

The Impact of Globalization on the Architectural Identity of Bahrain: Challenges and Opportunities in Preserving Heritage

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Abstract

This research investigates how globalization affects the architectural identity Bahrain, particularly focusing on the tension between modernization and the preservation of cultural heritage. Historically, Bahraini architecture has reflected local materials, climate, and cultural traditions, but global design trends increasingly shape the nation's urban landscape. This creates concerns over the potential loss of cultural distinctiveness and raises the question of how Bahrain can modernize without erasing its architectural roots.

To examine this issue, the research adopted a mixed methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative tools. Case studies of the Muharraq Pearling Path and Bahrain Financial Harbour provided contrasting examples of heritage preservation and globalized design. Semi-structured interviews with Bahraini architect Eng. Layla Al-Alawi offered expert insights, while document analysis reviewed government policies. A public questionnaire with 44 responses gathered data on public perceptions, attitudes, and preferences regarding architectural identity.

The findings show that while globalization brings innovations, it also threatens local identity. Both public opinions and expert views highlight the need for hybrid designs, policy incentives, and educational initiatives that combine modernity with cultural authenticity. The research concludes that safeguarding architectural heritage of Bahrain requires integrated strategies across design, governance, and public awareness.

Keywords: Globalization, architectural heritage, cultural identity, hybrid architecture.

Introduction

Historically, architecture has reflected the social, cultural and environmental conditions of its place. Traditional buildings were shaped by local climate, materials, and cultural practices. However, globalization has shifted this dynamic, spreading standardized styles like Modernism and High-Tech Architecture that often overlook local heritage. Economic pressures

and global real estate influences now prioritize efficiency and profit over cultural authenticity, creating urban landscapes that look increasingly similar worldwide.

Globalization has significantly impacted architecture, reshaping construction methods and transforming urban landscapes across the world. One of the most pressing concerns is the loss of cultural and regional architectural identity, as traditional forms and materials are replaced by standardized global styles that lack local context.

This shift reduces architectural diversity and raises crucial questions about how to maintain authenticity while embracing progress. Cities today often favor modern, internationally recognized designs over traditional, contextually rooted structures. Yet globalization has also spurred innovation in construction techniques and sustainable materials, offering opportunities to blend the old with the new. The challenge lies in moving forward without sacrificing cultural uniqueness.

In Bahrain, the effects of globalization are particularly visible in the rapid development of buildings shaped by international design trends. While globalization encourages the exchange of ideas and technologies, it also brings serious risks, including the erosion of local architectural identity. As urban expansion continues, there is an urgent need to examine how Bahrain can preserve its unique architectural identity while adapting to global design pressures. This research explores the changing face of Bahraini architecture under globalization and investigates strategies to safeguard cultural identity amid ongoing transformations. The primary aim of this research is to explore the impact of globalization on the architectural identity of Bahrain and assess the implications for cultural heritage and community identity.

Its objectives are:

- To identify the key factors that contribute to the loss of architectural identity.
- To analyze the influence of global architectural trends on local building styles and assess their social and cultural impacts.
- To identify challenges and explore the opportunities for preserving architectural identity of Bahrain and integrating modern developments while maintaining cultural authenticity.
- To assess case studies of architectural projects in Bahrain that successfully blend heritage with contemporary design.
- To review government policies on preserving architectural heritage.
- To recommend strategies for preserving local architectural identities amidst globalization.

Theoretical Framework

Globalization, as defined by Dök Mimarlık (n.d.), refers to the increasing interconnectedness of countries through trade, investment, and technology. In architectural terms, it is closely linked to the diffusion of universal design styles such as modernism and high-tech architecture, which often supersede local expressions. According to Rapoport (1969), architecture is a cultural phenomenon that reflects the values, needs, and traditions of its society. In this view, the infiltration of global architectural styles risks undermining the socio-cultural fabric of the built environment.

Oliver (1987) argues that vernacular architecture evolves in direct response to local climate, materials, and socio-cultural practices. The imposition of global design paradigms may therefore lead to the displacement of this organic evolution, replacing it with homogenized, placeless environments. This concern is echoed by King (2004), who emphasizes the influence of global capital and transnational networks in shaping urban landscapes, often prioritizing economic growth over cultural preservation.

