

Erosion of Cultural and Architectural Identity of Bahrain in the Face of Globalization

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Abstract

As Bahrain's urban landscape transforms under the influence of global design standards, many vernacular architectural elements—such as wind towers, courtyards, and coral stone facades—are being replaced by generic modern structures. In this context, this research investigates the erosion of cultural and architectural identity of Bahrain amidst increasing globalization. The study focuses on how these architectural changes impact national identity, particularly from the perspective of Bahraini youth.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach. Site observations were conducted at three representative locations: Sheikh Isa bin Ali House (traditional), Seef District (modern), and Bahrain National Theatre (hybrid). These were analyzed alongside data gathered from a structured questionnaire targeting Bahraini youth aged 18–30. Behavioral mapping, architectural documentation, and survey responses provided both qualitative and quantitative insights into public perception and spatial interaction.

Findings reveal a strong preference for traditional architectural features and a widespread concern that modern architecture lacks cultural resonance. Spaces with hybrid or locally inspired designs were perceived more positively. The research concludes that integrating traditional elements within contemporary frameworks is both feasible and desired. This approach offers a viable solution for preserving Bahrain's architectural heritage while accommodating urban development.

Keywords: Bahraini architecture, cultural identity, globalization, traditional elements, hybrid design

Introduction

Bahrain, a historically rich nation in the Arabian Gulf, has undergone rapid transformation in recent decades due to economic diversification, urban expansion, and increased exposure to global markets. Once defined by traditional architecture that reflected the island's culture, climate, and social norms, Bahrain's built environment now increasingly mirrors international design trends. Glass façades, steel towers, and standardized malls dominate the skyline, replacing wind towers, coral stone houses, and shaded courtyards that once characterized Bahraini settlements. While these modern developments symbolize progress and economic growth, they have also raised concerns about cultural disconnection and the erosion of national identity.

Architecture serves not only as shelter but as a cultural artifact that embodies collective memory, environmental responsiveness, and social structure. The replacement of vernacular architecture with globalized forms threatens to marginalize Bahrain's architectural heritage, particularly for the younger generation. As this demographic becomes increasingly immersed in modern spaces devoid of local references, their emotional connection to place and cultural identity may weaken. This shift poses critical questions about how Bahrain can preserve its unique architectural language while navigating the demands of modernization and globalization.

In this context, this study investigates the multifaceted effects of globalization on Bahrain's architectural identity and to explore strategies that reconcile the need for modernization with the preservation of cultural heritage. By analyzing the transformation of Bahrain's built environment, this research will assess how modern influences have reshaped the architectural landscape and impacted local identity and community cohesion. Furthermore, it seeks to understand the extent to which younger generations feel disconnected from Bahrain's architectural heritage, considering the role of modernization in shaping their perceptions and experiences. Ultimately, this framework aspires to contribute to ongoing discussions on maintaining cultural identity amidst rapid development, proposing recommendations for integrating traditional architectural elements within contemporary frameworks to support a meaningful and responsive design approach.

The aim of this research is to explore how globalization has influenced the erosion of Bahrain's cultural and architectural identity. The specific objectives of the study are as follows.

- To document architectural transformations across representative traditional, modern, and hybrid sites in Bahrain.
- To assess public perception—especially among youth—regarding architectural change and cultural identity.
- To identify strategies for integrating traditional architectural elements into contemporary design frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

The intersection of globalization and local cultural identity is a critical area of study in architecture, particularly in contexts such as Bahrain, where traditional practices face increasing pressures from modernity. Appadurai (1996) posits that globalization reconfigures cultural flows, significantly influencing how communities perceive their heritage and identity. This dynamic results in a dislocation from established norms, as local cultures increasingly adopt global aesthetics at the expense of traditional forms (King, 2004). The implications of this phenomenon are particularly pronounced in urban environments, where the aesthetic and functional aspects of architecture are often dictated by international trends rather than local customs.

