

Heritagization of Historic Sites: Transformation of Al Diriyah from a Ruin to a Branded Cultural Capital

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Abstract

Heritagization, the process of recognizing and promoting objects, places, and practices of significant cultural heritage, plays a key role in fostering cultural richness and identity of a given community. It could also promote urban regeneration, cultural tourism, and economic growth. Although widely implemented across the world, its impacts on historical sites remain insufficiently explored. In this context, this research examines heritagization as an urban branding strategy implemented at the Historic Al Diriyah site in Riyadh. Positioned within the "Heritagization of historical ruins" context, it examines the evolution of Al Diriyah from ruins to a revived cultural capital, integrating tradition and modernity in a large-scale urban branding project.

It employs an exploratory, qualitative case study as a research method and uses examination of documents and field research for data collection. The documents involved secondary sources, such as academic publications, newspaper reports, and promotional materials from the online platform of the official site of Al Diriyah. To supplement this, field research is carried out to generate firsthand information through observations and interviews. The fieldwork took place in August 2022, before the grand opening of the regenerated site, allowing for a thorough investigation of the transformation of the site in real time.

The findings reveal that the heritagization process, initially aimed at the preservation of historical ruins, has extended beyond mere preservation to rebrand the site as a revived cultural capital. This transformative process revitalizes previously neglected sites, turning them into thriving hubs for cultural tourism. However, it also demonstrates the risks of commodification of culture and over-commercialization of cultural heritage. The research concludes that heritagization can celebrate and promote cultural heritage, and by employing it for branding sites, it can generate substantial cultural transformations and economic benefits. Nevertheless, it is argued that these practices necessitate careful management to safeguard the dynamic and evolving nature of the heritage sites.

Keywords: Heritagization, Historic sites, Al Diriyah, Cultural capital, Cultural tourism, Urban branding

Introduction

Al Diriyah, established in 1446, is a historically significant site since it is the birthplace of the Saudi state and the Al Saud dynasty. It became the capital of the First Saudi State in the

18th century, marking a period of political and religious influence. However, in 1818, the city has been devastated by Ottoman forces, leading to its decline. In recent years, extensive restoration efforts have revitalized the historical ruins of Al Diriyah, transforming it into a vibrant cultural and heritage site. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2010, it now serves as a symbol of Saudi Arabia's rich history and a premier destination for cultural tourism.

The transformation of Al Diriyah, originally focused on the preservation of its cultural heritage, has evolved into a multifaceted development that integrates modern amenities alongside its historical elements. This strategic approach not only preserved the district's cultural identity but also repositions it as a dynamic cultural and tourist hub. As a pioneering cultural project, Diriyah acts as a key driver for Vision 2030, aligning with Saudi Arabia's commitment to enhance the role of tourism in its economy. The project is anticipated to significantly impact cultural tourism, employing a comprehensive approach to the revitalization and branding of the historic site. Beyond its role as a cultural tourism destination, Al Diriyah is set to become a prime example of a historic city within a contemporary setting. As a result, Al Diriyah exemplifies the process of heritagization, where historical ruins are repurposed and rebranded to serve both cultural preservation and economic development. This model of transformation highlights the potential trajectory for other historic sites, suggesting that heritagization may become a prominent framework for future preservation efforts.

However, the heritagization process that has been implemented in Al Diriyah's has also brought to light the challenges of heritagization. The process has, at times, leaned towards over-commodification, risking the marginalization of the authenticity of the site. Driven by the goals of increased cultural tourism and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the transformation of the historic district has sparked a debate on balancing heritage conservation with modern developments. Despite these challenges, the initiative has played a crucial role in raising the awareness of heritage and fostering a renewed appreciation of the historic ruins among the local community. As the heritagization of Al Diriyah continues, it highlights the need for a critical examination to ensure that economic interests do not compromise the historical integrity and cultural identity of such sites. Thus, the transformation of Al Diriyah into a branded tourism destination, while adhering to World Heritage Site (WHS) guidelines and sustainable development practices, raises significant scholarly questions. It necessitates examining the extent to which a WHS can undergo a mega-development while maintaining its cultural and historical integrity (Bay et al., 2022).

In this context, this research aims to explore the emergence of heritagization as an innovative novel branding strategy and its transformative impact on historic sites using the case study of Historic Al Diriyah. It also examines whether or not such initiatives aimed at preserving cultural heritage could also establish a global standard for urban branding of historic sites. Its objectives are:

- i. To identify the complex nature of heritagization.
- ii. To ascertain the effects of heritagization on historic sites.
- iii. To evaluate the impact of employing heritagization as a branding strategy at Al Diriyah.
- iv. To illustrate how heritagization of historic sites can serve as a strategic approach for branding of future historic sites.

Theoretical Framework

Heritagization

Heritagization refers to the identification and promotion of objects, places, and practices with cultural heritage values attached to them. It effectively recognizes heritage as a dynamic process. However, Walsh (1992) expresses apprehension regarding the 'transformation' of spaces into heritage sites, highlighting this process as one that converts authentic locations into tourist attractions by selectively referencing diverse historical images, often resulting in the deterioration or loss of the genuine places themselves (Walsh, 1992). Building on Walsh's ideas, Harrison describes heritagization as the conversion of objects and

places from practical 'things' into items meant for display and exhibition, thereby pointing to the identification of them as official heritage (Harrison, 2013a). Harrison also emphasizes how redundant objects and places are collected or cataloged, becoming neglected, redeveloped into heritage sites, or assigned new functions through regeneration (Harrison, 2013a).

In contrast, Di Giovine (2009) posits that heritagization is a process closely linked with the development of global heritage tourism, which is anticipated to pave the way for future peace. Bernbeck (2013) critiques this notion of heritagization, suggesting that it represents an insufficient approach in the conceptualization of heritage. He contends that heritagization is frequently viewed primarily as a tool for tourism production, which neglects its wider significance and diminishes heritage management to merely a strategy for promoting tourism (AlShaikh, 2017).