Tzonis and Lefaivre (2003) suggest that instead of resisting globalization, architects can engage in critical regionalism a design approach that synthesizes global technological advancements with local traditions and values. Frampton (1983) supports this by proposing a

framework where regional culture informs architectural design, ensuring that modern buildings resonate with local identity.

These theoretical perspectives establish a foundation for understanding the tension between innovation and preservation. While globalization can foster efficiency and creativity, it can also dilute cultural identity if not approached thoughtfully. Therefore, a theoretical consensus emerges that meaningful architectural identity in the age of globalization can only be sustained through a critical integration of global techniques with local design traditions.

Review of Literature

There is much research that examines the impact of globalization on Bahrain. Among them, Ben Hamouche (2004), Shah (2019), El-Masri (2010), Mahdi (2022) and Al-Hamad (2017) stand out. Ben Hamouche (2004) provides a comprehensive analysis of how the Gulf cities, particularly Bahrain, have transformed under globalization. He points out that economic modernization often results in generic urban landscapes and the erosion of cultural identity. He argues that this is especially evident in the replacement of traditional forms with glass façades and Western inspired buildings. Adding to this, Shah (2019) discusses how modernization in Bahrain has sometimes led to the neglect of heritage buildings in favor of international styles that do not reflect the local context. However, she also emphasizes the potential of restoration and revival of projects to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity.

El-Masri (2010) adds to this argument. He says that while globalization promotes urban development, it often marginalizes local culture unless supported by strong policy frameworks. He highlights the Pearling Path project in Muharraq as a successful example of integrating heritage into modern planning. However, he argues that such cases are limited and are often overshadowed by large scale commercial developments. In contrast, Mahdi (2022) focuses on how local architects in Bahrain are actively trying to preserve cultural identity by incorporating traditional elements into modern buildings. He suggests that these efforts are essential for creating meaningful architecture in a global context but are still underrepresented in mainstream development.

Interestingly, Al-Hamad (2017) traces the decline of the traditional architectural aesthetics in Bahrain, noting that globalization has shifted focus toward international styles. While this has brought technological and design innovations, it has also contributed to a disconnect between the built environment and local identity. As can be seen, previous research highlights that Gulf cities, including Bahrain, are increasingly adopting global urban forms leading to standardized cityscapes and the erosion of cultural identity. In fact, most scholars argue that cities like Dubai have become examples of "placeless" architecture with urban areas shaped more by global economic demands than local heritage.

Despite these contributions, however, gaps of knowledge remain. Few studies explore how Bahrainis experience these architectural transformations or how the policies could better support cultural integration.

Extensively Studied Areas and Identified Gaps

Al-Kodmany (2021) further discusses how Gulf cities, including Bahrain, increasingly adopt globalized urban forms, resulting in standardized cityscapes and what is often termed "placeless architecture." This shift reflects how architectural identity is shaped more by global market pressures than by local culture.

While physical and visual transformations are widely studied, there is limited research on the social and emotional impact of these changes. Al-Raisi (2020) points out the lack of exploration into how Bahrainis experience these shifts in terms of cultural belonging and identity. Moreover, few studies focus on how local architects are actively adapting or resisting global design pressures by integrating traditional Bahraini features into contemporary architecture. Additionally, heritage policies are discussed in general terms, but there is little analysis of their real-world impact or how they can evolve to support both preservation and modern development.

Fathy (2010) emphasizes that in many Arab regions, including Bahrain, the loss of vernacular design principles has led to a disconnection between architecture and environmental context. He notes that passive design strategies such as courtyard layouts and natural ventilation are often overlooked in favor of imported architectural forms, despite their historical climatic suitability. Meanwhile, Dabaieh (2013) investigates sustainable heritage in the Middle East and finds that integrating traditional architecture with modern eco-conscious methods is both feasible and culturally enriching. She presents evidence that combining local craftsmanship with innovative technologies can produce architecture that is both identity-based and future-oriented.

