions, are prime examples of heritage urban landscapes. They serve as centers for commercial transactions, social intersections, and cultural exchange. These bazaars are made up typically of a grouping of specialized markets that offer a variety of goods such as spices, fabrics, jewelry, household needs, handicrafts, and souvenirs. In addition to their economic significance, bazaars are social hubs where people gather to meet friends and acquaintances (UNESCO.org, 2003; Zandieh and Seifpour, 2020)

In addition to their economic and social significance, bazaars in old Arabic and Islamic regions have evolved over time into attractive core places for peer occupations, based on commercial, social, and personal networks. These hubs become known by specific occupation names, such as "Souq Goldsmiths", "Souq alSaffarin" or "Souq Potteries," reflecting the specialization and concentration of certain trades within each bazaar. These occupational names further contribute to the unique identity and heritage of the urban landscapes, highlighting the deep-rooted connections between the physical spaces and the craftspeople who practice their professions within them (Abu-Lughod, 1987; Karimi, 2015; Nursanty et al., 2023)

Furthermore, bazaars are important architectural centers that house many buildings with unique designs and details that are associated with beautiful handicrafts and symbols representing traditional experiences and skills. Some of these buildings have gained their significance through their association with important historical events or social practices related to the lives of individuals in a particular area (Belali-E Oskui and Jafari, 2022; Hamza, 2022). The diversity and richness of the details found in these bazaars make them a perfect embodiment of the 'historic urban landscape' idea adopted by UNESCO, which emphasizes the intersection of tangible and intangible elements in the urban environment. (UNESCO.org., 2011).

The bazaars in old Arabic and Islamic cultures are centers of commercial transactions, social interactions, and cultural exchange (Al-Ashab, 1974; Fethi, 1978; Roslan, Ramli and Choy, 2018; Ragheb, 2021). They are characterized by their unique architecture and the wide variety of goods available in them, ranging from spices, fabrics, jewelry, and handicrafts to souvenirs (Porcal-Gonzalo, 2023). UNESCO's concept of the historic urban landscape emphasizes the integration of tangible heritage with the culture of the people, represented by their customs, traditions, social practices, crafts and skills, providing insight into the way of life of previous generations and their interactions with their surroundings (Janse, 2003; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Harrison, 2010).

Previous research has focused on traditional bazaars in historical cities, as well as handicrafts and intangible heritage, and their preservation, development, and transfer to subsequent generations (Alghamdi, 2023; Fatma, 2023). There, many strategies and methods have been proposed for developing traditional bazaars in historic urban cores by focusing on human activities, communication, and professional development, and considering them as tourist destinations to provide a sustainable source of financial income for the development of historical areas (Poulios, 2014; Job, Becken and Lane, 2017; Farhan et al., 2022). The effective integration of land uses has also been proposed, linking historical areas with new transportation lines in cities (Elsayed, 2013; Furlan and Al-Mohannadi, 2020; Juraeva, 2021). Others have focused on place energy associated with the collective practices of individuals and their shared memories (Hamzah and Abduljalil, 2019).

Many research has explored the idea of adapting traditional bazaars as places for social co-existence and preserving handicrafts while examining the positives and negatives of government interventions (Mukherjee and Ghosh, 2019; Tannous, Furlan and Major, 2020). Many urban development plans for traditional handicraft souqs have also been proposed to facilitate their preservation and introduction to new generations, while handicrafts have been used as a base to attract tourists (xu and Tao, 2022; Edgü et al., 2015; Kusumowidagdo et al., 2023). However, in many cases, such preservations of bazaars face challenges due to a decline in the number of shopkeepers who work in handicrafts and other local small businesses (Taçon and Baker, 2019). Thus, there remains a gap in studying tangible and intangible legacies, including handicrafts and social practices, within their physical environments and means of developing these crafts and practices, which would attract attention as important cultural, social, and economic tourist destinations for the country. To address this gap, further research should be conducted to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis) associated with heritage urban landscapes. Such analysis could help identify solutions dedicated to developing and preserving the unique identity of these landscapes while also supporting the economic developments of the regions.

Further research is needed in this area to provide insights into the development of human heritage and the preservation of its physical and cultural elements.

This research therefore aims to achieve the following objectives.