Sánchez-Carretero (2013) explains that the concept of "heritagization," also referred to as *patrimonialisation* in European and French contexts, is less commonly used in English, except in critical terms as introduced by Kevin Walsh (1992), who viewed it as a process that transforms authentic places into spaces primarily designed for tourism. Undeniably, heritagization involves assigning values to certain past elements or practices. However, this process is shaped by various factors, including the evaluators, their objectives, the audience, and the wider societal context. Nonetheless, instead of focusing on material heritage, the debate shifts towards understanding why and how cultural aspects are considered valuable inheritances. This reorientation diminishes concerns about the "authenticity" of heritage, as the concept of inherent value becomes subject to scrutiny. According to Ashley (2014), this process carries emotional weight, reflecting deeper social values that shape relationships and reinforce a shared understanding of the past.

Hall (2005) questions the notion of "Heritage," which often refers to universalized white English heritage, suggesting it was just one of many heritagization processes. Heritagization, therefore, becomes a process of negotiation, where personal, local, and national values merge into collective expressions. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995) defines heritage as "a mode of cultural production in the present that draws from the past." In line with this definition, heritagization is recognized as the contemporary process of constructing *an image* to address current needs, challenges, or situations. As the active process of cultural heritage, heritagization facilitates discussions and perspectives on the legacy of heritage, historically emerging from collective decisions on what is considered 'heritagizable.' This process involves debates, selections, conflicts, and compromises. Therefore, heritagization can be seen as a process of value establishment, assigning significance to places, individuals, objects, practices, histories, or ideas as legacies from the past (Park et al., 2018). In this context, this dynamic process should be viewed as an index of identity, memory, and sense of place rather than only being associated with the monument (Goswami, Kumar, & Pipralia, 2022). Thus, heritagization not only preserves cultural heritage but also continuously redefines and adapts it to meet contemporary needs, ensuring its relevance and resonance in the present (Hanif, 2024).

In his theoretical concerns about heritagization and scales, Harvey (2015) explains how scale, region, and boundedness affect the creation of cultural heritage and the connection between local people and heritage-making. Adding to this, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett challenges the notion that locals are being transformed into cultural ambassadors or entertainers through the process of "heritagization," turning them from owners of cultural assets into performers (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). Hence, the concept of "heritagization," as a process rather than an object, has created new dynamics that are both intriguing and challenging. This raises questions about the formal and informal methods employed in heritagization and indicates that the process is quite selective (Mai Le Quyen, 2021).

Over the past few decades however, there has been a significant increase in what is recognized as heritagization within the realm of cultural heritage (Walsh, 1992; Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013b). Harrison referred to this period as a "heritage boom," characterized by an abundance of heritage. He concludes that while various traces and memories of different pasts accumulate, we rarely consider the mechanisms through which heritage items, locations, or traditions might be delisted, removed from museum collections, or allowed to deteriorate

(Harrison, 2013b). He also observes that there's a common belief that once items, locations, or customs are officially recognized and categorized as 'heritage,' they seldom undergo further change or transformation (Harrison, 2013a; Sjöholm, 2016). Heritagization is thus the process through which heritage is socially and culturally constructed, assigning cultural meanings and values to practices (Park et al., 2018). In this sense, Gonzalez (2013) elaborates that heritagization also includes the creation of material replicas that gradually overlay the original cultural heritage assets. This process becomes so ingrained that consumers begin to accept the inauthentic appearance and atmosphere of these replicas as genuine. As a result, reversing the heritagization process is difficult, especially when the current portrayal has been marketed as authentic to both the local community and tourists (AlShaikh, 2017).

However, heritagization, while aimed at preserving cultural heritage, has faced criticism for various aspects such as its association with touristification, gentrification, imagined pasts, and political involvement in the recognition of heritage. It often imposes an authorized heritage discourse, marginalizing alternative histories and commodifying culture for tourism and branding purposes. The romanticization and nostalgia associated with heritagization can result in an idealized and inaccurate representation of the past, which often contradicts authenticity. Moreover, the focus on material aspects may overshadow intangible cultural practices and oral histories. It is argued that addressing these criticisms is crucial to ensure an inclusive, sustainable, and respectful heritagization process of cultural heritage.

Hence, while heritagization offers a framework for preserving and valuing cultural heritage, it must be approached with a critical understanding of its complexities and potential drawbacks. Balancing the need for preservation with the authentic representation of heritage, and ensuring that local communities remain integral to this process, is essential for achieving well-planned heritagization.

Urban Branding

In recent decades, branding of cities has evolved into a distinct industry. With the traditional economic foundations of many cities weakening, tourism and cultural consumption have been embraced as means to revitalize and prevent economic decline. Consequently, urban districts are transformed into attractive destinations through revamped waterfronts, major events, and impressive cultural venues. A key approach in this urban management strategy is heritagization, which not only generates revenue but also connects the city to broader, often globalized, symbolic economic networks (Picard, 2016). Such an urban branding involves improving the perception or image of a city by promoting its visual identity through representation, communication, and marketing. This process focuses on measurable and tangible assets such as physical infrastructure, location, public services, and heritage resources within the broader urban context (Helmy, 2008).

As Lynch (1960) states, urban continuity serves to uphold the entire notion of relations in addition to promoting urban images with "recognizable, stability, and pleasant meaning". The discontinuity with heritage has caused significant social, economic, physical, and environmental concerns, leading to an identity crisis, disorientation, and dehumanization of cities. Hahn & Simonis (1991) aptly describe these effects: Cities are now seen as both a cause and a symbol of the negligent handling of fragile and frightening environmental products. The conversion of raw resources into waste and pollutants has become an independent process, and key aspects of human behavior are ignored in urban design, leading to serious socio-psychological issues. The notion of urban branding pertains to the worldwide competitiveness that exists between locations across all human settlements. In fact, according to Anholt (2003) and (2010), it's the most sensible tactic for building a brand's recognition and reaping its advantages locally (Setyadi, et al., 2024).

