

Transformation of Ancient Houses into Museums to Promote Nostalgic Tourism: The Folklore Museum in the World Cultural Heritage City of ‘hoi-an’ in Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformation of ancient houses in Hoi An into museums using the Hoi An Folklore Museum as a case study to highlight the development of nostalgic tourism. Since Hoi An's designation as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site in 1999, its ancient houses have become pivotal attractions offering visitors a window into its rich cultural past. Converting these historic spaces into museums is a critical step in preserving the city's architectural heritage while accommodating the growing tourism industry. This study examines the intricate balance between heritage conservation and tourism demands, emphasizing the cultural importance of these houses in maintaining Hoi An's traditional values.

Utilizing a case study approach, this research focuses on the transformation of the Hoang Hiep ancient house into the Hoi An Folklore Museum. Through archival research, interviews with local stakeholders, and on-site observations, the study provides insights into how the museum's exhibitions were designed to maximize space while preserving the site's cultural integrity. The collaboration between the state and local community in this transformation offers a detailed look at the opportunities and challenges associated with sustainable nostalgic tourism development in Hoi An.

The findings reveal that repurposing the Hoang Hiep ancient house into a museum illustrates both the potential and challenges of transforming heritage sites into tourist destinations. While such efforts help preserve Hoi An's cultural heritage and generate economic benefits, careful management is crucial to maintaining the authenticity of these sites. The study concludes that thoughtful planning and active community participation are essential to ensuring that these transformations remain sustainable, respectful of cultural heritage, and economically viable, providing valuable lessons for other heritage cities facing similar challenges.

Keywords: World Cultural Heritage, ancient house, Hoi An Folklore Museum, nostalgic tourism, spatial production, the Hoang Hiep ancient house, functional transformation

Introduction

The preservation and adaptive reuse of historical architecture have gained significant attention in heritage studies and tourism management, particularly as global tourism increasingly impacts culturally rich destinations. This approach offers a dual advantage: it preserves the historical and cultural significance of ancient structures while adapting them for contemporary uses that support local economies. One form of adaptive reuse that has garnered interest is the transformation of ancient houses into museums. This strategy not only conserves architectural heritage but also enhances the city's appeal to nostalgic tourism, where visitors seek authentic and immersive experiences rooted in history and culture.

In the context of Hoi An, a UNESCO World Heritage City in Vietnam, this phenomenon is especially noteworthy. Renowned for its well-preserved ancient architecture and vibrant cultural landscape, Hoi An presents a unique case study for investigating how adaptive reuse can balance heritage conservation with tourism development. The city's architectural heritage plays a pivotal role in maintaining its historical identity while simultaneously drawing tourists. Among these adaptive reuse projects, the conversion of ancient houses into museums provides a way to safeguard both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, allowing these structures to serve new functions while preserving their historical value.

This paper explores the transformation of Hoi An's ancient houses into museums, using the Folklore Museum as a case study to highlight how adaptive reuse facilitates nostalgic tourism and cultural sustainability. The Folklore Museum, housed in the former Hoang Hiep merchant house, exemplifies the integration of traditional architecture with contemporary museological practices. Through archival research, interviews with local stakeholders, and site visits, this study seeks to analyze the processes involved in these transformations, examining their implications for both heritage conservation and the sustainable development of tourism.



Fig. 1: The facade of Hoang Hiep ancient house.

Source: Nguyen Thi Bich Van

Museums, as cultural institutions, are tasked with the collection, preservation, and research of artifacts (Camarero & Garrido, 2008), and they play a critical role in education and public engagement (Han, 2004). In addition, they contribute to broader goals of cultural sustainability by preserving both tangible and intangible heritage (Härkönen, Huhmarniemi, & Jokela, 2018). The Folklore Museum, like other museums, is responsible for safeguarding cultural resources and attracting visitors (Hsu, Tsaih, & Yen, 2018). By showcasing original images, artifacts, and performances, it illustrates the cultural creativity and contributions of generations of residents in Hoi An (Friman, 2006).