1. To assess the tangible and intangible heritage of Souq alsaffarin in Baghdad and explore its significance in shaping the sense of place in the local area. This assessment will encompass the examination of rich architectural buildings and historic urban fabric within the souq.
2. To investigate the challenges faced by Souq alSaffarin, particularly the concerning decline in the number of shopkeepers and craftsmen, and to understand the potential implications for the continuation of local small businesses, which are gradually fading away.
3. To formulate a comprehensive set of recommendations for the conservation and development of Souq alSaffarin, with a primary focus on preserving its unique identity while proactively addressing the challenges it currently encounters.

These objectives aim to contribute significantly to the understanding of urban heritage landscapes, particularly traditional souqs. The research provides valuable insights into the conservation and development of Souq AlSaffarin in Baghdad, considering its vital role in shaping the identity of its region.

The research is carried out in three stages. It begins by introducing the issue and reviewing the most relevant literature, which was useful in identifying the research gap and defining proper objectives. Then, the methodology conceptualized in an integrated manner, including a case study approach, interviews, semi-structured questionnaire techniques, and, lastly, SWOT analysis. Finally, the findings and conclusions are described and discussed to suggest a way forward (Fig.1).

## Research Methods & Techniques

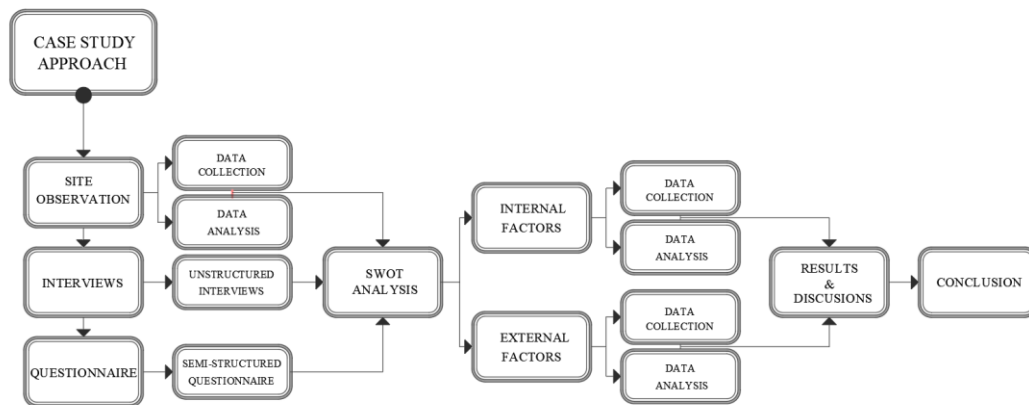
This research employs a case study method within which several techniques are adopted to gather data. First, a series of site visits to the bazaars located in the historic core of Rusafa was conducted. The main purpose of these visits was to identify and select suitable cases. Subsequently, souq AlSaffarin was chosen as one of the most important traditional souqs in Baghdad, Iraq (Al-Ashab, 1974; Fethi, 1978; Alobaydi, 2017).

For data collection, a variety of sources were used. These included aerial photographs, maps, certified reports, and two-dimensional plans obtained from the municipality of Baghdad. These data sources were carefully analyzed and evaluated to provide a detailed understanding

of the physical and cultural landscape of the selected bazaar. The use of various data sources enabled the researchers to gather a diverse range of information about the bazaar, including its history, architecture, spaces, and cultural significance.

A series of interviews were undertaken to gain insights into the experiences of the workers who have been associated with the Souq AlSaffarin for approximately fifty years or more (Fig.2).

The workers were chosen through a selective and convenient sampling technique. A socio-professional network was utilized, relying on nominations from craftsmen shop heads. This approach ensured security considerations and the preservation of valuable know-how. The interviews were conducted orally at their workplaces, allowing for a comfortable and familiar environment. Each question was illustrated and explained to the participants to ensure accuracy. In addition to that, open-ended questions were employed during the interviews to elicit context-rich information. This technique allowed authors to gather a deeper exploration of the workers' experiences, thoughts and perspectives. Thus, the interviews aimed to uncover insights and a more comprehensive understanding of the interviewees' thought processes and facilitated a natural flow of conversation, enhancing engagement and rapport during the interview process.



**Fig.1:** Research structure  
Source: Authors

These interviews provided a platform for the workers to express their views on the souq and share their personal narratives and memories, which served to enhance the understanding of the souq's historical and cultural significance. The information gathered through these interviews facilitated a deeper understanding of the social practices and professions associated with the market, including those of workers and shoppers alike. The data collected from these interviews were used to analyze, describe, and evaluate the practices and social structures that have developed within the souq over time.