Thus, cities have come to represent the loss of their heritage and the increased focus on organic, cultural, and historical elements. Respect for local customs, heritage, and characteristics is crucial for establishing a symbiotic interaction between people and their environments. As distinctive qualities differ, so should cities, with urban planning strategies reflecting these unique traits (Boussaa, 2000). It seeks to enhance a city's reputation, draw

tourists, promote economic growth, and foster a positive impression of the place among those who come (Kavaratzis, 2004; Kasemsarn, Sawadri, & Kritsanaphan, 2024). Consequently, many cities leverage a variety of cultural assets as key components in their branding efforts. When developing a strategy to enhance the image of a city, these assets are considered alongside heritage buildings and historical elements (Riza, 2015).

Despite this, there has been a resurgence of interest in reconnecting with and momentarily experiencing traditional, cultural and vernacular forms, evident in the proliferation of purposefully designed villages and cities and transforming them from abandonment to restored historic centers for the future (Dayaratne, 2020a). Hence, such urban transformation or redevelopment, presents considerable challenges for scholars and practitioners in urban planning and design (Shubbar & Boussaa, 2022). In fact, identifying optimal strategies to regenerate historical areas as a means of preserving cultural heritage amid shifting global contexts necessitates a more in-depth and critical examination (Boussaa, 2018a). This calls for in-depth analysis and comprehensive planning, as planning increasingly serves to preserve cultural heritage while also supporting financial sustainability and heritage tourism, it becomes essential to conserve and brand the heritage sites. This process involves identifying urban physical characteristics and fostering cohesive collaboration among multidisciplinary professionals, all of which are critical for the successful establishment of these urban branding initiatives (Boussaa, 2023).

Review of Literature

Sjöholm elaborates on the phenomenon of heritagization through a case study of Kiruna's urban transformation in Sweden, focusing on built heritage. In the 1980s, a heritagization process in Kiruna designated significant parts of the built environment of the central town as culturally important heritage, ascribing meanings, and heritage values to previously unrecognized environments. Historical buildings and environments were then officially recognized as heritage. During the urban planning process, re-heritagization occurred through reaffirmation, and validating the already designated heritage of the town as culturally significant. However, there were few indications of re-heritagization through reinterpretation or heritagization through addition. De-heritagization has also occurred, notably influenced by a 2011 agreement between the local authority and the mining company Luossavaara-Kiirunavaara Aktiebolag (*LKAB*), which has determined which building relocation would be financed. According to Sjöholm (2016), differing roles and priorities among the key stakeholders in the urban planning process has significantly impacted heritagization.

In examining heritagization in Canada, James (2013) argues that the heritage practices endorsed by Canadian Heritage function as neoliberal tools for regulating diverse cultures and citizens. He sees nation-building and social cohesion, central to these efforts, as mechanisms of hegemony that translate societal inequalities into simplified cultural representations of diversity. These strategies, aimed at producing a controlled narrative, have been critiqued as promoting a shallow, institutionalized discourse on heritage. This manipulation of heritage aligns with broader neoliberal trends where the complexities of difference are often flattened into feel-good narratives that lack depth and agency (Smith, 2006).

Similarly, Tureli's (2014) study of heritagization of Istanbul, particularly within its historic districts, explores efforts to conserve the vernacular wooden architecture of the city reflective of the Ottoman cultural heritage. Initial proposals by French planners in the early 20th century, such as Henri Prost's vision for an archaeology park, faced diplomatic and financial hurdles. However, from the 1970s onwards, local and international preservation efforts—spearheaded by UNESCO and the European Council—have focused on restoring significant areas like Sultanahmet. These initiatives have sought to balance preservation with modernization but have been critiqued for enabling gentrification and threatening the authenticity of the city, reflecting the tensions between heritage conservation and socio-economic development.

In Vietnam, Mai Le Quyen (2021) analyzes heritagization as a dynamic and transnational process involving various actors across global, national, and local levels. Her

work highlights the complex, phased approach to heritage creation, using Di Giovine's (2009) framework, which encompasses isolation, idealization, and valorization. This framework illustrates how localized heritage is de-contextualized, incorporated into national narratives, and ultimately reintegrated into a broader societal context to gain acceptance from both domestic and international audiences. Each phase reflects the intricate interplay between local identity and global heritage values.

While extensive analysis has been conducted on the top-down, often corporate-driven strategies that transform cities into centers for the consumption of cultural heritage, it is only in recent years that researchers from urban, architectural, and anthropological backgrounds have begun to closely examine how historic sites engage in heritagization processes through practices that extend beyond mere consumption (Picard & Leite, 2016). Thus, heritagization has emerged as an urban branding strategy that emphasizes these traits, corresponding to the symbols illustrated in the tangible and intangible aspects of the city, such as historical districts, monuments, institutions, and stereotypes related to the attitudes of residents, among other factors (Hague and Jenkins, 2004). The strategic integration of heritagization in urban branding not only enhances the cultural heritage vibrancy of cities but also fosters a deeper connection between urban spaces and their historical assets providing economic, urban regeneration and tourism opportunities.

Previous research thus consistently points out that heritagization is often inadequately conceptualized and poorly understood due to its complex and multi-layered nature. As Mai Le Quyen (2021) points out, there remains a need for a deeper exploration of how this process operates within the context of contemporary society, particularly in the light of the evolving relationship between cultural heritage and modernity. Present research is yet to fully address the nuances of heritagization across various regions, where its application may differ. This presents a significant gap that calls for further investigation into how different societies engage with heritagization in diverse contexts.

Research Methods

This research explores the impact of heritagization on a historic site: Al Diriyah, in Saudi Arabia. It employs an exploratory case study approach, focusing on the historical ruins as the primary area of investigation. As noted by Creswell (2013), the case study methodology provides an opportunity to delve deeply into the subject, gathering insights through techniques such as interviews and observations. Such a qualitative approach enables the collection of narrative data, facilitating a profound understanding of social phenomena that may not be easily explained through quantitative statistical analysis.

