

Welfare vs. Memory: Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Cultural Heritage Loss in Urban Recovery.

Abstract. During post-war reconstruction and urban renewal driven by welfare policies, contradictions in cultural heritage conservation persist as a critical concern. This study addresses the central question: How do post-conflict welfare policies contribute to cultural heritage loss, and what role do political ideologies and economic systems play in mediating this process? Using a qualitative multi-case study approach, this research triangulates archival data, interviews, and field observations across six cities—Jerusalem, Gaza, Nablus, Berlin, Beirut, and Baghdad—to examine how post-conflict welfare policies contribute to cultural heritage erosion. Key findings reveal that neoliberal commodification (Beirut) and territorial domination (Jerusalem) erase cultural memory, while grassroots agency (Nablus) and hybrid models (Berlin) reconcile heritage with recovery. The study underscores that heritage preservation succeeds only when aligned with institutional or grassroots priorities, as seen in Nablus' community-led restoration efforts supported by NGOs. In contrast, neoliberal frameworks (Beirut) and authoritarian governance (Jerusalem) accelerate heritage loss, while hybrid models like Berlin's critical reconstruction offer partial reconciliation. Institutional fragility, as observed in Gaza and Baghdad, exacerbates heritage destruction even amid international intervention. The study concludes that heritage conservation must be reframed as a core pillar of post-conflict welfare, demanding policies that integrate grassroots agency, enforce legal safeguards, and resist ideological or profit-driven exploitation. By juxtaposing contexts of occupation, neoliberalism, and institutional collapse, this work advances a global framework for balancing urgent reconstruction with the preservation of cultural memory.

Keywords. Post-conflict reconstruction, Cultural heritage preservation, Neoliberal urbanism, Urbicide, Community-led rehabilitation

Introduction

War-stricken cities face immense pressure to rebuild infrastructure for displaced populations, yet reconstruction often accelerates cultural heritage loss—a paradox this study interrogates. Existing debates bifurcate into critiques of urbicide (Coward, 2008) and neoliberal urbanism (Zukin, 2009), overlooking how institutional fragility and welfare imperatives intersect. Drawing on Laurajane Smith's (2006) concept of heritage-as-process, this paper reframes welfare as a psychosocial asset, where preserving cultural memory sustains collective resilience. Through cross-regional analysis of occupation (Jerusalem), neoliberalism (Beirut), and grassroots resistance (Nablus), we argue that heritage conservation must be central—not ancillary—to post-conflict recovery.

Institutional fragility—manifested in weak governance, fragmented laws, and inadequate enforcement—leaves heritage vulnerable to neglect or exploitation, as seen in Gaza's unregulated urban sprawl and Baghdad's laissez-faire redevelopment (Al-Harithy, 2021).

Conversely, profit-driven economic agendas, exemplified by Beirut's neoliberal privatization and Jerusalem's politically motivated erasure, prioritize short-term gains over long-term cultural sustainability (Zukin, 2009). These dual forces, operating across diverse geopolitical contexts, perpetuate a paradox: reconstruction efforts aimed at societal healing often inadvertently erase the very heritage that anchors collective resilience.

This article examines how institutional and economic drivers shape post-conflict heritage outcomes through a comparative analysis of six cities: Jerusalem, Gaza, and Nablus (Palestine); Berlin (Germany); Beirut (Lebanon); and Baghdad (Iraq). Three core arguments guide the analysis:

1. Weak institutions accelerate heritage loss by failing to balance welfare needs with preservation mandates.
2. Neoliberal or ideologically motivated economic policies commodify or weaponize heritage, displacing communities.
3. Hybrid models integrating grassroots agency and regulated markets offer pathways to reconcile these tensions.

The paper is structured as follows: First, the methodology outlines the qualitative, multi-case study approach. Subsequent sections analyze case studies from Palestine, Berlin, Beirut, and Baghdad, highlighting institutional and economic drivers of heritage loss. A discussion synthesizes findings into actionable policy frameworks, and a conclusion advocates for redefining welfare to include heritage as a pillar of post-conflict recovery. By foregrounding institutional capacity and economic priorities, this work advances a global dialogue on sustainable reconstruction—one that prioritizes cultural memory as integral to rebuilding societies, not merely their infrastructure.