Doumiati (2020) further explores the psychological impacts of globalized urban environments, observing that residents often report reduced feelings of attachment and recognition in rapidly modernized neighborhoods. She argues that architectural design must account for emotional continuity and cultural familiarity. Likewise, Serageldin (1999) points out that architectural identity is not static but evolves through active negotiation between memory and modernity. His analysis highlights the importance of context-aware and policy-making in safeguarding heritage values. These contributions suggest that future research must address not only aesthetic and policy gaps but also the emotional, ecological, and spatial narratives embedded in the built environment.

This research aims to fill those gaps by examining community perceptions, architectural practices, and the effectiveness of current policies in maintaining identity within a globalized context.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach to investigate how globalization is affecting Bahrain's architectural identity, with particular attention to the preservation of heritage. The study utilized a combination of research tools including interviews, document analysis, case study evaluations, and a structured questionnaire to gather both primary and secondary data.

Case Study Selection

To understand how traditional and modern architecture coexist in Bahrain, two architectural projects were selected as case studies. Selection criteria include relevance to the topic, visibility in public discourse, and accessibility for documentation and expert insight. The case studies are as follows.

Case Study 1: Muharraq Pearling Path – A Heritage-Focused Mixed-Use Development

The Pearling Path is a UNESCO World Heritage site that has been redeveloped into a living urban corridor. It is an exemplary model of how heritage can be preserved while still serving contemporary social and cultural functions. It includes restored traditional houses, public spaces, and community facilities. The project actively balances modern needs with heritage preservation and is directly connected to community identity and cultural tourism.

Case Study 2: Bahrain Financial Harbour – A Globalized Modern Project

A major commercial development consisting of high-rise towers, office spaces, and financial institutions. It reflects a purely globalized architectural approach. It illustrates how globalization can lead to placeless architecture, prioritizing efficiency and aesthetics over cultural relevance.

Semi-Structured Interview

An interview was conducted with Bahraini architect Eng. Layla Al-Alawi to explore professional perspectives on globalization's influence and challenges in preserving architectural identity. The interview was semi-structured to allow free-flowing discussion. Key ideas were documented during the conversation, which touched on client demands, hybrid design strategies, and the role of education.

Document and Policy Analysis

Official documents and policy reports from Bahrain's urban development authorities were analyzed. These included Bahrain Vision 2030 and urban development regulations to assess how governmental frameworks respond to globalization and heritage issues.

Questionnaires

A short, structured questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms, generating 44 responses. It aimed to gather public perceptions regarding modernization, cultural identity, and architectural trends. Questions included multiple-choice, scaled responses, and open-ended formats.

The Questionnaire Covers:

- ✓ The impact of globalization.
- ✓ People's emotional and cultural connection to architecture.
- ✓ The challenges to heritage preservation.
- ✓ The opportunities to promote it in modern contexts.

Questionnaire items included the following aspects:

- 1) If the respondent believed that Bahrain's traditional architecture is being preserved in new developments.
- 2) Which style of architecture does the respondent feel most represents his/her cultural identity: traditional, modern, or a mix of both.
- 3) The importance of the new buildings to reflect Bahraini heritage.
- 4) An assessment of recent buildings in Bahrain that successfully blend modern design with traditional elements.
- 5) An assessment of the connection to places or buildings that reflect traditional Bahraini design.
- 6) An assessment how globalization is changing the visual identity of Bahraini cities.
- 7) If the government should require the architects to include local design elements in all the public buildings.
- 8) What architectural features do the respondents most associate with Bahraini identity.
- 9) How much influence the respondents think foreign architects and developers have on the appearance of new buildings in Bahrain.
- 10) What the respondents think are the main barriers to preserving traditional Bahraini architecture in new developments.
- 11) An assessment of what challenges do architects face when trying to incorporate traditional elements into modern buildings.
- 12) How heritage can be preserved while modernizing.
- 13) If the respondents would support the initiatives that offer incentives for developers who use traditional architectural elements.

The use of these multiple qualitative tools allows triangulation of the findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and architectural dynamics in Bahrain.