Thus, in this research, qualitative methods are employed for data collection, focusing primarily on the examination of documents and field research conducted within the case study. Data was gathered by analyzing secondary sources such as academic journals, newspaper articles, and online advertisements from the official website of Al Diriyah. This generated the relevant background information, historical context, and promotional materials as data for the analysis. Field research provided firsthand insights through site visits, observations, and interviews. The fieldwork took place in August 2022, before the grand opening of the regenerated site, allowing for a thorough investigation of the site's transformation in real time.

Al Diriyah was selected as the case study to explore the emerging phenomenon of "Heritagization" amidst urban revival developments in the Gulf region. In 2010, the At-Turaif District of Al Diriyah gained recognition as a World Heritage Site due to its fulfillment of Criteria (iv), (v), and (vi). Criterion (iv) was met as it showcases exemplary Najdi architectural style and decoration, utilizing traditional building techniques suitable for the environment. Criterion (v) was satisfied by its representation as a remarkable desert settlement. Criterion (vi) acknowledges its historical significance as the initial unifying force in the Arabian Peninsula (Al-Tokhais, 2021).

This case study thus provides a comprehensive understanding of how heritagization has transformed the historic district and how the insights gained can pave for the heritagization of historic cities of the future.

The Case Study

Historical Urban Context of Al Diriyah

Historic Al Diriyah, located on the outskirts of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, is a historical and cultural site with a rich history dating back to the 15th century. Founded in 1446 by Mani' Al-Muraydi, Al Diriyah is renowned as the birthplace of the Saudi state and the ancestral home of the Al Saud royal family. A significant urban cultural heritage site, it is distinguished by its traditional buildings, neighborhoods, and public spaces that reflect the history and traditions of the local communities. Despite its cultural significance, the urban peripheries of it have faced substantial challenges in recent years. Rapid urbanization and economic development have led to the demolition of remaining traditional buildings and neighborhoods, posing a threat to the erasure of the cultural identity of this historic district.

Unfortunately however, the city has faced a doom phase of gradual deterioration, with the inhabitants using its melting mud ruins as a convenient source of building materials. From the accounts, it is found that the English visitors William Gifford Palgrave (1862) and Colonel Lewis Pelly (1865) both found the old historical site in a ruined state. Al Diriyah, however, gradually flourished under the shadow of the capital, Riyadh, which was growing at a rapid pace (Fig.1).



Fig. 1: Location of Al Diriyah in contemporary world map.

Source: Arab news

In the mid-twentieth century, efforts had begun to resettle Al Turaif, resulting in the construction of numerous courtyard houses at the Eastern end of the site. By the 1990s, these structures have been in significantly better condition than the remnants from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that surrounded them. Building materials have been repurposed from the old ruins; mud has been made into new bricks and mortar, stone has been used for columns and foundations, timbers for roof supports, and old doors have been reused. Subsequently, electricity has been installed, and rudimentary modifications have been made, such as replacing old decorated wooden doors with metal ones, the former becoming sought-after collectibles (Harrigan, 2015).

In 1974, the Department of Antiquities and Museums has expressed an interest in preserving the remains of Al Diriyah. UNESCO has sponsored a study of the site, conducted by a team of archaeology and conservation specialists. In 1976, at-Turaif has been placed under the protection of the 1972 Saudi Antiquities Act. By 1978, a second survey has been conducted. Both studies have recommended structures for preservation and restoration and have proposed methods.

The Department of Antiquities and Museums, later integrated into the Saudi Commission of Tourism in 2003, has responded to this challenge by “selecting specific buildings” for restoration, following the UNESCO reports' recommendations. Within at-Turaif, since the 1970s, the department has focused on restoring the Palace of Nasir initially, and then the Palace of Saad and the Faysal Tower in the late 1980s. By 1982, the last houses in at-Turaif had been abandoned, with only a few former residents visiting their family mud-brick homes. This has thus remained the case despite preservation initiatives till a Royal Decree authorized

the Historic Al Diriyah Development Programme, overseen by the High Commission for the Development of Al Riyadh.

In 2010, following the efforts and guidance of the Saudi Commission of Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA) and based on the documents prepared by the High Commission for the Development of Al Riyadh, At-Turaif of Historic Al Diriyah was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Harrigan, 2015). Since its designation, the entire historic district has undergone a massive urban regeneration project aimed at identifying, highlighting, and showcasing its historical significance through the process of heritagization. This has transformed the previously ruined historic site into a branded heritage destination for cultural tourism and cultural activities.

Findings

Heritagization of Historic Al Diriyah

In the initial urban regeneration phase (1986–2010), efforts primarily centered on preserving Historic Al Diriyah to mitigate decay and establish a development master plan, laying the groundwork for a potential UNESCO World Heritage Site listing. Subsequently (2010–2017), there has been a heightened focus on achieving UNESCO recognition, maintaining its status, and implementing the proposed development plan. In the recent phase (2017–2024), the historical ruins of Al Diriyah have become the focal point of an ambitious initiative to promote the area as a premier international tourist destination, surpassing the mere goal of World Heritage listing (Bay et al., 2022).

Hence, following the UNESCO World Heritage designation, the revival of Al Diriyah has gained momentum with the goal of providing visitors with more contemporary facilities. These initiatives have given rise to new constructions that illuminate the histories of the First, Second, and Third Saudi States while coexisting with the ancient buildings. One such example is Al Turaif's modern set of amenities. Al Diriyah's regeneration strategically aimed to reinforce the image of the historic site and encompasses ambitious projects in urban heritage and environmental development that highlight national, cultural, and historical values (Fig 2 & 3). Moreover, the regeneration plan has been initiated to emphasize the importance of the historical ruins for the younger generation to understand the ideals of the Kingdom and to become role models who exemplify the qualities necessary for success, ongoing development, and the preservation of cultural heritage (Harrigan, 2015).