Furthermore, museums serve an important educational function by fostering community beliefs and practices, encouraging the development of new values and behaviors (Loach, Rowley, & Griffiths, 2017; Moldavanova, 2016). Since 2013, the Folklore Museum has implemented educational programs, particularly for elementary students, through interactive activities that enhance their understanding of local history (Soini & Dessein, 2016).

Cultural sustainability in museums can be narrowly defined as the preservation of cultural heritage for future generations (Yuqin, 2008; Bertacchini, Dalle Nogare, & Scuderi, 2018) or more broadly as fostering cultural vitality by promoting values and behaviors that resonate with the community (Bui et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The transformation of ancient houses into museums, as seen in the case of the Hoi An Folklore Museum, is rooted in broader discussions of heritage conservation and nostalgic tourism. According to Rapoport (1969), the built environment serves as a vessel for cultural transmission, and adaptive reuse of historical buildings plays a critical role in preserving cultural identity while accommodating contemporary uses. This process aligns with the concept of heritage conservation, which Lowenthal (1985) defines as the act of safeguarding cultural artifacts and architecture to maintain continuity with the past.

In the context of nostalgic tourism, museums housed in repurposed historical buildings offer visitors a tangible connection to cultural memory. This type of tourism, as described by Boym (2001), involves a desire to relive or connect with a perceived authentic past. The conversion of ancient houses into museums, such as the Hoang Hiep house, provides a space where visitors can engage with Hoi An's rich cultural history, thus fulfilling the demand for immersive, historically grounded experiences. Folklore museums, in particular, play a critical role in this type of tourism by showcasing both tangible artifacts and intangible cultural practices, allowing for a deeper engagement with the community's heritage (Camarero & Garrido, 2008).

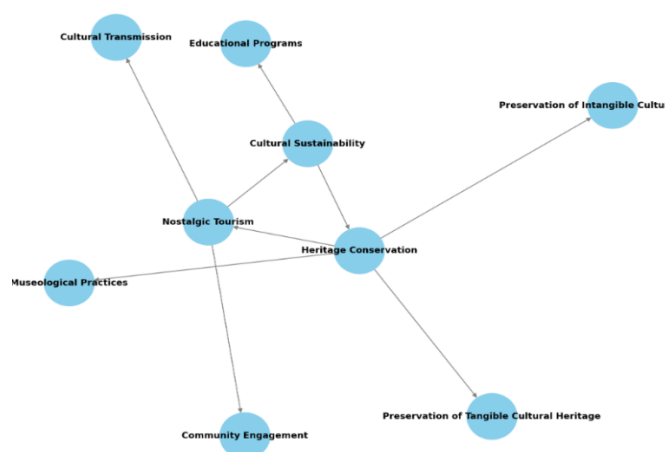


Fig. 2: Theoretical Framework: Transformation of Ancient House into Museum.
Source: Nguyen Thi Bich Van

Furthermore, the concept of cultural sustainability is central to this study. As noted by Throsby (2003), cultural sustainability refers to the capacity of cultural heritage to endure over time, providing social and economic benefits while maintaining its intrinsic value. Museums like the Hoi An Folklore Museum not only conserve historical artifacts but also actively participate in cultural education, thus fostering both community identity and tourist engagement (Loach, Rowley & Griffiths, 2017). In this context, the Folklore Museum serves as both a cultural repository and an educational space, promoting community values while accommodating the growing demands of nostalgic tourism.

The dual role of museums in both preserving heritage and catering to tourism demands reflects the growing recognition of adaptive reuse in heritage management. As Smith (2006) notes, the adaptive reuse of historical buildings contributes to cultural sustainability by providing new functions for old structures while preserving their historical integrity. The transformation of the Hoang Hiep ancient house into the Hoi An Folklore Museum illustrates

how adaptive reuse can successfully balance the preservation of cultural heritage with the economic and social benefits of tourism.