Research objectives

This study aims to:

1. Document the mechanisms through which institutional fragility (e.g., Gaza's unregulated sprawl) and neoliberal commodification (e.g., Beirut's privatization) accelerate heritage loss during welfare-driven reconstruction.
2. Analyze how political ideologies—occupation (Jerusalem) versus neoliberalism (Beirut)—mediate tensions between heritage preservation and socio-economic development.
3. Propose a hybrid policy framework that integrates grassroots agency (Nablus) and regulated markets (Berlin) to align urgent reconstruction with cultural memory preservation

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative multi-case design, selecting six cities to represent distinct geopolitical and economic contexts: occupation (Jerusalem, Nablus), neoliberal privatization (Beirut), laissez-faire governance (Baghdad), ideological division (Berlin), and institutional collapse (Gaza). Data were triangulated through archival analysis, semi-structured interviews with 12 local stakeholders (e.g., Palestinian NGO workers, Beirut activists), and field observations. In inaccessible zones like Gaza, satellite imagery (UNOSAT) and peer-reviewed studies by regional scholars (e.g., (Al-Harithy, 2021)) offset fieldwork limitations. Reflexivity was prioritized by cross-verifying findings with local voices and minimizing reliance on state-curated archives.

1. Literature Review: Firstly, a review of academic literature, policy papers, and reports from organizations like UNESCO, ICOMOS, and the World Bank was carried out to gather theoretical insights and factual data on post-conflict reconstruction and heritage preservation. This process included examining heritage conservation charters/guidelines (e.g., UNESCO's 2011 Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscapes) and scholarly works on each case study city.
2. Case Study Selection: The primary case study is Palestine (Jerusalem, Gaza, Nablus) due to its prolonged conflict history and acute heritage risks. The secondary cases—Berlin, Beirut, and Baghdad—were selected to represent divergent geopolitical contexts: post-WWII socialist/capitalist division (Berlin), neoliberal post-civil war reconstruction (Beirut), and post-invasion laissez-faire development (Baghdad).
3. Data Collection: Data were gathered through:
 - Archival Research: Historical records, urban plans, and NGO reports (e.g., Riwaq's restoration projects in Nablus, Solidere's master plans in Beirut).
 - Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted remotely with 12 professionals, including urban planners, heritage experts, and NGO staff in Palestine and Lebanon (2022–2023). Interviews focused on decision-making processes, challenges in balancing welfare and heritage, and community responses.
 - Field Observations: Site visits to Berlin and Nablus (2019–2022) to document architectural changes and community engagement in heritage sites. In inaccessible conflict zones (e.g., Gaza), satellite imagery (UNOSAT) and verified secondary sources (e.g., UNESCO damage assessments) were used.
4. Data Coding and Analysis: Data coding followed Bazeley's (2013) three-stage process:
 - Open Coding: Interview transcripts and field notes were tagged with emergent themes (e.g., 'urbicide,' 'neoliberal façadism').
 - Axial Coding: Themes were grouped into categories (e.g., 'Drivers of Loss': political, economic, institutional).
 - Selective Coding: Core categories were refined into a narrative linking welfare policies to heritage outcomes (e.g., 'grassroots resilience').

*To mitigate bias, secondary sources from conflict zones (e.g., Gaza) were cross-verified with satellite imagery (UNOSAT) and peer-reviewed studies by regional scholars (e.g., (Al-Harithy, 2021)).
5. Ethical Considerations: To mitigate bias from secondary sources (e.g., government reports in conflict zones):
 - Triangulation: Cross-verified data across NGOs, academic studies, and satellite imagery.
 - Reflexivity: Acknowledged the researchers' positionality as non-local scholars by prioritizing local voices in interviews and citing Palestinian/ Iraqi authors.

Core Case Study – Palestine: Welfare, Reconstruction, and Heritage in Conflict

Palestine provides a stark example of the potential for welfare-driven planning and reconstruction in a situation of long-term conflict to affect cultural heritage. The area boasts a dense fabric of archaeological and architectural heritage dating back thousands of years, yet its

ancient cities and archaeological sites have endured successive waves of destruction due to conflict, occupation, and uncontrolled development (UNESCO, 2016). The threats to heritage conservation in Palestinian cities are interwoven with political domination and the human needs of a displaced and increasing population.