**Fig.1.** Certificate of registration for a dealer in metals, timber, and other building materials in 1918 from the deputy Military governor for the grandfather of one of the interviewers and samples of his production  
Source: Authors

In conjunction with the site visits and interviews, a semi-structured questionnaire was administered to 17 craftsmen from the Souq AlSaffarin. These artisans were selected to represent the remaining individuals in the market, as they were nominated by heads of artisan shops. It's worth noting that this approach is a limitation of the current study, even though all 17 craftsmen participated in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was designed with open-ended questions to allow an inclusive understanding of the current state of the souq, the craftsmen's experiences, and their perceptions of the challenges and opportunities faced by the souq. Data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using the SWOT technique, (Fig.7), which is a planning tool that evaluates the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats of a project. The purpose of using this technique was to identify the points of strength, weakness, opportunities, and threats for handicrafts and their impact on the souq as well as Rusafa's historic core as understood and expressed by the workers.

Further clarification regarding the case study presented in this research will be provided in the subsequent sections, offering a detailed and comprehensive description of the study's specifics.

The questions that were directed to craftsmen in souq Alsaffarin were divided into two parts. The first part was related to the souq and its weaknesses and strengths, while the second part was related to the opportunities that could improve the reality of the souq and the challenges it faces as follows.

#### **Internal forces**

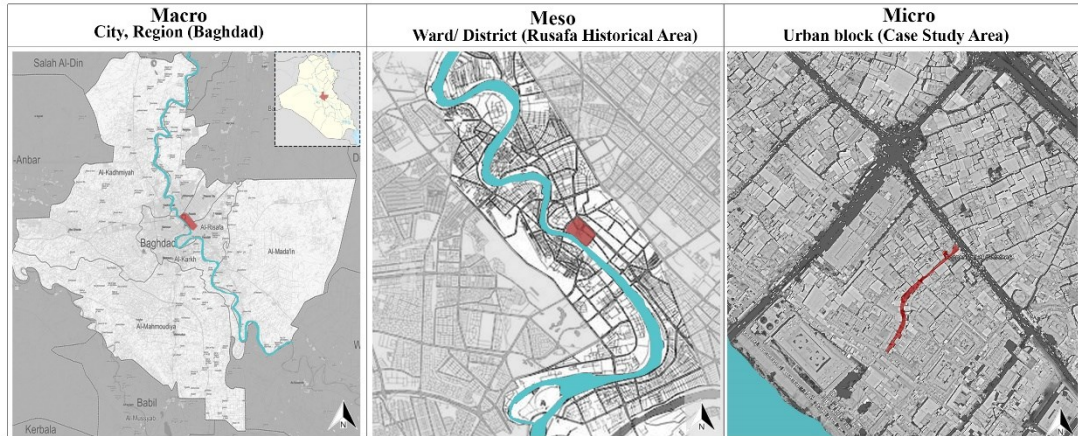
- Do you still practice your handicrafts, or have you turned to imported goods completely?
- Do you still have your own workshop? If yes, what motivates you?
- Did you inherit your business from your family, and will you pass it on to your children?
- Can you continue to work as a craftsman, but outside this place? If yes, what is the effect of the Souq environment and its location on your business?
- Do you have a comfortable work environment suitable for your production?
- Have you worked on learning new skills that will advance your business?
- Have you made any adjustments to your business to suit the market and competition?
- Have you resorted to electronic marketing for your products? If yes, how have you done that?

#### **External forces**

- How have various factors evolved and impacted the job market during your time in the field?
- Could you provide information about the most recent developments in this area of work?
- Can you describe the current state of the area's infrastructure in relation to this field of work?
- What are the prominent issues or challenges that the market is currently facing?
- Is there any form of state support or assistance for individuals involved in this craft?
- Are the existing laws designed to protect worker rights and ensure their sustained participation in the market?
- How easily accessible is the market area through transportation links?
- Is there a substantial and consistent flow of shoppers or customers to the market?
- Do you observe any significant media coverage or support for this line of work?

