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RECONSTRUCTING MEANING: THE INTERPRETIVE TURN IN DOCUMENTING HERITAGE THROUGH ARCHITECTURAL LENS

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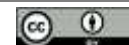
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Abstract

The paper explores the significance of interpretive documentation via architectural lens in documentation of heritage. It critiques how conventional documentation just emphasises physical form, and aesthetics of built heritage while overlooking the cultural, ideological, symbolic meanings embedded within structures. Research argues that Architectural structures are not just physical entities but are in fact complex mediums through which societies express their purpose, identities, belief systems and historic memories. This paper also highlights how uncovering hidden meanings within architectural structures can shift our usual perceptions and deepen our understanding of them. It argues that architectural structures carry cultural, political, and ideological narratives that go beyond their physical form and aesthetic appeal. Conventional documentation often misses these points. By using interpretive approaches and methods



we can uncover hidden stories, local traditions and myths that can give life to architectural elements. Furthermore, the paper highlights the transformative role of digital, which, when combined with interpretive methods, enhances accuracy, accessibility, and engagement. Together, these approaches propose a new framework for heritage documentation, one that values not only the visible aspects of buildings but also the intangible memories, beliefs, and identities they embody.

Keywords: Interpretive Documentation, Architectural Heritage, Symbolism in Architecture, Community Narratives, Digital technologies

Introduction:

Beyond the Surface: Redefining Heritage Documentation:

Architectural heritage is normally perceived as collection of antique structures or material remains. It is a powerful reflection of political, cultural, ideological beliefs and practices that shaped ancient civilizations. Architectural elements such as decorations on facades, carvings, glass, arches, columns and much more are normally perceived as aesthetic choices, but originally all elements that collectively built structures are manifestation of political, cultural, religious and personal ideologies. These factors when taken together in order to understand the sensitivity of structures provides great insights (Carmela Cucuzzella, 2022). These structures hold emotional strength, ancestral memories and sometimes legacies. These structures connect people with their histories, cultures and communities. They work as Genius Loci reminds us about our origins, preserving our stories and traditions alive, helping generations stay connected through a shared narrative that embraces sacrifices, wars, and governance (Smith, 2006). Some people connect themselves spiritually while others connect emotionally to different heritage sites. Heritage is considered as such a powerful entity that it stir emotions where people feel a sense of belonging, identity, connectivity and continuity with the past (Bareither, 2021). The conservation and detailed documentation (visible and invisible) of these sites play an important role in safeguarding cultural identity which ensures the continuity of traditions, beliefs and memory across generations. Heritage holds educational value, which can act as open air classrooms offering lessons related to designs, culture and histories. Conserved and well documented heritage sites can boost sustainable tourism which can generate income, employment and investment in local communities (UNESCO, 2017). In the present world, heritage can be documented more reasonably and accurately by using modern digital tools such as GIS, photogrammetry, 3d, and mobile devices. This research plays an important role in drawing a line between conventional heritage and interpretive documentation and its importance in the coming time (Remondino, 2011).

Literature Review:

1. Architecture as Cultural and Ideological Expression

Architectural heritage is sometimes perceived as old buildings but in real these old structures hold great stories. These structures, when observed closely tell us how societies evolved over time expressing their values and beliefs. Paul Ricoeur in his book “Memory, History, Forgetting” stated that architecture is not individual it is in fact a form of “collective memory” which meant that memories are shaped by social groups, traditions and arts. We remember what our ancestors choose to remember. Monuments and Heritage structures play an important role in expressing collective memories because the designs of these structures hold shared narratives, values and identities of the communities that built them. These heritage structures being neglected and left undocumented can detach people from their origin weakening their sense of identity leading to a rupture in cultural continuity (Ricoeur, 2004). Architects and archeologists believe that not just the big structures but the small ones also hold great importance for communities because they feel sense of association to such structures (Robert Layton, 2006). Harrison in his book “*Heritage Critical Approaches*” (Harrison, 2013) argues that heritage is not merely about physical structures, but about the living culture that surrounds and interacts with them. These heritage buildings hold such significance that societies and cultures have been reinterpreted with additions and subtractions, shaping and reshaping contemporary values.