Jerusalem – Demolition of the Mughrabi Quarter (Moroccan Quarter)

A very vivid example is the demolition of Jerusalem's Mughrabi Quarter. It was an old neighborhood close to the Western Wall, founded in the 12th century by Saladin as a waqf (endowment) for Muslim pilgrims from North Africa (Pullan et al., 2013). The quarter remained untouched for centuries by different rulers and developed into a close-knit community with several religious locations. In June 1967, right after the Six-Day War, Israel took control of East Jerusalem and the Old City (Oren, 2017). In the interest of creating a large plaza for Western Wall pilgrims (a welfare-driven goal for one religious group), Israeli authorities forcibly removed the residents of the Mughrabi Quarter and bulldozed the neighborhood within hours, literally overnight. Some 135 houses, two mosques, and other historic structures were torn down, removing an 800-year-old urban pattern from the face of the earth (Mayes, 2020).



Figure 1. Demolition of the Mughrabi Quarter

This action, taken without public debate, was the epitome of how post-war reconstruction can equal acts of deliberate cultural erasure (Coward, 2008). The new plaza served religious and touristic needs, but at the cost of an entire quarter of Jerusalem's multicultural heritage. Tourists to the Western Wall today gaze out upon a broad stone-paved plaza with no sign of the vibrant quarter that existed. The sole remaining trace is the title "Mughrabi Gate" for one of the entrances of Haram al-Sharif, and archaeological ruins buried underneath – now also endangered by infrastructure projects (Lixinski & Zhu, 2024). The case of Mughrabi Quarter illustrates how rebuilding under occupation got intertwined with political agenda (Judaization of Jerusalem's Old City), termed by Pullan et al. (2013) and discourse of public benefit (enhancing

access and safety for Jewish pilgrims). It is a cautionary tale of a city's heritage being lost in the rush to reconstruct urban space in the post-war period.

Gaza – Repeated Destruction and Neglect

In Gaza, blockade-induced poverty and unregulated urban sprawl have eroded Ottoman-era architecture, with UNESCO identifying 22 heritage sites as damaged or destroyed in 2024 (Christofoletti, 2024). While humanitarian crises understandably prioritize housing, the absence of enforceable heritage laws allows speculative high-rises to encroach on archaeological sites. Limited data accessibility—reliance on satellite imagery and NGO reports—constrains granular analysis. Future studies could partner with local NGOs to document oral histories or employ 3D scanning for inaccessible sites, as seen in UNESCO’s Mosul initiatives.



Figure 2. Destruction of heritage in the current war against Gaza

Reconstruction in Gaza, led by international donors and a local authority hindered by blockade conditions, has struggled to prioritize heritage (Hassoun et al., 2025). Quite understandably, precedence is being given to the reconstruction of homes, schools, and hospitals for the besieged population. This has the consequence that heritage preservation is occasionally shelved or treated as a luxury, and damaged historic buildings are hurried along for demolition for safety reasons or replaced by new building with little documentation. Further, the necessity to accommodate a fast-growing population (more than 70% of the population of Gaza are refugees) has caused urban sprawl and increased density in Gaza's cities (Hassoun et al., 2025). In the absence of stringent planning legislation, modern concrete high-rise apartments have replaced traditional houses, encroaching on archaeological sites (UNESCO, 2016).

The welfare imperative – to improve living conditions in crowded, war-damaged neighborhoods – thus unintentionally contributes to the gradual loss of Gaza’s cultural landscape. Nonetheless, there are local efforts, often supported by NGOs, to protect key sites: for example, restoration

projects for the Great Omari Mosque and certain Ottoman-period homes were undertaken in times of relative calm (Teller et al., 2024). Gaza's situation encapsulates the dilemma of reconstruction under ongoing conflict: how to balance life-saving, forward-looking development with the preservation of a fragile, historically significant urban heritage.