By framing the analysis within these theoretical perspectives—heritage conservation, nostalgic tourism, and cultural sustainability—this study contributes to the broader discourse on how ancient buildings can be repurposed in ways that respect their historical significance while supporting contemporary societal needs.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing multiple methods to gather comprehensive data about the transformation of the Hoang Hiep ancient house into the Hoi An Folklore Museum. The research design includes site visits, where detailed observations were made about the physical and spatial characteristics of the building before and after its conversion. Archival research was conducted to collect historical data on the house, including documents related to its original function as a commercial residence and the processes involved in its transformation into a museum. Additionally, interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including museum workers, local residents, and visitors. These interviews provided insights into both the cultural significance of the house and the community's perspectives on the museum's role in tourism and heritage preservation.

Data collection focused on three main aspects: the physical space (architectural features and layout), the social space (community interactions and cultural activities), and the commercial aspects of the house before its transformation. This case study approach allowed for a detailed analysis of how the house's conversion into a museum impacted Hoi An's tourism industry and its cultural sustainability. By examining both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage elements preserved in the museum, the study highlights the broader implications for heritage conservation and sustainable tourism development.

Case Study: The Folklore Museum in Hoi An

The Hoi An Folklore Museum, located in an ancient house once used for living and business, is a prime example of how historical buildings can be repurposed to serve new functions while preserving their cultural value. This museum showcases the rich cultural traditions of Hoi An through original images, artifacts, and performance activities that highlight both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The museum's exhibits emphasize the contributions of different generations of local residents in building and developing the town, fostering a sense of continuity between the past and present. The Folklore Museum also plays a key role in educational outreach. Since 2013, it has developed programs aimed at elementary school students, incorporating interactive activities that allow children to engage with local history. These programs not only educate but also help maintain and spread community beliefs and practices, contributing to the cultural vitality of Hoi An (Van & Singyabuth, 2023).

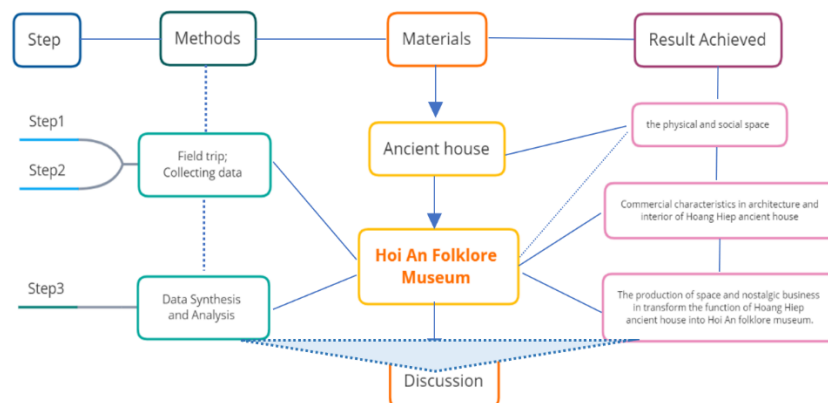


Fig. 3: Theoretical Framework: Transformation of Ancient House into Museum.

Source: Nguyen Thi Bich Van

Hoang Hiep Ancient House: Physical and Social Space in the Formation of the Commercial House in Hoi An Ancient Town

The Physical Space and Business Advantages of Hoang Hiep Ancient House Before Transformation

Hoi An's status as a historic trading hub was largely defined by its location along the banks of the Thu Bon River, historically known as the Cui or Cai River. The Hoang Hiep ancient house was one of the most prominent merchant houses, reflecting the bustling commercial activity that characterized the city. The house was located strategically between Nguyen Thai Hoc Street, a central business area, and Bach Dang Street, which ran alongside the river. This prime location made the house highly advantageous for trading, particularly in the context of receiving goods directly from the river into the warehouse and conducting business near the pier.