1. Findings

1.1. Case Study Evaluations

Case Study 1: Muharraq Pearling Path

The Muharraq Pearling Path stands as a benchmark for heritage-driven urban regeneration. It revitalizes a historic neighborhood by restoring traditional houses, cultural facilities, and pathways vital to the pearling economy of Bahrain. The integration of modern infrastructure such as shaded walkways, signage, and visitor centers is sensitively executed while preserving narrow alleyways, courtyards, and traditional building materials like coral

stone and gypsum alongside traditional architectural elements like wind towers and wooden mashrabiya, reinforces a sense of place.

The project is widely appreciated for strengthening the cultural identity of Muharraq and fostering emotional ties among the residents and the visitors. It reinforces cultural identity and fosters emotional connections among the residents and the visitors. The project illustrates that modernization can coexist with heritage if approached thoughtfully. The visual aids include an urban layout diagram showing how the path connects historic nodes.



Fig. 1: Case Study 2 – the Bahrain Financial Harbour
Source: Author

In contrast, the Bahrain Financial Harbour symbolizes a globalized and placeless architectural model. The project serves as a counter example, representing a globalized architectural model. The towers lack any cultural symbolism, and most stakeholders viewed the project as "placeless" and disconnected from Bahraini identity. Although the development meets international commercial standards, it reveals how rapid globalization can overshadow heritage in favor of generic aesthetics.



The design features modern glass façades, steel structures, and high-tech styling. Designed to meet international corporate standards with no apparent references to Bahraini cultural or architectural traditions.

Semi-Structured Interview

Participant: Bahraini Architect – Eng. Layla Al-Alawi

Key insights:

- Globalization is diluting cultural identity in new architectural developments.
- Clients often prioritize international styles, limiting traditional elements.
- Hybrid design strategies are essential for preserving culture.
- Education and awareness are necessary at both public and professional levels.

The architect emphasized the growing tension between globalization and the preservation of cultural identity in the built environment of Bahrain. According to her, the rapid influx of international architectural styles has resulted in a shift away from culturally grounded design. This trend, often driven by the developer or the client preferences for modern aesthetics, limits architectural creativity and reduces the inclusion of traditional Bahraini elements in new constructions.

The architect noted that while there is potential for a successful fusion of modernity and heritage, this opportunity is often missed due to cost concerns, lack of policy incentives, and limited awareness among the clients. Hybrid design strategies such as integrating traditional spatial concepts like courtyards or wind towers into modern structures were proposed as a way forward, especially for public and civic buildings.

Moreover, the participants underscored the importance of early-stage education for the architects, planners, and developers, emphasizing that awareness of the architectural history of Bahrain must be cultivated from academic settings to professional practice. Public engagement was also seen as crucial, as a culturally informed society is more likely to value and advocate for heritage in everyday urban life.

Review of Documents and Policies

Two documents were reviewed. They are:

1. Bahrain Vision 2030 and
2. Urban Planning and Development Regulations.

While these documents emphasize heritage as a strategic priority, implementation is inconsistent. There are no binding requirements for incorporating local elements in new public projects. Incentives for culturally sensitive architecture are weak, and most urban developments still follow the global design trends.

Questionnaire Findings

Responses: 44

Main findings:

- 89% believe heritage should be reflected in new buildings.
- 64% identify with a hybrid architectural identity.
- 82% see foreign influence as major or complete.
- Main barriers to cultural preservation: developer priorities, cost, weak policies.
- Emotional connection to traditional designs remains strong.
- High public support for government-led preservation initiatives.

Respondents called for mandatory cultural elements in public architecture and expressed readiness to support incentives for developers adopting heritage-based designs.

Analysis and Discussion

This section analyzes the collected data to understand the underlying meanings, patterns, and implications related to the impact of globalization on the architectural identity of Bahrain. The analysis integrates findings from case studies, interviews, policy documents, and questionnaire responses, organized systematically to identify consistent trends, observations, and tensions within the built environment.