Fig 2: Ruined state of Al Diriyah before the Urban Regeneration.
Source: Documentalium

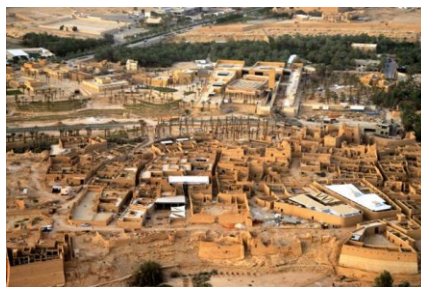


Fig. 3: Al Diriyah before/under the Urban Transformation.
Source: Tropmanarchitects.

The ambitious balance sought by the regeneration project situates it squarely within the “domain of heritagization.” This process has involved transforming a previously neglected heritage site to align with established heritage values while simultaneously balancing the imperatives of cultural preservation and cultural tourism. In fact, the restoration efforts of the project have extended beyond mere preservation, transforming the historical ruin into a heritage destination, hence the latest phase (2024 onwards) has aimed to strengthen the branded image by enhancing the cultural tourism appeal and attracting global attention (Fig 4). However, this approach also has raised critical questions about the authenticity and integrity of the site, as the commodification of heritage for tourism can sometimes overshadow its historical and cultural significance. The challenge lies in ensuring that the site retains its historical context while being crafted for the future. Hence, the Heritagization of Al Diriyah demonstrates a complex interplay between heritage preservation and contemporary development. While the efforts have significantly enhanced the global profile and the tourism potential of the site, they also highlight the need for a careful balance to maintain authenticity and cultural identity of this historical site.

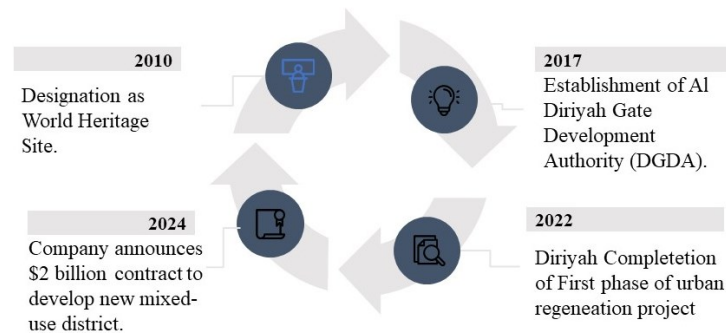


Fig 4: Dissecting the heritagization process in Al Diriyah.

Source :Author

Impact of Heritagization: Branding Historic Al Diriyah from Ruined State to Cultural Capital

The significant restoration and regeneration project of Al Diriyah after its designation as a world heritage site has been initiated to preserve the ruined cultural heritage of the Al Diriyah precinct and transform the area into a commercialized heritage and cultural tourism destination. The Al Riyadh Development Authority has led the studies and implementation, coordinating efforts with the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, the King Abdulaziz Foundation for Research and Archives, and the Al Diriyah Municipality. Upon the completion of this ambitious restoration and development program, which includes the creation of new museums, it has become evident that Al Diriyah and its various quarters are poised to become a living heritage site. According to Harrigan (2015), this transformation serves as a bridge to the past and a source of pride for the Saudi nation and its future generations.

This heritage-making process has regenerated a historical site previously in a ruined state and has breathed new life into its centuries-old heritage. The initiative has also revitalized vernacular practices, showcasing Najdi town planning from the 18th to 19th centuries using traditional adobe materials and construction methods. This open-air heritage museum transformation has also prioritized sustainable reuse, enhancing both socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions through improved local attachment and new tourist offerings (Mazzetto, 2022). Indeed, this heritagization has impacted Al Diriyah's urban regeneration efforts, transforming it from an ancestral historical site into a dynamic *Cultural Capital* and *Heritage Museum*. Significant investments have further rejuvenated the historic district, branding it as a cultural and tourism hotspot with retail shops, cafes, and cultural institutions.

Undeniably, this form of regeneration exemplifies an initiative that creates a constructed historical image within the historic district (Hadjri, & Boussaa, 2007).

The Urban Branding approach through the process of heritagization to convert the historical site into a branded cultural capital has not eventually stopped since Al Diriyah has continued to develop its infrastructure and has extended beyond its urban peripheries. The Diriyah Company recently revealed the concept design for The Arena in Diriyah, a 20,000-seat venue, part of a \$63.2 billion masterplan by the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) to further develop Diriyah's heritagization process (Fig. 5). Designed by HKS, the concept of the arena draws on the natural geology and historic Najdi forts of the area, combining historical reflection with modern digital and tech-forward elements. Furthermore, the developers spearheading the transformation of the city into a major cultural tourism project has also recently revealed plans to construct King Salman Boulevard, a 1.9km avenue modeled after the Champs-Elysees in Paris, along with the first Opera House of the kingdom to be known as the Royal Diriyah Opera House (Halligan, 2024).



Fig. 5: The Diriyah Company revealed the concept design for the arena in Al Diriyah.
Source: HKS/Diriyah Company

Interpreting Vision 2030 in the Heritagization of Historic Al Diriyah

With the establishment of the DGDA (Diriyah Gate Development Authority) in 2017, the Saudi government has launched several ongoing conservation projects under the Vision 2030 initiative, which aims to transition the country from an oil-dependent economy to a more diversified one, emphasizing tourism, the arts, and culture. In December 2022, the DGDA officially opened the Al Turaif quarter of the historic site to the public, allowing both domestic and international visitors to explore this historic area (McKelvey, 2023). Significant progress has been made not only within the officially designated historic zone of Al Diriyah but also in the surrounding areas and neighboring peripheries. The Saudi government has launched a forward-thinking initiative to attract 25 million visitors annually. To support this ambitious goal, an impressive budget of nearly USD 18.5 billion has been allocated to establish Historic Al Diriyah and its environs as one of the premier and most frequented destinations globally (Bay, et al., 2022).