Nablus – Coordinating Heritage Conservation with Community Needs:

Nablus, the West Bank's urban capital, is a case where both heritage conservation needs and post-war rehabilitation have been advanced side by side, though under immense pressure. The Old City of Nablus comprises a complex network of historic bazaars, religious sites, and caravanserais with some structures dating back to the Roman and Ottoman periods. In the Israeli military offensives of 2002 (during the Second Intifada period), Nablus's historic center was heavily shelled and under siege for a long time (Alraouf et al., 2025). Over 1,000 buildings in the Old City were targeted by missiles and shelling and destroyed or damaged, among them historic houses and parts of the famous Khan al-Wakalah caravanserai (Echarri & Brebbia, 2018).

This destruction was part of what analysts called an urbicidal campaign against Palestinian cities—amounting to an attack not just on human life but on cultural heritage. When the fighting subsided, Nablus faced the task of rebuilding a thriving old city for its 150,000 inhabitants (Shehadeh & Johnson, 2025). Local authorities and planners, aided by UNESCO, the EU, and such institutions as Riwaq (a Palestinian heritage non-governmental organization), prepared a master plan for the Old City with a preservation agenda (Salameh et al., 2022). The rehabilitation strategy was to balance between saving history and meeting people's needs of modern life. This involved the restoration of historic structures for conversion to residential use, the updating of infrastructure (water, sewage, roads) in manners respectful of the built environment, and the encouragement of resident retention as opposed to their displacement to modern suburban developments.

Practical steps included stabilizing unsafe historic structures, restoring the medieval clock tower, converting outdated Ottoman mansions into community centers and guesthouses, and upgrading living conditions in traditional hosh (courtyard housing clusters) for dozens of low-income families (Bleibleh & Awad, 2020). Despite limited resources and the difficulties of military occupation, Nablus's approach has been hailed as a model of excellence in post-conflict urban reconstruction. It acknowledges that cultural heritage can serve as a catalyst for social rehabilitation and economic revival, rather than an obstacle (Winter, 2014). Far from perfect – as some historic structures inevitably did disappear and not all restoration work was up to international standards – the Nablus case shows that welfare aspirations (better housing, services, and security) and heritage preservation can peacefully coexist. Strong local institutions (Nablus Restoration Committee and the municipality), international technical aid, and local participation coincided to conserve much of the character of the city during its reconstruction (Saleh, 2025).

Nablus is different from other Palestinian locations where heritage has fared worse; for example, in Jerusalem and Hebron, politically driven planning has often overshadowed conservation. Collectively, the Palestinian examples illustrate a spectrum: from outright heritage erasure for the sake of new development (in the case of Jerusalem's Mughrabi Quarter), to incidental loss through neglect amidst humanitarian crises (Gaza), to coordinated efforts towards holistic reconstruction (Nablus). These cases set the stage for juxtaposing the ways in

which other cities – with different political and planning regimes – have tackled the welfare vs. heritage challenge in post-conflict reconstruction.



Figure 3. Nablus old city after restoration

Berlin, Germany: Modernist Reconstruction and Ideological Erasure

The rebuilding of Berlin following World War II serves as an archetype of the ways in which wholesale devastation, allied to political division, shaped urban planning choices that reshaped the city's legacy. Berlin in 1945 faced widespread devastation: an estimated 300,000 apartment buildings lay in ruins, and in the central downtown areas such as Mitte, nearly 90% of the buildings lay in rubble (Clapson, 2019). In the immediate post-war years, the priority was for housing and re-establishing city services for a shattered population. There was a huge demand for housing in both East and West Berlin governments, and temporary solutions occasionally took precedence over preservation.

Many war-damaged historically significant buildings that might have been restored were cleared instead for safety or ideological reasons. For example, in East Berlin, the communist government deliberately brought the remains of the former imperial City Palace down to the ground in 1950 since it considered the building a relic of Prussian militarism (Urban, 2007). In its place came a modernist piazza, then later the Palast der Republik (GDR parliament building) – a statement of the new socialist era. This project eradicated an essential component of architectural heritage in the name of a more democratic urban ideal and political expression. Similarly, West Berlin, although not eradicating heritage for ideological purposes, opted not to rebuild everything as before. Western urban planners adopted new urban design paradigms in districts such as the Hansa Quarter (Hansa Viertel), where a new group of streamlined, functionalist buildings by international architects replaced the pre-war district (Murphy & Hourani, 2016).