Rapoport (1969) emphasizes that architecture serves as a tangible expression of culture, intricately linked to social values, environmental conditions, and symbolic meanings. The replacement of local architectural elements—such as wind towers, courtyards, and coral stone structures—with standardized global designs signifies a profound loss of cultural expression and identity. Hall (1990) further elucidates that cultural identity is not static; it is continuously reshaped through interactions with global influences. In Bahrain, this is evidenced by the gradual erosion of architectural features that once defined the local landscape, replaced by high-rise buildings and Western-style developments that often lack cultural resonance.

In fact, Rapoport (1969) argues that architecture serves as a direct expression of culture, intricately linked to social values, environmental conditions, and symbolic meanings. The replacement of local architectural elements—such as wind towers, courtyards, and coral stone structures—with standardized global designs signifies a profound loss of cultural expression and identity. Hall (1990) introduces the concept of cultural identity as a fluid construct, suggesting that it is rooted in shared historical experiences yet continuously reshaped through interactions with global influences. This perspective is particularly relevant in Bahrain, where architectural heritage acts as a repository of cultural memory. The increasing prevalence of

international styles disrupts this continuity, leading to a sense of disconnection from heritage, especially among younger generations.

Review of Literature

Existing literature documents the growing alienation among younger generations from their cultural heritage, a trend exacerbated by the prevalence of modern architectural forms that offer little connection to traditional practices (Khalaf, 2006). Mahgoub (2007) critiques the uncritical adoption of foreign architectural models, warning that such practices disregard local customs and environmental conditions. This leads to urban environments stripped of their unique identity, fostering a sense of placelessness.

The interplay between globalization and local cultural identity has garnered significant attention in architectural research, particularly in the context of Bahrain. Scholars examine how the rapid dissemination of global architectural styles affects traditional forms and cultural expressions. Appadurai (1996) highlights that globalization reconfigures cultural flows, creating a complex landscape where local identities must navigate the pressures of modernity. This dynamic often results in a dilution of established cultural norms and practices, particularly in urban settings. King (2004) elaborates on this phenomenon, discussing the rise of standardized environments that prioritize economic growth over cultural preservation. He notes that Bahrain, like many Gulf states, has seen an influx of foreign investment, promoting a cosmopolitan lifestyle often at the expense of its architectural heritage. As a result, the skyline becomes increasingly dominated by high-rise buildings and generic designs that lack references to local traditions, raising critical questions about maintaining distinct identity amid such transformations.

Khalaf (2006) explores the sociopolitical consequences of urban renewal in Bahrain, arguing that replacing heritage sites with commercial developments contributes to cultural alienation. He notes that while modernization can bring economic benefits, it often comes at the cost of losing cultural landmarks that foster community identity. Mahgoub (2007) critiques the uncritical adoption of foreign architectural models, warning that such practices ignore local customs and environmental conditions. He argues that the proliferation of glass façades and high-rises transforms the physical landscape and disrupts the symbolic continuity of identity. These insights underscore the importance of integrating traditional elements into modern designs to create urban environments that resonate with local cultural values.

Moreover, AlSayyad (2001) discusses the broader implications of architectural change in Arab cities, noting that modernization often prioritizes economic agendas over cultural preservation. He argues that the architectural identity crisis faced by many Gulf cities results from a failure to reconcile modern needs with traditional practices. This observation is particularly pertinent in Bahrain, where rapid urbanization has led to the erosion of local architectural forms. The emotional and psychological impacts of architectural change on residents are also significant. Studies indicate that individuals experience a sense of loss and disconnection when traditional architectural elements vanish from their surroundings. Khalaf (2006) captures this sentiment, stating that the absence of familiar landmarks can lead to feelings of placelessness among communities, especially among youth who may feel alienated from their cultural heritage.

Recent research points to the importance of community engagement in architectural design. Scholars argue that involving local populations in the planning process can foster a sense of ownership and connection to the built environment. This participatory approach is essential for ensuring that new developments reflect the cultural values and historical context of the community (Mahgoub, 2007). By integrating public input, architects and planners can work towards designs that honor traditional practices while accommodating modern needs.