### Case study: Souq Alsaffarin

Rusafa Center is a historically rich area, featuring many archaeological buildings and structures that carry stories of people's daily lives and rituals (Al-Ashab, 1974; Fethi, 1978; Alobaydi, 2017a). The bazaars in this area are a significant part of its urban structure and serve as the main economic backbone of the region, while also being an incubator for social events, (Al-Saffar, 2020). The handicrafts souqs, including souq AlSaffarin are particularly unique in terms of type and scale (Fig.3), with specialties varying according to the traded goods (Fu, Kim, and Mao, 2017; Alsaffar, 2022)



**Fig. 3:** The location of the traditional souqs and Souq Alsaffarin in Rusafa historical center.

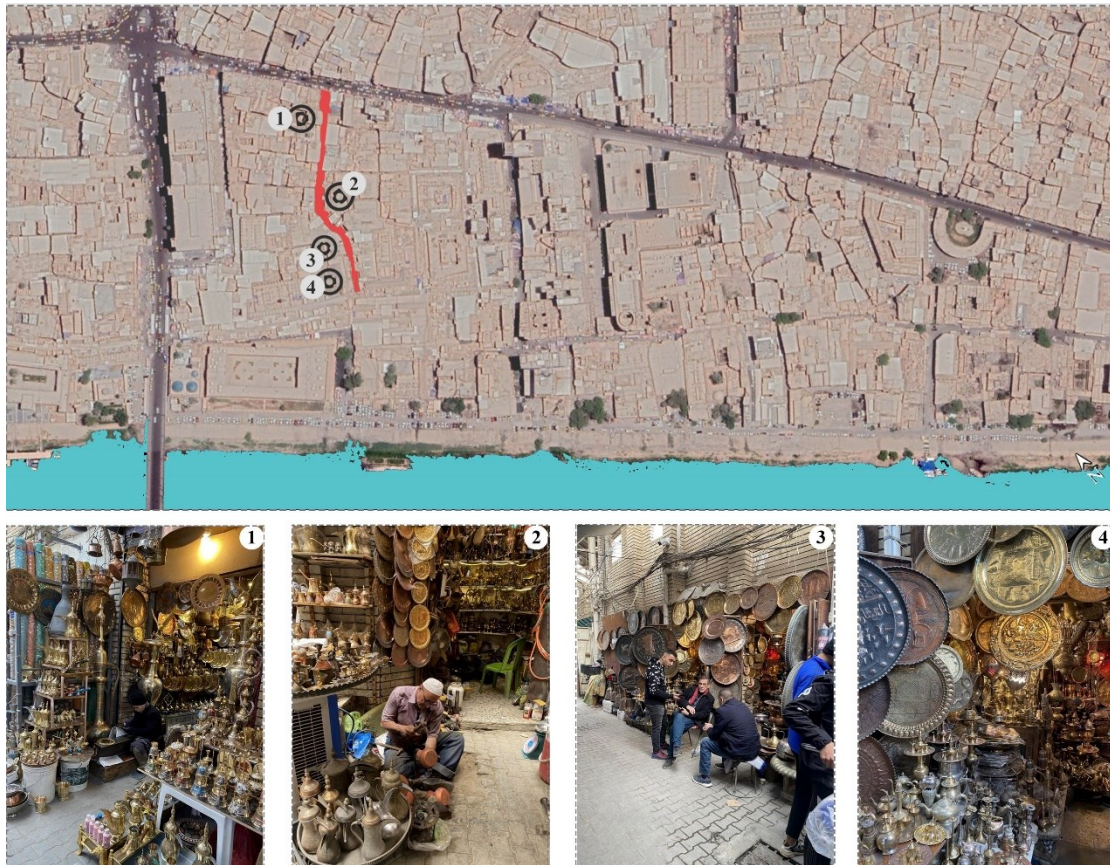
Source: Google Maps modified by authors

Souq AlSaffarin is one of the most prominent craft souqs in Baghdad and is located in Bab Al-Agha area near Al-Rashid Street, in a place called Darb Al-Masouda (Figs. 4 & 5). It was established during the reign of Al-Mustansir Billah, who ordered the establishment of a group of souqs coinciding with the establishment of the Al-Mustansirah School, a famous Islamic school educating Muslims to have required knowledge and terms, to facilitate meeting the needs of its students.