Nast elaborates on how Saudi Arabia is revitalizing the historic city of Al Diriyah to become the new cultural capital of the Kingdom under the Vision 2030. Al Diriyah is once again emerging as one of the mega projects and is expected to become a significant regional and international center for lifestyle, tourism, entertainment, and culture. In fact, this district aims to be the heart of Saudi Arabia's creative scene. According to Nast (2024), from the rejuvenated area of Al Bujairi, a pedestrian-friendly maze of winding pathways lined with boutiques, to JAX, a vibrant hub for artists and creatives housing several museums, art galleries, and offices for the Saudi Ministry of Culture, there is something for everyone.

Thus, the At-Turaif region of Historic Al Diriyah will feature cultural academies, museums, and a cultural district, and perhaps most notably, art commissions throughout the master plan. Discussions are underway about digital libraries and archives, internal knowledge,

capacity building, traditional arts and crafts schools. The Diriyah Gate Development Authority has collaborated with the Ministry of Culture and the Diriyah Biennale Foundation on a range of diverse cultural initiatives with the aim of establishing Al Diriyah as the branded cultural hub of the Middle East by 2030 (Arab News. 2022).

A cultural renaissance is occurring in Al Diriyah as part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. With cutting-edge facilities and infrastructure, Al Diriyah is being transformed into a major global tourist and cultural destination (Fig. 6). These efforts not only safeguard Saudi cultural identity but also set a global benchmark for sustainable cultural preservation (Goetz, 2024). The Diriyah Project is an integral part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, aiming to attract 27 million local and international visitors. This initiative supports the national tourism policy, which seeks to welcome 100 million visitors from around the world by the year 2030.



Fig. 6: Regenerated Al Diriyah prior to its public opening in August 2022.
Source: Author

Constructing a Thematic Cultural Capital Through Heritagization

Heritagization, as demonstrated in Al Diriyah, seeks to safeguard cultural heritage while stimulating economic growth, enhancing cultural awareness, and shaping cultural tourism. The project's success in authentically reflecting the historic site is crucial for reinforcing community cohesion and boosting cultural tourism. However, while the reconstructed initiative does promote cultural heritage, there are concerns that the site's cultural identity might be eclipsed by the "thematic period village" concept emphasized in the project's promotional efforts.

On one hand, the use of modern materials to replicate an ancient, authentic style—accomplished through innovative contemporary technology—implies that the authenticity of the site is largely confined to its visual appearance. This raises important questions about the preservation of cultural heritage when authenticity is reduced to mere surface representation. Cronberg (2009) associates this transformation with a fantasized, aestheticized, and idealized past—a meticulously crafted imitation that creates the illusion of historical experience. Such an "imagined" past can lead people to mistakenly believe that the reconstructed time and place genuinely existed. This approach to shaping a desired image introduces an element of artificiality, undermining true authenticity and resulting in the imitation of historical styles (Uluca-Tumer, 2012). Kowalski further notes that "the constructed representation of the past may unify groups but can also provoke conflicts over the validation of personal interpretations of history, prompting critical inquiries into what should be remembered, along with the reasons, locations, and agents involved in that process" (Kowalski, 2020).

On the other hand, in line with the commitment to interpreting or constructing cultural and historical influences, which are identified as inherent in any historical notion of 'taste,' it becomes evident that such perception remains distinct, even within modern interpretations,

serving as a significant and unique outcome of the broader experiential process (Grchev, & Grcheva, 2019). Such transformation encompasses both tangible and imagined elements. Architecture, as a means of transforming a site, arises from the tangible reality while simultaneously concealing it. It also imposes imaginative visions onto the real, merging with its geographic context to create images that provoke re-imaginings and enhanced perceptions.

According to Dayaratne (2020a), these imaginations, whether individual or collective, also serve as pathways for escaping the harsh realities of the real world. Thus, as Dayaratne, (2020b) argues, the future of cultural practices doesn't necessarily need to center on past traditions but can create new ones by 'gathering' and 'assimilating' valued elements from an imagined past. The heritagization process, which involves selectively gathering and assimilating elements from an idealized or imagined past, carries profound emotional and cultural significance. It reflects underlying values that uphold social order, nurture collective relationships, and foster a sense of connection to the past (Ashley, 2014). This process not only preserves cultural heritage but also shapes contemporary social dynamics by invoking traditions that resonate with current societal needs. Sánchez-Carretero (2013) emphasizes that heritage in this context is understood as a metacultural process, meaning that objects like artifacts, buildings, and landscapes do not inherently constitute heritage. Instead, they become recognized as such only when society assigns cultural or historical value to them. This perspective frames heritage as a unique cultural construct because it involves a reflective process, where elements of culture are imagined, reinterpreted, or elevated based on their perceived importance within the collective consciousness. Heritage, therefore, becomes not just a static entity but the result of societal recognition and valuation of certain cultural aspects.

The term 'conservation' is interpreted in a broader sense within such initiatives, acting as an all-encompassing term synonymous with the heritage-making process. This method aims to shift the conversation towards considerations of authenticity, contemporary values, and the creation of destination images (Viñas 2002; Orbaşlı 2008; Thouki, A. 2022). The concept of heritagization, understood as the process of constructing or reflecting upon past legacies, aligns with UNESCO's framework for cultural heritage transmission. As outlined in the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, this form of heritage is continuously recreated by communities and groups in response to their evolving environments, interactions with nature, and historical experiences. By fostering a sense of cultural identity and continuity, intangible cultural heritage encourages respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. This interpretation has gained global recognition since the adoption of the 2003 UNESCO Convention (Park et al., 2018).