As can be seen, literature reveals a complex interplay between globalization and local cultural identity, particularly in the context of Bahrain. Scholars highlight the erosion of traditional architectural forms in favor of modern, standardized designs, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that prioritizes cultural preservation alongside economic development. As Bahrain continues to evolve, understanding these dynamics becomes crucial for maintaining its architectural heritage and fostering a sense of belonging among its residents.

Research Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to gather comprehensive insights into the erosion of Bahraini cultural and architectural identity in the face of globalization. The methodology consists of three main phases: site observations, structured questionnaires, and qualitative interviews.

Phase 1: Site Observations

The first phase involved conducting site observations at three distinct locations: Sheikh Isa bin Ali House, Seef District, and Bahrain National Theatre. Each site was visited twice for approximately two hours, ensuring observations were made during periods of human activity and favorable natural lighting.

During these visits, I employed behavioral mapping techniques to record human interactions within these architectural spaces. This included noting seating patterns, circulation routes, and the use of shaded areas. Field notes were meticulously taken to document key architectural elements such as spatial organization, building materials, and cultural motifs. Additionally, I captured visual data through photographs, allowing for a richer analysis of the physical contexts and their relationship to local identity.

Phase 2: Structured Questionnaires

The second phase involved disseminating a structured questionnaire aimed at Bahraini youth aged 18 to 30. This demographic was targeted due to their potential disconnection from traditional architectural forms and cultural heritage. The questionnaire was distributed digitally through platforms such as Google Forms and university networks, ensuring broad accessibility.

The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions, designed to gather quantitative data on respondents' familiarity with traditional Bahraini architecture, their emotional attachment to built-environments, and their perceptions of globalization's impact on cultural identity. Key questions included:

- How familiar are you with traditional Bahraini architecture?
- In your opinion, how important is traditional architecture in expressing Bahraini cultural identity?
- What impact do you think modern/global architecture has had on Bahraini identity?

This format allowed for statistical analysis while also providing qualitative insights through open-ended responses.

Phase 3: Qualitative Interviews

To deepen the understanding gained from the questionnaires, qualitative interviews were conducted with a subset of respondents. These interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to speak freely while also guiding the conversation with specific prompts. This approach facilitated a more in-depth exploration of personal experiences and feelings regarding architectural changes.

Interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, ensuring accurate capture of their responses. Key topics of discussion included:

- Feelings about architectural change in Bahrain over the past two decades.
- Recommendations for architects and urban planners in integrating traditional elements into modern designs.
- Personal connections to specific architectural spaces and the significance of these connections.

The combination of structured and semi-structured interviews provided a nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives while allowing for flexibility in exploring unexpected themes that emerged during the conversations.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, quantitative results from the questionnaires were analyzed using basic statistical tools to identify trends and patterns. Qualitative data from interviews

were subjected to thematic coding, allowing for the identification of key themes and sentiments expressed by participants.

This mixed-methods approach not only enriched the data collected but also ensured a comprehensive understanding of the complex issues surrounding the erosion of cultural and architectural identity in Bahrain. By triangulating findings from site observations, questionnaires, and interviews, the research aims to provide a well-rounded perspective on this critical topic.

Findings and Analysis

Questionnaire Responses

The questionnaires were distributed to Bahraini youth aged 18 to 30, with 54 completed responses received. The demographic breakdown of respondents is as follows:

| Age | Gender | Occupation | Education Level |
|--|-------------------------|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18–21: 20% 22–25: 45% 26–30: 35% | 60% Female, 40% Male | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students: 70% Employed: 20% Others (unemployed/freelance): 10% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High School: 10% Undergraduate: 65% |

Fig. 1: Demographic Distribution

Familiarity with Traditional Bahraini Architecture:

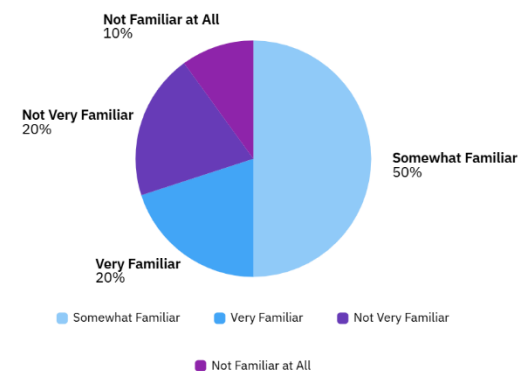


Fig. 2: Familiarity with Traditional Bahraini Architecture
Source: Author

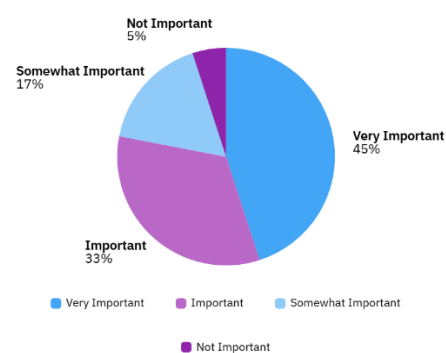


Fig. 3: Importance of Traditional Architecture in Expressing Identity
Source: Author

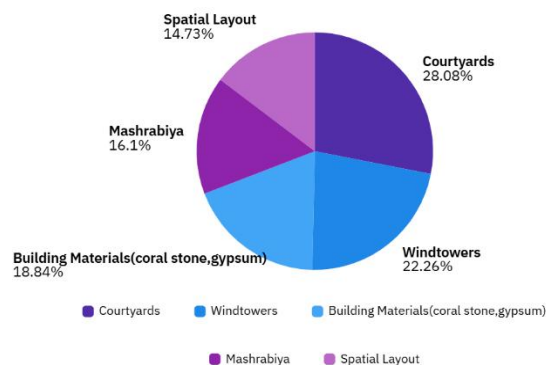


Fig. 4: Most Recognized Traditional Elements
Source: Author

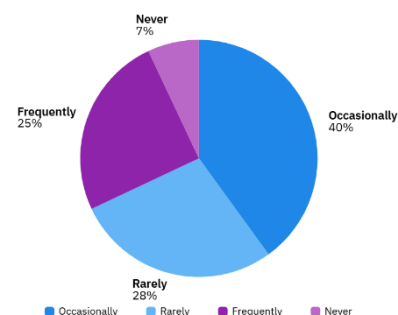


Fig. 5: Frequency of Experiencing
Source: Author

Globalization & Modern Architecture

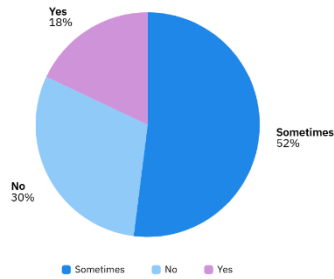


Fig. 6: Do modern buildings reflect Bahraini culture?
Source: Author

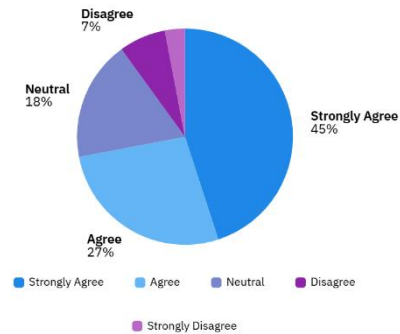


Fig. 7: Should traditional elements be used in new buildings?
Source: Author

Open-Ended Responses (Thematic Summary)

1. Feelings about Architectural Change

Common themes:

- “Too fast-paced”, “loss of soul”, “globalization overshadowing identity”
- Some noted hope in “new designs inspired by heritage”