**Fig. 4:** Traditional Souqs area Urban context, Land use, and daily shoots from souq alsaffarin. Source: Municipality of Baghdad Library

Source: Authors

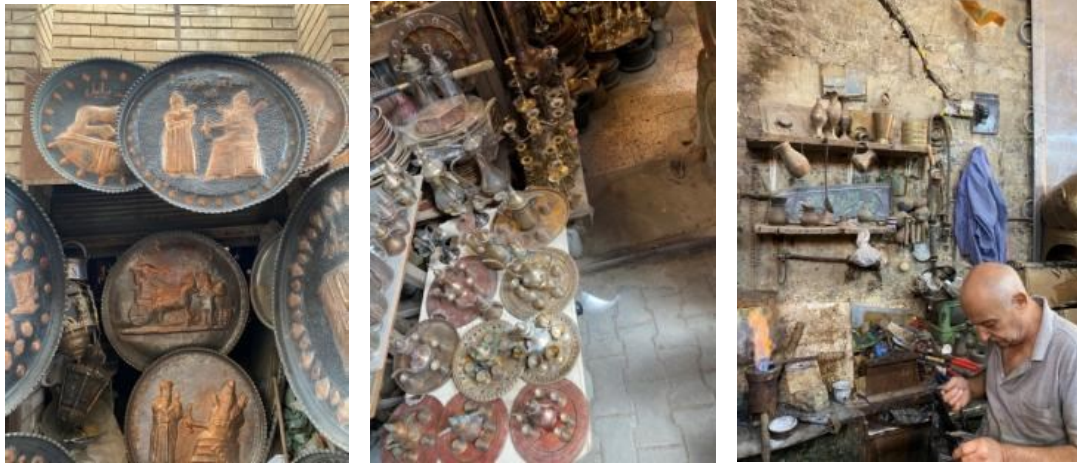


**Fig. 5:** Souq Alsaffarin and its' proximities.  
Source: Google map modified by Authors

The souq was known primarily for providing bowls, pots, lanterns, and other copper-made products. Its name, Saffir, is derived from the local name for copper. The craftsmen in the souq varied in the variety of stages of copper production that they performed, producing beautiful and unique pieces of art (Al. Ashab, 1974; Fethi, 1978).

Souq AlSaffarin was not only a place to purchase copper utensils and other household items but was also associated with beautiful social rituals related to weddings and newborns. The souq was an essential destination for brides' and preparations for the newborn, where new household utensils and accessories were purchased, including mirrors, combs, bathroom tools, and boxes made of wood and copper. However, with changing wedding customs and a decline in the use of copper utensils in cooking, the souq has turned to the production of antiques and copper souvenirs associated with documenting the civilization and historical identity of Iraq, forming a tourist destination within the historical center.

The Rusafa Center, particularly Souq AlSaffarin holds significant cultural and historical values and the preservation and promotion of these cultural practices and handicrafts are crucial for the identity of the region and the tourism industry as seen in Fig.6.



**Fig. 6:** Handicraft products in Souq AlSaffarin,  
Source: Authors

**Table 01:** SWOT Analysis

Source: Author

### STRENGTHS

- Deeply tied to Mesopotamian civilization, the city's identity preserves unique rituals and social practices, showcasing Iraq's vibrant society.
- Located in Rusafa's heart amid bustling bazaars, it holds a prominent position among Baghdad's commercial centers.
- Integral to Baghdad's history, it houses historical treasures like AlSaffarin Mosque and Khans, boasting significant architectural values.
- A vital hub for history enthusiasts, it offers insightful exhibits from the ancient past, documenting the region's rich civilization.
- Proximity to Al-Mustansiriya School, a renowned educational and tourist spot, further elevates its importance and historical significance.

### OPPORTUNITIES

- Boost cultural tourism by organizing events and attracting visitors to the souq and its unique offerings.
- Generate new job opportunities while receiving government assistance in the form of raw materials provision and subsidized rental prices.
- Collaborate with cultural and educational institutions to introduce and nurture fresh talent in the craft.

### WEAKNESSES

- The region's urban environment has significantly declined due to neglect, leading to a deterioration in the souq's overall appeal and infrastructure.
- Despite its historical association, the souq struggles with a lack of interest from shoppers in its offerings, whether handcrafted or imported goods.
- The craft industry has suffered major deterioration as the demand wanes and craftsmen show reluctance to continue their trade, impacting its vitality.
- With craftsmen reluctant to pass down their skills to future generations, there is a risk of losing valuable traditional knowledge and heritage.
- The souq's economic viability is impacted by declining demand for copper utensils and foreign competition for handmade exhibits. Improving the internal environment, particularly for women shoppers, becomes essential.