Challenges in Heritagization of Historic Al Diriyah

While the Al Riyadh Development Authority (ADA) initially sought to create preservation plans for the physical structures and environment and to propose urban design solutions for repurposing the historic site, these regeneration efforts have extended the mere preservation plan and have not conformed to the established scope and guidelines for UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Bay et al., 2022). This hierarchical top-down approach has also limited local involvement in heritage preservation and tourism development in ad-Diriyah. To address this, first of all, there is a call for a collaborative research strategy encompassing cultural, social, economic, and environmental dimensions, involving local authorities, educational institutions, and independent researchers. Emphasizing a scientific approach in decision-making and translating research outcomes into practical policies is essential for effective planning and implementation (Al-Tokhais, A. 2021).

Hence, a critical question is whether the heritagization of Al Diriyah has resulted in the development of a fabricated destination inspired by the past that also provides the local community and tourists with exceptional entertainment experiences. While the village is being reconstructed to embody an authentic 300-year-old style, the introduction of such vibrant, modern spaces raises concerns about the authenticity of the recreated historical site. Moreover, the decades-old site, historically associated with private and regal values, is now being extensively commercialized to support cultural tourism, thereby promoting values more aligned

with public interests. This commercial shift starkly contrasts with the original historic city (Hanif, 2024). Urban transformation in this context often faces challenges related to the reconstruction and replication of the past, rather than the preservation of cultural heritage (Hadjri & Boussaa, 2007).

Moreover, it is crucial to consider that significant modifications compromising a site's authenticity can lead to its inclusion on the Danger List or removal from the World Heritage List (Jimura, 2019). The challenge often arises from a shortage of qualified experts in the heritage sector capable of managing sites with scientific precision (Al-Tokhais, 2021). For instance, in an article for Asharq Alawsat, Zahi Hawass, a globally recognized Egyptian archaeologist, expressed concerns over projects initiated to construct roads within the historic town of Al Diriyah, aimed at facilitating tourism and potentially benefiting construction companies. Rather than promoting pedestrian accessibility and protecting unsustainable development practices, these initiatives raise critical questions about the wisdom of compromising authentic heritage to cater to transient tourists for the sake of heritage commodification, while simultaneously depriving those who prioritize a more responsible and sustainable approach to preservation (Spiess & Mubarak, 2012). Similarly, in their initial survey, the landscaping contractors Bodeker expressed concern about the rapid expansion of Riyadh's outer suburbs potentially encroaching on Al Diriyah and its surroundings. This suggested a strategy: by supporting these established visitor habits, encroachment could be minimized, thereby preserving the area's cultural identity—a balance needed to be achieved between preserving the site sensitively and making it tourist-friendly. Protecting the historic setting with its sense of place and the heritage of the entire vicinity should be a priority. The construction of access roads, the availability of modern materials, shifts in occupations, economic changes, and the decline of authentic architectural practices are among the factors that pose significant threats to the survival and continuity of the historical site. While change is unavoidable, it is crucial to preserve the authenticity and integrity of historic sites in this evolving context (Foram, 2023).

As a result, a critically questionable aspect of the heritagization process in the transformation of Al Diriyah from a ruined state to a branded cultural capital involves the future extent of the development of luxurious lifestyle and entertainment districts designed to offer tourists an unforgettable cultural experience (Fig. 7). This approach has led to significant commercial exploitation, transforming the site on a large scale primarily for cultural tourism. Consequently, the novel branding strategy to turn the historic district into a living heritage site or an open cultural museum has introduced new challenges. Chief among these is the fear of over-commodification, where the World Heritage site risks losing its authentic cultural value in favor of a tourist-centric model. Gravari-Barbas emphasizes that such heritagization, aestheticization, and artification can act as opposing forces to places primarily functioning as commercialized spaces (Gravari-Barbas, & Jacquot, 2019).



Fig. 7: Urban Transformation Proposal of Historic Al Diriyah.

Source: Ahlanwasahlan

Unveiling the Novel Branding Strategy of “Heritagization” in Historic Al Diriyah

The urban regeneration initiatives to revive the Historic Al Diriyah are closely aligned with the desired urban branding strategy, which will also allow visitors to immerse themselves in cultural activities and seminars such as the study of Najdi architecture, bricklaying, date harvesting, calligraphy, Arabic poetry, Ardah dance, and Bedouin tentmaking, among other cultural activities and skills. These initiatives aim to provide a unique heritage experience, featuring a traditional Arabic bazaar, traditional and contemporary galleries, diverse cuisines, and high-end retail shops. These initiatives have also indirectly led toward the revival of intangible cultural heritage and preserved it for generations to come. In this context, tourists also can increase their understanding of and firsthand experience with a cultural heritage’s uniqueness, which helps to build the branding approach further (Duxbury et al., 2020; Guzijan, 2018; Nursanty, 2013; Kasemsarn, Sawadsri, & Kritsanaphan, 2024).

However, the incorporation of modern amenities and luxury lifestyles has, to some extent, compromised the site’s authentic historic integrity and cultural identity. This heritagization process, while leveraging the district’s historic significance and intangible aspects, has been commercialized and exploited within an urban context, primarily to create a branded cultural destination. Yet the goal of transforming Al Diriyah into a branded destination that along with intangible cultural activities will also provide a shopping hub with an impressive array of fine dining restaurants, all while preserving its historical image and unveiling its novel urban branding strategy has regenerated the previously neglected heritage site. Hence, the transformation of a once-neglected historic district into a grand-scale cultural hub which is unprecedented in the Gulf region, positions Al Diriyah as a model for cultural heritage revival.

This transformation, as even indicated by the promotional language on the official website, reflects a shift from authentic preservation to more of a commercially driven reinterpretation of the historic site. Thus, the case of Al Diriyah sparks the critical need for a careful approach when integrating historic sites into urban branding strategies. Reducing heritage to mere touristic destinations and constructing a new, historicized past risks overshadowing the authentic cultural and historical significance of such sites. While heritagization can drive economic growth and cultural tourism, it must be balanced with a commitment to preserving the true cultural identity and integrity of historic districts. Al Diriyah’s experience serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating that while modern amenities and branding can revitalize a heritage site, they should not come at the expense of its historical context. Instead, a thoughtful and respectful integration of heritage into urban branding can ensure that these districts remain meaningful and vibrant cultural assets, rather than just themed attractions for tourists (Fig. 8).