2. Recommendations for Architects/Planners

- “Design with local climate and culture in mind”
- “Reintroduce courtyards and shading structures”
- “Use native materials”
- “Don’t just copy Western malls and towers”

3. Emotional Connection to Space

Mixed sentiments:

- Some feel disconnected in modern areas: “sterile”, “not for us”
- Others feel proud of hybrid spaces like the National Theatre
- Emotional connections strongest in spaces with family or historical memory

5.2 Qualitative Interview Findings

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 5 participants selected from the questionnaire respondents. The interviews aimed to explore personal experiences and perceptions regarding architectural changes in Bahrain. Each interview lasted approximately 5-10 minutes and was recorded with consent.

• Personal Connections to Architecture

Many participants shared nostalgic memories tied to traditional buildings, such as family gatherings in courtyard houses or community events in historical sites. One respondent stated,

"The wind tower in my grandmother's house was not just an architectural feature; it was a part of my childhood"

Architectural student, UoB, interview on 15.05.2025.

• Concerns About Modernization

Several interviewees expressed concerns about the rapid pace of modernization, fearing that it leads to a loss of cultural heritage. One participant remarked,

"Every time I see another high-rise going up, I feel like we are losing a piece of ourselves"

Architectural student, UoB, interview on 15.05.2025.

- **Desire for Integration**

A recurring theme was the desire for architects and planners to integrate traditional elements into modern designs. Participants suggested that this could create a unique architectural identity that respects the past while embracing the future.

"We need buildings that tell our story, not just structures that look good on Instagram"

Family Member, interview on 17.05.2025.

- **Community Engagement**

Many respondents emphasized the importance of community involvement in architectural decisions. They believed that local voices should be heard in planning processes to ensure that developments reflect cultural values. One interviewee stated,

"If we want to preserve our identity, we must be part of the conversation"

Architectural student, UoB, interview on 15.05.2025).

Site Observations

Site observations were conducted at three key locations: Sheikh Isa bin Ali House, Seef District, and Bahrain National Theatre. Observations focused on human interactions, architectural features, and the overall ambiance of each site.

A. Sheikh Isa bin Ali House – Traditional Architecture (Muharraq)

Architectural Elements Observed:

- Distinct wind towers (badgirs) for natural ventilation.
- Courtyards with shaded zones, promoting communal gathering.
- Coral stone walls with gypsum plaster, authentic to local tradition.
- Mashrabiya wooden screens used for privacy and airflow.
- Clearly defined public and private zones, with gendered spatial segregation.

Behavioral Mapping:

- Visitors engaged in slow-paced, reflective exploration.
- Many sat or gathered in shaded spaces, indicating a natural comfort in layout.
- Cultural identity was visibly maintained through restored features and storytelling signage.

Cultural Indicators:

- Spatial patterns emphasized privacy, climate adaptability, and social interaction, highlighting the essence of Bahraini traditional life.



Fig. 8: Sheikh Isa Bin Ali House
Source: Author



Fig. 9: Sheikh Isa Bin Ali House, Details
Source: Author

B. Seef District – Modern Commercial Development

Architectural Elements Observed:

- Predominance of glass curtain walls, steel structures, and imported materials.
- Absence of traditional elements such as wind towers or inner courtyards.
- Use of unified, international style design with minimal cultural reference.
- Commercial typologies (malls, towers) dominate the skyline.

Behavioral Mapping:

- Fast-moving pedestrian flows; emphasis on shopping and consumption.
- Minimal public seating or gathering spaces, limiting community engagement.
- Heat exposure due to lack of shading or climate-responsive design.

Cultural Indicators:

- Little to no visible integration of Bahraini identity.
- Users interacted with the space transactionally, not socially or culturally.



Fig. 10: Amfa Tower 3, Seef District
Source: Author

C. Bahrain National Theatre – Hybrid Architecture

Architectural Elements Observed:

- Modern materials (glass, steel) blended with local references.
- Use of geometry inspired by Islamic patterns in internal features.
- Water feature and open plaza reminiscent of traditional public spaces.
- Wooden ceiling structure nods to historic dhow boat construction.