The layout of the house, typical of commercial residences, was designed to maximize business space. It had no open space between the adjacent buildings, a common feature of two-sided houses in the area. The architecture emphasized practicality and efficiency for trade, with a long, narrow structure that allowed for goods storage in the back and trading in the front. The house's construction adhered to Feng Shui principles, situating the house close to both the river and the market, thereby ensuring its success as a trading hub.

Social Space: The Chinese Immigration Journey and the Hoang Hiep House's Role in Hoi An's Commercial Network

In the 18th century, Hoi An became a vibrant commercial hub, attracting merchants and traders from across Asia, particularly from China. The influx of Chinese immigrants to Hoi An was a significant historical event that not only contributed to the city's economic prosperity but also shaped its unique cultural and social fabric. Among the various Chinese communities that settled in Hoi An, the Chaozhou, Cantonese, Hokkien, and Fujianese were the most prominent, each establishing their own trading houses, temples, and social institutions. The Hoang Hiep ancient house, owned by the Hua family, played a central role in this development, functioning both as a commercial powerhouse and a vital social space within the Chinese immigrant community.

The Hua family, who managed the Hoang Hiep trading brand, were well-established merchants specializing in the trade of local products and spices, which were in high demand both locally and internationally. The house was strategically located near Nguyen Thai Hoc Street, one of the main commercial streets in Hoi An, and had direct access to the Thu Bon River, facilitating the transportation of goods by boat. This access was critical for business, as it allowed the Hua family to engage in both domestic trade with other parts of Vietnam and international trade with neighboring countries, especially China and Japan.

However, the Hoang Hiep ancient house was more than just a commercial establishment. It also served as an important social space for the Chinese community. As a gathering place, the house hosted not only business meetings but also social events, religious ceremonies, and community gatherings. Chinese merchants and local Vietnamese officials frequently met at the house to discuss trade matters, negotiate business deals, and strengthen social ties. The house, with its large, open courtyards and reception rooms, provided ample space for such activities, fostering a sense of community and collaboration among Hoi An's diverse residents. It symbolized the strong social networks that were essential for maintaining commercial partnerships and fostering mutual trust between the Chinese and Vietnamese communities in Hoi An.

The Chinese migration to Hoi An in the 18th century had a profound impact on the town's commercial success. By integrating their trading expertise and cultural practices into the local economy, the Chinese merchants helped transform Hoi An into a thriving port city. The Hoang Hiep ancient house, with its extensive trade connections, was a key node in the broader commercial network that linked Hoi An to other major trading ports in Vietnam and beyond, including Da Nang, Guangzhou, and Nagasaki. The house's operations contributed significantly to the wealth and prosperity of the town during this period, allowing the Hua family to amass considerable influence in both the economic and social spheres of Hoi An.

As the Chinese community flourished, the Hoang Hiep house became an enduring symbol of cultural exchange and economic collaboration. The house's architectural features, including its Feng Shui-inspired layout, reflected both Chinese traditional values and local Vietnamese influences, showcasing the hybrid nature of Hoi An's built environment. The Hoang Hiep ancient house and other Chinese-owned buildings were instrumental in shaping the town's unique architectural identity, blending Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese styles to create a cohesive and distinctive cultural landscape that still defines Hoi An today.

However, the social and economic role of the Hoang Hiep ancient house began to change after 1975, following the reunification of Vietnam. The house, along with many other properties owned by private families, was nationalized by the state, marking the end of its function as a private residence and trading center. As the country transitioned towards a socialist economy, the house ceased to operate as a commercial hub, and the Hua family eventually left the property, moving abroad like many other Chinese-Vietnamese families at the time. This marked a significant shift not only for the Hoang Hiep ancient house but for the broader Chinese community in Hoi An, as many prominent merchant families either migrated or saw their properties taken over by the state.