2. Limitations of Conventional Documentation:

Conventional documentation which focuses on physical description and historical data priorities tangible aspects such as form, material and chronology. These records though are essential, but they often miss intangible layers embedded within the structures which include cultural symbolism, socio-political meanings and lived experiences. This often risks the heritage in losing its original purpose known as “crisis of representation” where meaning is just confined to visible and measurable (Ricoeur, 1976). Interpretive documentation seeks to uncover deeper meaning through critical, reflective approach where architecture is perceived as not just a physical object of preservation but a medium of cultural storytelling. To uncover deeper meanings, a more holistic form of documentation can be achieved, by critically exploring both tangible and intangible narratives through alternative approaches (Jokilehto, 2002).

3. The Interpretive Turn - A Dual Approach:

Heritage documentation is not just limited to record physical structures, it also uncovers the symbolic cultural and ideological meaning embedded within the structures. Elements, materials, ornamentation, planning styles, building heights, spaces and techniques carry cultural, religious or political significance which reflect values of a certain era or society. Interpretation of these help in identifying the purpose and underlying idea of the design (Dubin, 2009).

Interpretive process plays a key role in achieving a deeper understanding where going beyond surface level is necessary to analyse how built forms express identities, beliefs, and collective memory. The approach plays a very major role especially in the areas where records of heritage go missing or never

created (Blake, 2023). Digital technologies such as Photogrammetry, GIS, 3D modeling, and laser scanning have also become vital in such cases. The technologies not only aid preservation but also helps interpretative process in reconstructing lost and visualization of them that help in finding cultural memory and historical narratives along with ideological and socio-political influences (Boussaa, 2017). Interpretive documentation used with digital tools provides a more holistic method of documentation of Architectural Heritage which makes sure that both tangible and intangible dimensions are taken and studied alternatively.

4. Digital Tools in Service of Interpretation (Tool for Preservation and Cultural Continuity):

Interpretive documentation plays a very crucial role in decoding the symbolism. Symbolism is comprised of emotions and cultural meanings that are embedded within the structures. This interpretation can be done along with technical recordings of heritage structures. This dual approach is necessary in order to document these neglected sites because significance does-not only lies in material or design but the community memory and cultural narratives give meaning to these neglected sites (Macdonald, 2013). Technologies like 3d modelling, GIS, laser scanning, and Photogrammetry can offer accurate visual records but the value of these gets enhanced when paired with cultural interpretation such as, understanding traditions, spatial usage and ornamentation along with symbolic motifs and elements. Without this the documentation is just a bundle of visual models that has no heritage essence (Winter, 2012). Interpretive documentation not just preserves the physical fabric of heritage but also cultural meaning, memories and architectural symbolic meanings connected to them (Champion, 2015).

5. Emotional and Community Attachment to Heritage:

Architectural heritage for local community is not just important for its form and design but the emotional resonance that they feel from these structures give them a sense of cultural pride which make them feel a sense of belonging (Nasim Abedi Dadizadeh, 2024). People's emotions are connected to these sites via autobiographical memories, especially in the environments where multiple generations have lived their lives. An example can be taken of a house which is called a generational house where multiple generations of family have lived over time. Such kind of houses do not hold any architectural significance but a symbol of familial continuity and memory (Knez, 2014). Emotions like Nostalgia, pride and even grief sometimes become embedded with heritage transforming them into symbols of collective belonging. These studies indicate that deteriorating heritage still possesses significant emotional meaning for communities. These meanings are invisible in conventional heritage documentation therefore understanding and documenting these emotional connections is important for authentic conservation (Bareither, 2021).