The underlying belief was that a break with historical precedents – including its architectural systems – would allow Berlin to move into a progressive future. These modernist residential estates and wide boulevards improved living conditions and transport links (in line with welfare

goals); yet this change also led to the loss of the complex, densely populated urban tissue typical of old Berlin. An art historian musing about Berlin remarks that many houses, churches, and palaces were destroyed after the war and that the process of transformation continues to this day. Indeed, the manner in which Berlin has repeatedly re-invented its urban form is remarkable. Following reunification in 1990, the reconstruction chapter reopened: the Palast der Republik (already itself a product of the GDR period) was torn down in the 2000s in controversial moves to reconstruct an imitation of the long-lost Baroque City Palace (Bach & Murawski, 2020). This cycle—trading one era's heritage for another—exposes the complexity of heritage decisions in reconstruction contexts. Additionally, during the decades following the war, large prefab housing blocks, Plattenbauten, were constructed primarily in East Berlin to address the housing shortage.

Pragmatic in design and rapidly constructed, though, these structures are often criticized for their poor quality and frequently lacking architectural harmony with the surrounding environment (Gao et al., 2023). In West Berlin, the search for modern amenities spawned projects such as the redevelopment of Breitscheidplatz during the time of the Berlin Wall, when a new modern church was constructed alongside the ruined Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, saving only its damaged spire as a memorial (Harrison, 2019).



Figure 4. Housing blocks (Plattenbauten) in East Berlin

In sum, Berlin's reconstruction took the form of a synthesis of preservation and innovation: some landmark buildings were painstakingly restored (the Reichstag building's exterior, for example, was preserved and later modernized), while other parts of the city underwent thorough reinvention (Rusnak et al., 2024). The planning system, one socialist in its centralization and the other capitalist in its municipalism, differed in their approaches; both, however, underscored the difficulty in balancing heritage preservation with pressing social needs. Berlin eventually came to benefit from public discussion and critical examination regarding its identity, leading to policies in the 1980s and 90s for critical reconstruction (reconstruction of new buildings with reference to historic streetlines and scale) (Adamou & Giebelhausen, 2023). However, the immediate post-war decades had created a legacy of heritage loss which the city grapples with

to this date. Berlin illustrates that even in a situation in which there was high architectural awareness, welfare (housing) and ideological imperatives oftentimes took precedence over heritage conservation in the urgency of post-war rebuilding.

Beirut, Lebanon: Neoliberal Reconstruction and the Erasure of Historical Memory

Few places more vividly illustrate the conflict between redevelopment and cultural heritage than Beirut following the 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War. The Beirut Central District (BCD) was severely damaged over 15 years of war, with most buildings being shelled, set on fire, or left abandoned, while a great deal of the area had been vacated. In the early 1990s, the government of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri launched an ambitious but contentious scheme to reconstruct the center of the capital (Doyle, 2023). A private real estate firm, Solidere (Société Libanaise de Développement et de Reconstruction), was set up and granted extraordinary authority to acquire and clear land in the Beirut Central District (BCD). Solidere's mandate was to construct a new, economically successful city center – in essence, a "new Beirut" on top of the old (Kassir, 2010).

Preservation of heritage came second in the process, despite Beirut's rich architectural heritage of Ottoman and French Mandate-era buildings. Solidere's Master Plan involved complete expropriation of the downtown area: thousands of property owners were forced to accept shares in the company in exchange for their war-damaged properties. Entire tracts were leveled. Though certain notable historical structures were preserved (or their frontages preserved for aesthetic reasons), the overall effect was a complete remapping of the city centre (Ragab, 2011).

Another references how post-war reconstruction of downtown Beirut "totally reconfigured the urban space," resulting in the "dispossession of its inhabitants" and altering what was once naturally developed urban territory into a stark new area, an "image of 'heritage'" unconnected to the genuine article. The old souks (bazaars), for instance, were not restored in their former form; a modern shopping centre was constructed instead, although superficially modeled to remind one of the old souk (Kassir, 2010).