Case Study Analysis

Case Study Comparison	Muharraq Pearling Path	Bahrain Financial Harbour
Architectural Approach	Heritage preservation with adaptive reuse	Globalized, international corporate design
Materials and Elements	Coral stone, gypsum, wind towers, mashrabiya	Glass facades, steel structures, high-tech materials
Cultural Symbolism	Strongly linked to Bahraini identity and history	No apparent cultural references
Impact on Community	Reinforces emotional connection, boosts cultural tourism	Perceived as disconnected from local identity

The two selected case studies present contrasting approaches to architecture in Bahrain. The Muharraq Pearling Path exemplifies how heritage-focused design can preserve cultural identity by integrating authentic materials and spatial configurations, such as narrow alleyways, coral stone, and wind towers, into a modernized setting. This case shows that with careful planning, modernization and heritage preservation can coexist.

In contrast, the Bahrain Financial Harbour project reflects a globalized, placeless aesthetic, prioritizing international corporate standards over local references. Its glass and steel towers lack cultural symbolism, representing the homogenizing forces of globalization. This contrast illustrates the challenges architects face in balancing local identity with global design pressures.

Analysis of Interview Findings

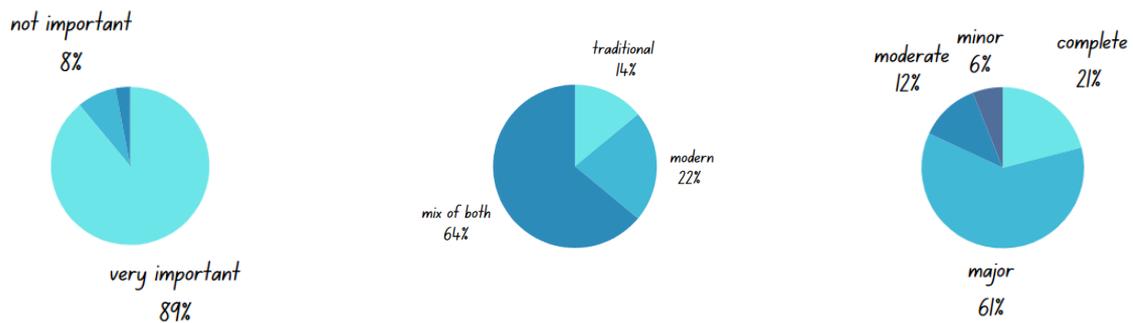
Interview Key Insights	Findings
Globalization's Impact	Reduces cultural references in design; pressures architects to follow trends
Recommended Strategies	Hybrid designs mixing modern functions with traditional elements
Major Barriers	Cost concerns, lack of incentives, limited client awareness
Importance of Education	Early training for architects and public engagement are critical

The semi-structured interview with Eng. Layla Al-Alawi revealed the professional challenges and tensions architects experience under globalization. Al-Alawi stressed that client and developer demands often push for international styles, leaving little room for cultural creativity. She highlighted that hybrid strategies, where traditional elements such as courtyards or wind towers are adapted into modern designs, can effectively balance heritage and innovation. However, these strategies are underused due to high costs, limited policy support, and insufficient awareness. This interview underscores the importance of policy interventions and educational programs to foster culturally grounded architectural practices.

Document and Policy Review

The documents demonstrate a strong strategic intent to preserve heritage, especially in designated zones. Bahrain Vision 2030 includes cultural sustainability as a key pillar. However, analysis shows a disconnect between policy and practice. There are no binding regulations requiring foreign architects to incorporate local design elements. Moreover, incentives for private developers to adopt culturally sensitive architecture remain minimal. While heritage is respected in principle, broader urban development still trends toward globalized aesthetics.

Questionnaire Analysis



Based on the 44 responses, the questionnaire reveals significant concern among the public about the disappearance of traditional architecture in Bahrain. While a majority recognize the need for modernization, 89% believe heritage should be reflected in the new buildings. The public overwhelmingly identifies with a hybrid architectural identity (64%), indicating openness to blending styles. Developer priorities and high costs emerged as the top barriers to cultural preservation. The influence of foreign architects is perceived as overwhelming, with 82% selecting “major” or “complete” influence. Furthermore, the main barriers to preserving traditional architecture were seen as developer priorities, high costs, and affirm the urgency for policy reforms and incentivized hybrid design approaches.