6. Participatory and Co-Design Methods in Heritage Interpretation:

Cultural narratives can be better understood by actively engaging with local communities. To this end, participatory methods, oral history collection, and co-design approaches are being used to connect with people and explore the symbolism behind structures, as well as their intended purposes and reasons for construction. Structures can be seen as bodies, while the narratives and emotions associated with them

serve as their souls—without which the body remains incomplete. Involving communities has the potential to uncover not only symbolic meanings but also hidden stories embedded within these sites. When structures are preserved by authorities they find many underlying gems which work as reasons for further research (Schofield, 2014).

A combined approach, integrating digital technologies with cultural interpretation, could provide a more holistic documentation of heritage, as technical recording alone may lose authenticity; each detail carries a story that gives it meaning (Addison, 2007).

Case studies:

1. Interpreting Heritage: From Conventional Documentation to Multidimensional Understanding

Traditional documentation of heritage has often focused narrowly on the physical form of monuments, overlooking the deeper narratives embedded within them. A pertinent example is the case of the deteriorated “Machki Fort,” which was recorded in a conventional manner by Baig (Baig, 2021). While its structural details were noted in several books and government reports, the documentation lacked interpretive depth—the fort’s meanings, functions, and symbolic associations were never explored. The limited and fragmented data available made it difficult to uncover the stories, cultural purposes, and historical layers within the site. However, collaborative engagement with local communities, along with temporal mapping and comparative analysis of neighboring forts, provided valuable insights. This co-design process helped clarify myths, traditions, and oral histories associated with the fort, giving context to its architectural form. Further, research by Farid and Saeed (Farid & Saeed, 2025) employed a comparative framework, analysing Machki Fort alongside contemporaneous regional forts such as Jamgarh, Rukanpur, Mirgarh, and Derawar. Their study traced architectural evolution and construction practices shaped by socio-political, cultural, and ideological influences, revealing that meaningful heritage documentation must integrate both material evidence and interpretive understanding. Through this approach, Machki Fort’s architecture is situated within broader historical and cultural frameworks, illustrating how built forms reflect the interplay between functionality, identity, and social context.

Similarly, the case study of the Qutb Shahi Tombs (Fatima Farid, Ghousia Saeed, & Rehman, 2022) demonstrates how heritage can be interpreted through multiple perspectives by analysing the architectural elements that embody political ambition, cultural exchange, religious identity, and social practices, all of which evolved over time. Each feature carries layered influences, though the ones emphasized are those the architect intended to highlight, with the authors tracing transformations from simple to more elaborate structures and linking changes in domes, arches, ornamentation, and materials to shifting dynastic power, artisan migrations, ideological preferences, and local traditions. They uncover hidden influences by examining the travel histories of Qutb Shahi rulers and artisans, while also analysing key features such as the lotus-petal base beneath the dome, the arched parapet, and the niched façade in terms of origin and purpose. By highlighting the hybridity of Persian, Hindu, and Deccani styles fused into a single vocabulary, the authors argue that these design elements were not merely aesthetic but part of a deliberate negotiation of authority and identity. The paper convincingly shows

how architecture functions as a historical text reflecting politics and culture. Nevertheless, it positions the Qutb Shahi Tombs as living heritage, whose evolving forms continue to reveal how ideas, power, and society inscribe themselves into built space. Figures 2-3, from the above-mentioned article, show architectural elements dictating personal ideologies.



Figure 1: Machki fort and its silent legacy in the Cholistan desert



Figures 2- 3: Elements speaking histories - case study of Qutb shahi tombs

2. Interpretive documentation using Digital Tools:

In the case study of the Gordon Wilson Flats (Rushton, Rogers, Silcock, & Schnabel, 2018), demonstrates how digital tools can expand heritage interpretation by combining tangible and intangible sources within immersive environments. The researchers used laser scanning, photogrammetry, archival drawings, and photographs to digitally reconstruct the flats in different states—original, in use, and decayed—while also incorporating oral histories and public memories to capture social meaning. These reconstructions were then experienced through platforms such as Hyve3D, which allowed collaborative group exploration, and HTC Vive, which provided fully immersive, individual interaction. By enabling users to virtually inhabit the past and present of the building, the study shows how digital technologies

preserve both material details and lived experiences, opening heritage to multiple interpretations while also provoking questions of authenticity, memory, and the politics of preservation. The combination of physical attributes and symbolic attributes made the interpretative documentation deeper and meaningful.