In 1998, recognizing the historical and cultural value of the Hoang Hiep ancient house, the state invested in a comprehensive restoration project aimed at preserving the building's architectural heritage while repurposing it for public use. This restoration was part of a larger effort to conserve Hoi An's cultural landmarks and promote tourism, particularly nostalgic tourism, which draws visitors seeking authentic experiences of Vietnam's historical and cultural past. The restoration involved not only repairing the physical structure but also converting the space into a museum that would serve as a repository of Hoi An's cultural heritage.

By 2005, the Hoang Hiep ancient house had been fully transformed into the Hoi An Folklore Museum, a public cultural institution dedicated to preserving and showcasing the town's rich history, including the contributions of the Chinese community. The museum now serves as a key destination for tourists interested in Hoi An's cultural heritage, featuring exhibits on traditional crafts, local folklore, and the history of the town's commercial development. Through its exhibits, the museum maintains the legacy of the Hoang Hiep trading brand and the Chinese community's pivotal role in shaping the economic and social fabric of Hoi An.

The transformation of the Hoang Hiep ancient house into the Hoi An Folklore Museum marks a significant shift in the building's role within the community. Once a bustling center of commerce and a social hub for the Chinese immigrant population, the house now serves as a cultural space that connects both locals and tourists to the town's historical past. This adaptive reuse not only ensures the preservation of the

house's architectural integrity but also allows for the continued transmission of Hoi An's intangible cultural heritage, fostering a deeper understanding of the town's unique blend of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese influences.

The Hoang Hiep ancient house serves as a poignant reminder of the Chinese immigration journey and the profound influence the Chinese community had on Hoi An's commercial network and cultural development. Its transformation into the Hoi An Folklore Museum ensures that this legacy is preserved for future generations, while also contributing to the town's thriving tourism industry.

Transformation of Hoang Hiep Ancient House into the Hoi An Folklore Museum

The transformation of the Hoang Hiep ancient house from a private merchant residence into the Hoi An Folklore Museum reflects broader trends in heritage conservation and adaptive reuse. The process of conversion aimed to preserve the architectural integrity of the building while adapting it for a new function that would serve the public and contribute to cultural education. The state invested 1.7 billion VND in the restoration and renovation of the house, recognizing its historical and cultural significance to Hoi An. The transformation involved careful conservation of the building's architectural features, including the pinewood construction, the yin and yang roof tiles, and the layout of the house's three interconnected buildings.



Fig. 4: Interior of the Main House of Hoi An Folklore Museum
Source: Nguyen Thi Bich Van

Comparison of the House Before and After Transformation

Before transformation, the Hoang Hiep ancient house was designed as a space for commerce and residence. The house's narrow structure, long corridors, and large warehouse space in the back were all elements designed to facilitate trade. Its location near the river and market was crucial to its success as a commercial hub. The house's function as a private space for the Hua family also included social gatherings and meetings, which took place in the central courtyard and spacious reception rooms.

After transformation, the house was repurposed into a public cultural institution. The original architectural features were preserved, but the function of the house shifted entirely. The long corridors and open spaces that once housed goods for trade were converted into exhibition areas, while the courtyards that once served as gathering spaces for business meetings were transformed into display areas for traditional crafts and performance arts. The upstairs rooms, once used for family life, now house intangible cultural heritage artifacts, including a vast collection of traditional costumes and craft tools (Van & Singyabuth, 2023).

Figure 4 illustrates the interior of the house after its transformation, where traditional architectural elements such as the wooden beams and tiled roofs remain intact. These preserved features enhance the museum's authenticity, providing visitors with an immersive experience that connects them with Hoi An's history.