### THREATS

- Traditional bazaars face reduced public access, impacting their vitality and appeal.
- Favorable import laws prioritize speed and lower prices, posing a threat to local handicrafts despite potential compromises in quality.
- The region's urban state and infrastructure receive inadequate attention and investment.
- The scarcity of tourists visiting the souq contributes to its limited economic prospects.
- Insufficient media marketing, high rental prices, limited raw material support, and



- Foster cooperation between diverse societies, encouraging the exchange of cultures and experiences.
  - Implement a well-structured approach to improve the urban environment and souq infrastructure, ensuring easy access and efficient services.
- uncontrolled expansion of textile shops further hinder the growth and development of the craft and the souq.

### Findings From Observations and Other Sources

Souq AlSaffarin, a historic market in Baghdad, has served as an important hub for the exchange of copper goods for over a millennium. The market was established during the reign of Al-Mustansir Billah and was initially intended to cater to the needs of students at the nearby Al-Mustansirah School. Over time, the market has become a fixture in Baghdadi life and has been associated with social rituals related to weddings and newborns. The market has also functioned as an important economic backbone of the region, providing livelihoods to many artisans who have specialized in producing copper products.

Despite its importance, Souq AlSaffarin has experienced significant changes over time, particularly in recent decades (Al-Akkam, 2013; Al-Saffar, 2016). Changes in social customs, including a decline in the use of copper utensils and a shift in wedding rituals have contributed to a decrease in demand for copper goods (Al-Wardi, 1965; Baram, 1991). Moreover, the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq in the aftermath of the first Gulf War have had a significant impact on the market, as tourism has slowed, and the number of artisans has decreased due to immigration (Duclos, 2017) and forced participation in wars.

The lifting of government support for artisans in the post-2003 era has further exacerbated the challenges facing the market. Competition from cheap imported goods from countries such as China, Iran, and Turkey has led to a decline in demand for locally produced copper products. As a result, the number of artisans in the market has declined significantly, with the current number of remaining shops being around 17 (Fig.7).



**Fig.7:** One of the elderly craftsmen is on his way to rent his shop and leave work.

Source: Authors

The results of the qualitative interviews and the semi-structured questionnaire confirmed a number of facts represented in the following. 86% of the total craftsmen in the market switched to working with imported goods, while 29% continued to work in handcrafts. 96% of the craftsmen refuse to pass on the profession to their children, while 6% of the total workers are keen to pass over the profession to their children.

At a time everyone sees that the environment is deteriorating in all aspects, with the lack of government support and accreditation, there is an absence of an appropriate environment to host high-quality craft workshops. 24% of the craftsmen switched to producing poor and cheap daily orders, while 6% worked to develop their work in line with the requirements of the times, and they represent the most popular shops in the market. Most agreed on the loss of the government's role and laws, as well as the media attention limited to some superficial programs.

Majority also agreed on the reluctance of visitors, in general to buy copper products, except those rare.



**Fig. 8:** Some foreign tourists who bring a sign of hope for the market  
Source: Author

Despite these challenges and changes, Souq AlSaffarin remains an important symbol of the cultural heritage of Iraq. The market is an important site for documenting the history of the region and represents a unique form of traditional craftsmanship that has been passed down for generations. In recent years, efforts have been made to revitalize the market, including the establishment of cultural festivals and the promotion of tourism. However, ongoing instability and security concerns in Iraq continue to pose significant challenges to the market's future (Helvalı, 2020; Asaad, 2020). In fact, there has been a growing trend in recent years toward preserving and promoting traditional handicrafts in Iraq (Farhan et al., 2022; Al Hashimi and Alobaydi, 2023). This trend has been driven by a recognition of the cultural and historical value of these crafts, as well as a desire to support local artisans and revive traditional industries (Alsaffar and Alobaydi, 2023). Organizations such as the Iraqi Handicrafts Association and the Iraqi National Committee for Education, Science, and Culture have been working to support traditional artisans and promote their work, including exhibitions, workshops and training programs.