Behavioral Mapping:

- Users lingered in and around the building, especially during cultural events.
- Mixed demographic engagement—both locals and tourists.
- Spaces encouraged reflection, interaction, and cultural expression.

Cultural Indicators:

- Balanced architectural narrative—not purely traditional nor fully globalized.
- Users reported a stronger sense of cultural connection in informal interviews.



Fig. 11: Bahrain Theatre
Source: Frame Magazine

Discussion

The findings from the research on the erosion of Bahraini cultural and architectural identity reveal several critical insights based on the data collected from the questionnaires, qualitative interviews, site observations, and visual analysis. These insights underscore the complexities faced by the Bahraini society in balancing modernization with the preservation of its rich cultural heritage.

A significant awareness of traditional Bahraini architecture exists among the youth, as indicated by the questionnaires. Approximately 68% of respondents reported familiarity with architectural elements such as wind towers and courtyard houses. This familiarity suggests that traditional architecture is recognized as an essential part of cultural heritage. However, only 20% identified as "very familiar," highlighting a gap in deeper engagement with these structures. This finding indicates a need for educational initiatives aimed at enhancing understanding and appreciation of Bahrain's architectural history. Such initiatives could foster a stronger connection between the youth and their cultural heritage, ultimately encouraging preservation efforts.

The research reveals that traditional architecture plays a crucial role in expressing Bahraini cultural identity, with 84% of respondents affirming its importance. Qualitative interviews further emphasize this connection, as participants shared personal stories and memories tied to traditional buildings. These emotional ties underscore the significance of preserving such architecture beyond aesthetic considerations; it is integral to community memory and identity. Respondents articulated a strong sense of loss regarding the encroachment of modern developments, with 76% expressing concerns that globalization threatens to overshadow traditional values and heritage. This sentiment reflects a broader anxiety about cultural erosion in the face of rapid modernization. The juxtaposition of modern structures against historical sites in site observations illustrates this concern, as many participants noted a sense of detachment from the modern urban landscape, which often feels devoid of cultural depth.

Conclusions

This paper deals the complexity of modernity and tradition in the pursuit of a future of Bahrain. It examined the erosion of cultural and architectural identity of Bahrain in the face of globalization. Findings are clear. A recurring theme in this research is the desire for architects and planners to integrate traditional elements into modern designs. Most of the respondents of a survey among the youth expressed a vision for architecture that respects historical context while addressing contemporary needs. This desire reflects an understanding that modernity does not necessitate the abandonment of cultural heritage.

In fact, the overwhelming call of the community for architecture that "tells our story" signifies a proactive approach to urban development, advocating for solutions that honor the rich history of Bahrain while accommodating modern lifestyles. Moreover, the findings highlight the necessity of community involvement in architectural planning and decision-making. Many respondents emphasized that local voices should be integral to discussions about development projects. This engagement can help strike a balance between growth and preservation of heritage. A community-oriented perspective is crucial for ensuring that development reflects the cultural values and aspirations of the Bahraini society.

The research reveals the complexities surrounding the preservation of Bahraini cultural and architectural identity in an era of globalization. There is a clear awareness and appreciation for traditional architecture among the youth, accompanied by a strong desire to see these elements integrated into modern developments. The findings advocate for a collaborative approach to urban planning that prioritizes cultural heritage, ensuring that Bahrain's architectural legacy is preserved and celebrated amidst rapid modernization. This balance will be key to maintaining the cultural identity that is central to the community's sense of belonging and history.

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Conflict of Interest: The author declares that the implementation of this study does not involve any conflict of interest.

Ethical Practice: The author declares that this research has been conducted employing accepted ethical research practices and does not violate the rights of any social group, a person or animals. The data was generated with a full understanding and agreement of the respondents, and owners of the case studies.

Availability of Data: The author declares that the data used in this study are available for verification upon request.

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