The responses suggest that while the public is open to modernization, there is a deep cultural attachment to heritage elements, and a desire to see them integrated thoughtfully into future developments. People express a strong emotional connection to places reflecting traditional design, emphasizing the role of architecture in sustaining collective memory and identity.

Patterns of Interpretations and the Discussion

The combined findings point to several recurring patterns:

- 1) **Globalization vs. Local Identity:** There is a consistent tension between the desire for modern, internationally appealing architecture and the need to preserve Bahrain’s unique cultural identity. This tension is reflected in both professional practice (interviews) and public perception (questionnaire).
- 2) **Hybrid Design as a Solution:** Across all data sources, hybrid design approaches emerge as a promising path forward, allowing architects to integrate traditional elements without sacrificing modern functionality.
- 3) **Systemic Barriers:** High costs, client preferences, lack of incentives, and minimal regulatory requirements are key obstacles preventing broader adoption of culturally sensitive design.
- 4) **The Role of Policy and Education:** Both architects and the public identify education and policy reform as crucial for bridging the gap between heritage preservation and modernization.

These patterns reveal that preserving the architectural identity of Bahrain in the face of globalization is not just an aesthetic choice but a socio-cultural necessity. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative action from the architects, the developers, the policymakers, and the public.

The data indicates that successful future architectural practices in Bahrain will depend on recognizing the importance of cultural heritage, implementing supportive policies, and educating both professionals and the public about the value of hybrid, contextually rooted design.

Conclusions

The impact of globalization on the architectural identity of Bahrain is both complex and far-reaching. While modern developments have introduced advanced technologies and international aesthetics, it has also challenged the continuity of local heritage within the built environment. This research has revealed clear tensions between the drive for economic progress and the need to preserve cultural memory, especially in a rapidly transforming urban landscape.

To move forward effectively, it is not enough to merely protect isolated heritage sites or apply decorative elements symbolically. There is a critical need for a deeper, more deliberate architectural discourse; one that studies the cultural identity of Bahrain in relation to modern needs and interprets tradition as a living resource rather than a fixed image of the past. This means designing not only for functionality or global appeal but for meaningful cultural expression.

If Bahrain is to present itself as a modern nation rooted in its identity, future architectural practices must be guided by thoughtful planning, stronger policy frameworks, community participation, and academic research. By embedding heritage meaningfully into the language of contemporary design, Bahrain can shape a built environment that reflects both who it is and who it aspires to become.

The case studies show heritage and global styles can coexist but require intentional design to avoid overshadowing local identity. The questionnaire data reveals that the public strongly values Bahraini architectural heritage. A majority of the respondents reported feeling a stronger emotional connection to spaces that reflect traditional Bahraini elements and identified several barriers to preservation. The expert interview emphasized the challenges architects face when working in a globalized market and confirm that critical regionalism offers a promising design pathway, but success depends on resources, education and supportive policies.

The literature review and document analysis indicate that while the official development frameworks of Bahrain emphasize cultural sustainability, there is a gap between policy language and actual implementation. Current regulations often lack the specificity and enforcement mechanisms needed to ensure that foreign architects or developers respect and integrate local identity into their designs. Furthermore, few formal incentives exist to reward projects that successfully blend heritage and innovation, which reduces any motivation among the developers to go beyond standard globalized designs.

In conclusion, the research demonstrates that the architectural identity of Bahrain is at risk under globalization but can be preserved. This includes stronger governmental policies and incentives, greater public and professional awareness, and design strategies that actively blend the local and global elements. Importantly, the preservation of architectural identity is not simply a nostalgic exercise; it is an active process of negotiation between tradition and modernity, as well as memory and progress. Without targeted efforts, Bahrain risks becoming a landscape of “placeless” architecture shaped more by international market forces than by its rich cultural history. Therefore, preservation must be seen not as resistance to globalization but as an opportunity to create a distinctive, future-oriented Bahraini architectural identity.

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