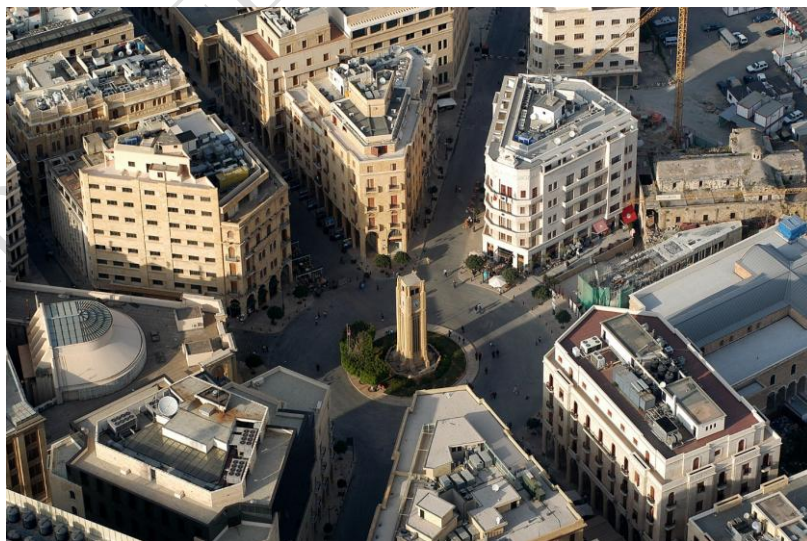


Figure 5. Downtown Beirut: A Reconfiguration of Urban Space

Critics argue that the project implemented by Solidere transformed the historic architecture into a mere marketing facade: "the central hall [house] – if preserved – was relegated to a mere facade covering open building schemes, in an attempt to accommodate generic office specifications and corporate needs" (Lévesque, 2019).

In effect, what was left of the cultural heritage would tend to show only surface qualities, dwarfed by the modern-day skyscrapers or shopping malls in the vicinity. A number of architecturally significant buildings that survived the war, a vintage theater and several houses of Ottoman period origin, were taken apart due to their incompatibility with modern-day town planning or their being too expensive to restore.

DEMOLITION-BASED DEVELOPMENT IN MUNICIPAL BEIRUT (2000-2013)