The research (Brown, Knight, & Saeed, 2009) explores how mobile technologies can enhance the interpretation and accessibility of heritage by delivering layered, location-specific information directly to visitors as they move through a site. Using tools such as GPS-enabled guides, 3D models, QR codes, and RFID technology, the study shows how digital devices can provide not only historical facts but also images, reconstructions, audio narratives, and interactive maps, allowing visitors to experience both the tangible setting and its intangible histories in real time. From a heritage perspective, these tools transform static monuments into dynamic learning environments, making interpretation more personalized, context-sensitive, and engaging, while also highlighting challenges of accuracy, usability, and balancing digital mediation with direct physical experience of the site.

4. Interpretation process impacted by Cultural Narratives:

The work (La Frenierre, 2008) shows the importance and impact of people's participation while documentation and preservation of heritage sites. It demonstrates how interpretation gets enriched when participatory practices are integrated while documentation. Research further highlights heritage mapping as a collaborative process that actively engages local communities in identifying and documenting cultural assets. Moving beyond expert-driven inventories, the method brings together residents, stakeholders, and heritage professionals to co-create maps that integrate both tangible features—such as monuments, buildings, and landscapes—and intangible dimensions, including traditions, memories, and symbolic associations. Conducted through workshops, seminars, and participatory activities, the approach fosters openness and encourages community members to share personal narratives and lived experiences tied to heritage sites. This participatory practice not only enriches interpretation and ensures that marginalized voices are included, but also strengthens cultural ownership, continuity, and sustainable management. This combination of local knowledge with spatial mapping helped the researchers in resulting strong interpretive documentation, which allowed cultural stories to be included in geographical record forming enabling a more holistic understanding of the heritage.

Conclusion

Conventional documentation often confines heritage to its physical form, overlooking the ideological, cultural, and emotional meanings embedded within structures. In contrast, interpretive documentation engages with both tangible and intangible dimensions, uncovering stories, beliefs, identities, memories, and cultural narratives that are essential for understanding the full significance of a heritage site. The integration of digital technologies in preservation and interpretation further enriches this process, ensuring that heritage is captured with greater depth, accuracy, and accessibility.

The case studies of Machki Fort and the Qutb Shahi Tombs discussed above demonstrate that architecture, often perceived merely as aesthetic form, is in fact a material expression of political ideologies, cultural values, community narratives, and lived experiences. These structures are not static monuments, but repositories of layered histories conveyed through their architectural elements. Rushton et al. (2018) show that digital tools such as laser scanning and photogrammetry, while ensuring physical accuracy, become truly effective when integrated with interpretive documentation, enabling preservation of both tangible and intangible dimensions—the soul of heritage as well as its form. Similarly, Brown and Knight et al. (2009) reveal how digital mobile technologies enhance interpretation by delivering layered, site-specific information to visitors, expanding accessibility and engagement. La Frenierre (2008) further underscores the critical role of participatory mapping and community storytelling in capturing intangible narratives, ensuring that documentation reflects emotional, symbolic, and historical dimensions alongside physical features. Collectively, these studies affirm that heritage is best understood and preserved through a synthesis of aesthetic, political, cultural, technological, and participatory perspectives, resulting in a more holistic and inclusive representation of the past.

Declaration

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT 5.0 to support the writing process, specifically to enhance the readability and language of the manuscript. Following its use, the authors thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as necessary and assume full responsibility for the final version of the published article.

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