### Findings from Literature

The studies of existing literature offer a broader perspective on the interactions among urban conservation, cultural background and sustainable improvement (Albabely & Alobaydi, 2023; Hoşkara et al., 2023; Al-Saaidy & Alobaydi, 2021; Mohammed & Alobaydi, 2020; Naheed & Shooshtarian, 2022; Pereira, 2023; Stoica, 2021; El-Bastawissi et al., 2022) collectively shighlighting the evolving discourse and diverse approaches in addressing those interconnected subject matters. Stoica's analysis of international charters emphasize the historical development closer to holistic urban conservation (Al-Saaidy & Alobaydi, 2021) while describing the role of urban blocks' geometry in influencing socio-cultural interactions. Mohammed and Alobaydi (2020) reveal the role of sustainable actions based on the syntatic properties of roads. El-Bastawissi et al. (2022) observe the historic urban landscape methodsd being practiced in Beirut, advocating for collaborative strategies. Hoşkara et al. (2023) underscore the interdisciplinary nature of cultural history in reaching sustainable improvement goals. Pereira delves into the geological dimension of heritage, emphasizing its international range. Albabely & Alobaydi (2023) illustrate the role of urban form on movement densities in relation to the syntactic properties of streets. Naheed & Shooshtarian (2022) focus on the city sustainability-cultural heritage nexus and the role of multidisciplinary schooling.

Comparatively, the current study presents a deep dive into the tangible and intangible historical past of Souq AlSaffarin. This observations, similar to the preceding evaluations, underscores the significance of heritage in shaping urban identity and financial sports. It acknowledges demanding situations, along with declining shopkeepers, affecting the sustainability of nearby organizations. Notably, this work emphasizes the want for a complete approach that engages the network and promotes sustainable practices for the souq's protection. While the preliminary reviews span a number of international perspectives, the latter approach makes contributions valuable insights to the wider conversation on urban conservation, cultural heritage, and sustainable development ultimately highlighting the multifaceted strategies required to ensure the longevity and vibrancy of historical sites within evolving urban landscapes.

Traditional handicrafts in contemporary designs and products is a way of connecting the past with the present and creating new markets for these products. While Souq AlSaffarin has faced many challenges over the years, this trend towards preserving traditional crafts although it is still relatively far from the early craftsmen and their problems offers hope for the future of this historic market and the cultural heritage it represents

## Conclusions

The significance of Souq AlSaffarin to Iraq's cultural heritage is immense, having played a vital role in the Baghdadi people's daily lives and social traditions for centuries. It stands as a testament to the country's historical and artistic legacy. However, the market's decline mirrors the broader challenges that traditional handicrafts and the preservation of global heritage face today.

To transform the bazaar into a premier tourist attraction, its strategic location at the heart of the historical center can be leveraged. This can be achieved by gaining governmental backing and synergizing with the nearby commercial hub for the craft's expansion. Collaborations with educational and media institutions can yield educational opportunities in handicrafts, thereby opening doors for employment. Integrating cultural events within the craft can enrich public involvement and foster partnerships. By formulating a comprehensive revitalization plan, including elevating Al-Mustansiriya School's role as a cultural and tourist hub, the entire region can be rejuvenated, attracting visitors to the bazaar and its surroundings.

Prioritizing improved transportation connectivity will foster a vibrant atmosphere that engages both visitors and locals. A welcoming environment within the bazaar, catering to artisans and shoppers can be crafted. Public workshops can showcase the captivating copper crafting process, offering a unique drawing. By embracing contemporary elements and collaborations, the craft can undergo revitalization and innovation. Concurrently, refining import regulations, introducing controls, and providing skill development courses can invigorate local handicrafts for sustainable growth.

Preserving such traditional souqs requires careful consideration of both tangible and intangible aspects, ensuring the safeguarding of their historical identity and unique handicrafts. This can be achieved by using all opportunities to enhance the souq's operations, such as social interactions and transactions while preserving its urban landscape.

## Recommendation

The study makes several recommendations related to human heritage and urban conservation. These are:

- Enrich the cultural experience including enhancing heritage accessibility spanning architecture, economy, society, and history, while also promoting conservation.
- Address ownership laws to back craftsmen and curb textile store proliferation. A tiered production approach accommodates diverse shoppers. Media campaigns and awareness highlight heritage importance. Explore innovative transportation and rejuvenate the riverfront.

- Concurrently, support artisans' business growth for sustainability. Bridging tradition and modernity creates contemporary pieces honoring heritage. Improved security extends working hours, aiding workforce growth and education.

Comprehensive regional reconstruction benefits both the souq and its progress. Elevating souq ambiance tackles initial challenges. Balancing tradition and modernity fosters new opportunities and ongoing relevance.

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