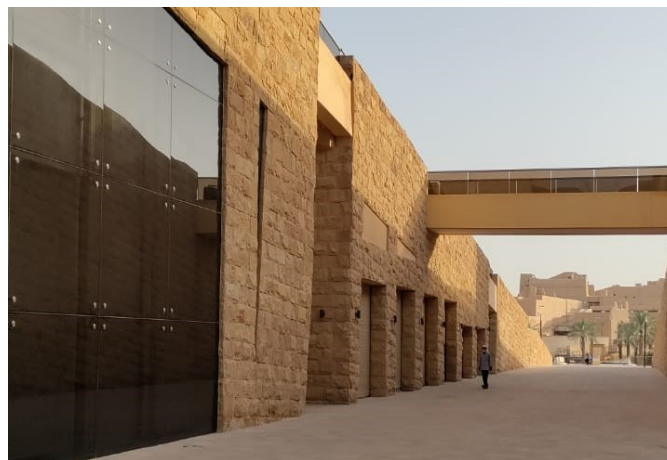


Fig. 8: Integration of modern amenities in the Historic Al Diriyah.

Source: Author

Discussion: Heritagization as a Strategic Approach for Developing Future Historic Sites

The case of Al Diriyah offers valuable insights for future historic cities by demonstrating both the opportunities and challenges associated with heritagization. It highlights the potential of heritage-making processes to revive neglected or decaying sites, integrating them into modern urban environments while preserving the historical site. The transformation of Al Diriyah illustrates the importance of balancing economic and tourism-driven objectives with the need to maintain the authenticity and integrity of historic sites. Future historic cities can learn from this by adopting a more measured approach to heritagization—one that respects the historical context while embracing modern amenities. By carefully managing the commercial aspects of heritage, historic cities can ensure that the essence of their cultural heritage is not lost, enabling them to serve as living examples of the successful coexistence of tradition and modernity for the future. This balance can foster sustainable cultural tourism and provide long-term benefits for both the local community and global heritage conservation efforts.

Most of the interview responses reveal that the urban branding of Al Diriyah has significantly enhanced awareness of the site's cultural identity, which had previously been neglected. Although the local community was not directly involved in the heritagization process, its importance is rooted in the cultural regeneration that connects deeply with ancestral heritage. Interviewees emphasized that heritagization can have both positive and negative impacts on cultural heritage.

On the positive side, it has contributed to economic growth, improved living standards, modernized infrastructure, and raised educational levels. However, some concerns were raised regarding the commercialization of traditional culture and the transformation of the entire historical site into a space that, while reimagined and visually enhanced, may provoke idealized or nostalgic perceptions of the past, rather than authentic cultural interpretation. This duality further highlights the complexity of heritagization and its broader implications for urban development. This can be further supported by an interviewee who stated that:

“because of the lack of awareness and understanding of heritagization processes, I think it has been abused widely to either mutate existing cultural heritage in their tangible, intangible, or natural forms or completely jeopardies the validity and value of heritage authenticity. At times, I believe heritagization could be an excellent safeguarding approach for reviving lost heritage, however, once the roots or factors of authenticity are gone, this reclaim loses its value, thus losing the meaning of heritage.”

Interview: August 2022

Heritagization initiatives are frequently overlooked, as they are often seamlessly incorporated into broader urban regeneration or urban development projects. However, the absence of explicit recognition or clarity in these heritagization processes does not imply their non-existence. In the context of heritagization of historical sites for the future, it is becoming increasingly important to critically assess the complex interplay between heritagization and urban regeneration. This relationship is not only influencing the branding of individual historical sites but is also extending to the branding of entire historical districts. Such transformations necessitate a deeper understanding of how heritagization is interpreted and perceived by local communities, as their engagement and awareness are essential to preserving the authenticity of these sites. The process of heritagization, while integral to safeguarding heritage, must balance modernization with the preservation of cultural heritage, ensuring that local communities remain actively involved and that the future of historical sites reflects both cultural identity and sustainable development.

Conclusion

The transformation of Historic Al Diriyah illustrates a comprehensive heritagization process that serves as a novel urban branding strategy. While this approach effectively preserves and commercializes the district's heritage, establishing it as a vibrant cultural and tourist destination, it also poses the risk of marginalizing its authentic cultural heritage under the pressures of cultural tourism driven by Vision 2030. However, it is essential not to dismiss this initiative, as it significantly contributes to the preservation of intangible heritage and raises heritage awareness within the local community and among future generations. Despite the challenges associated with such an unprecedented scale of heritagization in the region, the historical site of Al Diriyah demonstrates a potential to harmonize modernity and tradition, fostering a renewed appreciation for historic cities and their cultural value.

In conclusion, this research has examined the transformative impact of heritagization on historical ruins, particularly those that were once in a state of disrepair or neglect, with Al Diriyah serving as a case study. The study explored the complexities of the heritagization process, which often begins with the intent of preservation but can evolve into an unchecked branding strategy that risks compromising the historical integrity and authenticity of cultural heritage sites. The findings reveal that heritagization, while originally aimed at preservation, can extend beyond this goal, effectively rebranding the site as a revived cultural capital. This transformation not only revitalizes previously overlooked ruins, converting them into vibrant centers for cultural tourism but also highlights the inherent risks of over-commercialization and the commodification of heritage.

This study thus concludes that although heritagization can celebrate and preserve cultural heritage, when it is coupled with branding, it can also lead to cultural awakening and significant economic developments. However, such transformations call for meticulous management to ensure the preservation of the evolving and dynamic nature of heritagization without compromising the authenticity of the heritage itself.

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