Fig. 5: Layout of Exhibition Spaces at the Hoi An Folklore Museum

Source: Nguyen Thi Bich Van

The Role of Adaptive Reuse in Conservation

The transformation of the Hoang Hiep ancient house demonstrates how adaptive reuse can facilitate the conservation of historical buildings while introducing new social functions that ensure their continued relevance. By repurposing the house into a museum, local authorities not only preserved the building's physical structure but also allowed for the ongoing transmission of cultural knowledge through public exhibits. The Hoi An Folklore Museum now serves as a cultural space where both tangible and intangible heritage are showcased. The adaptive reuse of the building has enabled the conservation of its original form, while the new function as a museum provides financial sustainability through tourism.

The museum highlights the craftsmanship of Hoi An's residents through a collection of over 483 artifacts. The exhibits are organized around four main themes: folk visual arts, folk performing arts, traditional craft villages, and folk activities. Visitors are encouraged to engage with the history of the house and the broader cultural heritage of Hoi An through interactive displays and performances.

The Impact of the Transformation on Cultural Sustainability

The transformation of the Hoang Hiep ancient house into the Hoi An Folklore Museum has had a profound impact on the cultural sustainability of Hoi An. The museum plays a crucial role in cultural education, providing programs for local students and visitors alike. Through interactive activities, such as pottery workshops and traditional craft demonstrations, the museum fosters the continuation of community traditions and cultural practices. The preservation of the house and its conversion into a museum has allowed for the long-term safeguarding of Hoi An's heritage, ensuring that future generations will remain connected to their cultural roots.

The Hoi An Folklore Museum exemplifies how adaptive reuse can transform historical buildings into active cultural spaces that contribute to both heritage conservation and tourism development. The museum's ability to attract tourists while promoting cultural education underscores its role in maintaining the cultural vitality of Hoi An.

The case of the Hoang Hiep ancient house illustrates the successful integration of heritage conservation and adaptive reuse. By transforming the house into the Hoi An Folklore

Museum, local authorities have preserved a significant architectural and cultural landmark while ensuring its relevance in the modern tourism economy. The museum serves as both a repository of cultural knowledge and a space for community engagement, offering a model for how adaptive reuse can support both the conservation of historical buildings and the promotion of cultural sustainability.

Discussion

The transformation of ancient houses into museums, exemplified by the Hoi An Folklore Museum, plays a crucial role in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Hoi An while adapting to the evolving demands of nostalgic tourism. This adaptive reuse enables the conservation of historical architecture and cultural artifacts, while providing visitors with immersive experiences that connect them to the town's rich history and traditions. This approach aligns with global trends in nostalgic tourism, where travelers increasingly seek authentic experiences that offer deeper connections to local cultures beyond simple sightseeing (Bui et al., 2020).

Comparing the House Before and After Transformation

The transformation of the Hoang Hiep ancient house into the Folklore Museum demonstrates a significant change in both function and form. Before the transformation, the house primarily served as a private commercial residence with long corridors for storing goods and a strategic location near the river and marketplace. After the transformation, the house was adapted to serve as a museum, with the same corridors and courtyards now functioning as exhibition spaces for traditional artifacts. The layout of the house remained largely intact, preserving the architectural integrity of the building, but its purpose shifted from private commerce to public cultural education. Figure 4 illustrates the spatial differences, comparing the house as a functional residence with its new role as a museum.

This adaptive reuse preserves the house's architectural features, such as its yin and yang tiled roofs, courtyards, and wooden beams, ensuring that the building retains its historical and cultural significance. Meanwhile, its new role as a museum offers visitors an opportunity to engage directly with both tangible and intangible heritage, such as local craft demonstrations and traditional performances (Van & Singyabuth, 2023).

Balancing Preservation and Commercialization

The transformation process in Hoi An not only safeguards tangible and intangible cultural values but also contributes significantly to the town's economic sustainability. By turning heritage sites into tourist attractions, these museums create new revenue streams that support the preservation of cultural assets while enhancing the visitor experience. The Hoi An Folklore Museum offers a range of performances and craft demonstrations, allowing visitors to engage more deeply with Hoi An's living heritage, beyond static displays (Van & Singyabuth, 2023).

However, the repurposing of ancient houses for tourism also presents challenges. Balancing preservation with commercialization is critical to maintaining cultural integrity. While the transformation increases accessibility and ensures that a wider audience appreciates the house's cultural significance, there is a risk of over-commercialization. This could lead to the commodification of historical sites, potentially undermining their authenticity, particularly as global tourism markets continue to influence local economies (Axelsson et al., 2013).

Community Involvement and Authenticity

The success of these transformations depends on thoughtful planning and community engagement. It is essential to involve local stakeholders in the process to ensure that these transformations align with the values and traditions of the community. In Hoi An, the engagement of local artisans and residents in the planning and management of the museum fosters a sense of ownership and helps maintain the authenticity of the exhibits and performances. This inclusive approach is essential for ensuring that tourism development contributes positively to both the economic and cultural fabric of the town (Soini & Dessein, 2016).

The transformation of ancient houses into museums in Hoi An exemplifies a model of heritage preservation that meets the demands of modern tourism while respecting the cultural integrity of these sites. However, it requires careful consideration to strike a balance between economic development and preserving the cultural heritage that makes Hoi An a unique and vibrant destination for nostalgic tourism (Loach, Rowley, & Griffiths, 2017).

Conclusion

The transformation of ancient houses into museums in Hoi An represents a key intersection of heritage conservation, cultural sustainability, and nostalgic tourism. Through the case study of the Hoi An Folklore Museum, this research demonstrates the dual roles these repurposed structures serve: preserving cultural heritage while promoting cultural values in a manner that appeals to modern tourists. This delicate balance between conservation and commercialization is increasingly relevant in the context of Hoi An, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that attracts global attention for its rich history and vibrant cultural landscape (Friman, 2006). Insights from the Case Study of the Hoi An Folklore Museum are as follows.

1. Preservation of Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage

The transformation of the Hoang Hiep ancient house into a museum has allowed for the preservation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The architectural integrity of the building was maintained, while its new function as a museum ensures that the cultural practices and traditions of Hoi An are passed down to future generations. The museum exhibits traditional crafts, costumes, and performance arts, all of which contribute to the preservation of Hoi An's cultural identity.

2. Promoting Nostalgic Tourism

The adaptive reuse of the house appeals to the growing demand for nostalgic tourism, where visitors seek to engage with authentic historical experiences. The museum provides an immersive environment that connects tourists to Hoi An's past through interactive displays and live demonstrations of local crafts. This type of tourism not only enhances the visitor experience but also strengthens the connection between the local community and its heritage (Bui et al., 2020).

3. Balancing Economic Development and Cultural Integrity

The transformation of ancient houses into museums creates new revenue streams that support the local economy. However, the challenge lies in balancing economic development with cultural preservation. As seen in the case of the Hoi An Folklore Museum, careful planning and management are essential to ensure that the commercialization of these spaces does not compromise their authenticity or cultural integrity (Axelsson et al., 2013). Thoughtful restoration processes and community involvement are critical to maintaining this balance.

Broader Implications for Cultural Heritage Management

The findings of this study have broader implications for cultural heritage management in World Heritage contexts beyond Hoi An. As cities around the world grapple with the challenges of tourism-driven development, the case of Hoi An offers valuable lessons on how heritage sites can be adapted to meet contemporary demands without sacrificing their historical and cultural significance. The careful balance of preservation, tourism, and community involvement seen in Hoi An's approach can serve as a model for other heritage cities facing similar pressures (Throsby, 2003).

In conclusion, the transformation of ancient houses into museums, such as the Hoi An Folklore Museum, represents an effective strategy for preserving cultural heritage while fostering economic growth through nostalgic tourism. This study underscores the importance of community engagement, thoughtful planning, and sustainable practices in ensuring that heritage sites remain culturally significant and economically viable for future generations.

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