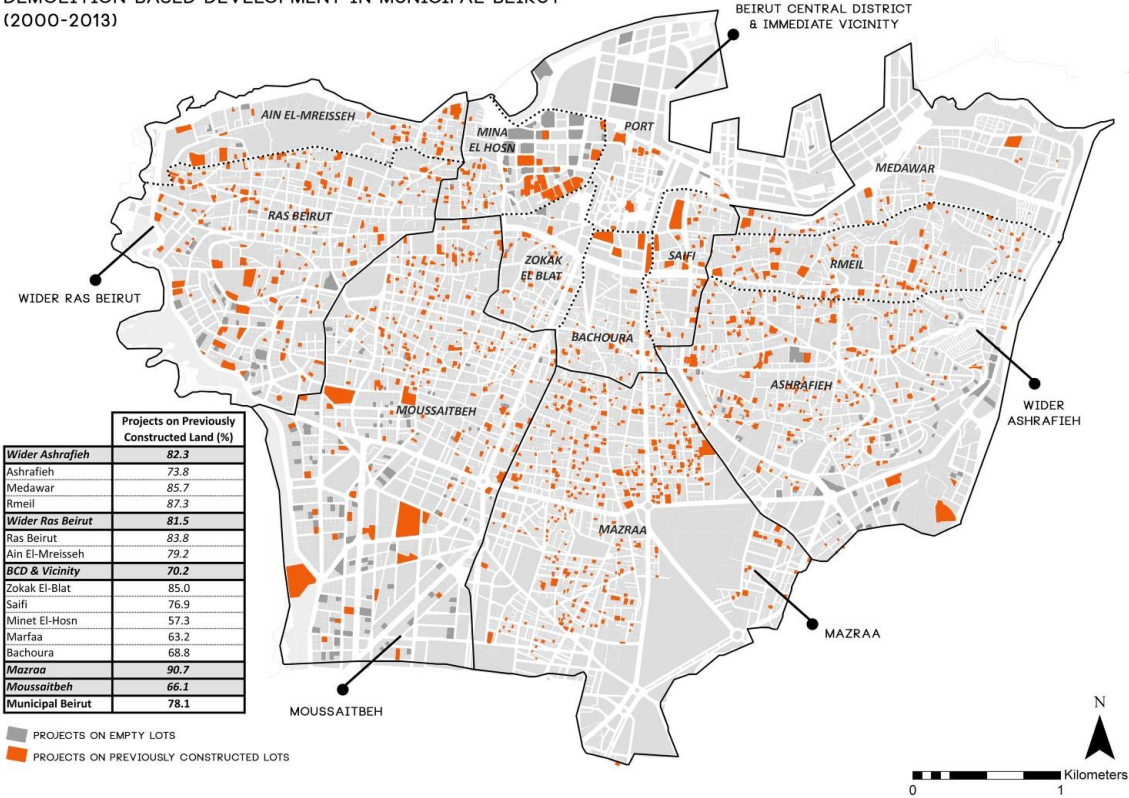


Figure 6. The Demolition of Beirut’s Heritage Sites

This has been referred to as "collective amnesia by design," in which systematic erasure of historical records is done to project an idealized future (Khalaf, 2022). The political and economic underpinnings of Beirut's reconstruction were of the utmost importance. The project was neoliberal in nature, and private investment and real estate development were the key drivers for rebuilding. Meanwhile, heritage preservation, without the force of law or influential advocates, was pushed to the side in favor of commercial interests. Furthermore, the sectarian character of the war made it hard to quibble about whose heritage (Ottoman? French? Early Lebanese independence era?) should prevail; in a sense, avoiding all these questions by beginning anew was simple for developers (Bizhan, 2022).

The impact has been much contested. On the one hand, Beirut's downtown was rebuilt with new buildings, parks, and businesses, reviving the area economically to some extent. Conversely, the city missed a chance to truly "reweave" its war-torn heritage and mend war wounds in a preservation context. The Solidere solution provided a glossy downtown center that some celebrate as an accomplishment; however, many Lebanese lament the destruction of historic traditional streets and displacement of individuals who used to live in them.

Even years later, observers warn against the "precedent of Solidere" whenever new development threatens heritage in Beirut. In sum, Beirut's experience is characteristic of a post-war planning model led by private capital and absence of public oversight, in which heritage is commodified or destroyed. It illustrates the importance of having institutional checks and cultural assessments in place; otherwise, reconstruction can emerge as an instrument of cultural homogenization rather than restoration.

Baghdad, Iraq: Rampant Growth and Disappearing Traditional Fabric

In Baghdad, the 2003 U.S. invasion, along with the ensuing years of conflict, produced a distinct but equally difficult context for the preservation of cultural heritage. As an ancient city with layers from the Abbasid Caliphate to the Ottoman and contemporary eras, Baghdad lacked any "master plan for reconstruction" after the war. On the other hand, the city was undergoing a disorderly boom in construction activity, fueled in part by demand for domestic housing and in part by opportunistic commercial development in a permissive regulatory framework (Barakat, 2007).

This boom occurred when the city was already reeling under years of sanctions and neglect, with several dilapidated buildings. Since 2003, although security has slightly increased in some of these areas by the late 2000s, residents returning and local investors have been quickly demolishing old structures to make way for new ones. The result has been an accelerating loss of Baghdad's distinctive architectural heritage, especially its mid-century and early-20th-century buildings and its old neighborhoods (UNESCO, 2016).

A striking example can be found in Al-Harthiya, a central district that was once a lush residential area known for its mid-century Baghdadi homes with gardens and ornate facades. By 2020, Harthiya had been transformed in a way that was "irreparably changed in the midst of a post-2003 building boom that has been largely unregulated (Hann et al., 2015). Powered by profit and facilitated by a weakened state, it has incrementally eroded Baghdad's architectural heritage and destabilized the city's urban fabric. Tall multi-story residential buildings now interrupt the formerly homogeneous streets filled with low-rise houses.

Developers often divide up large residential parcels into numerous small parcels, constructing concrete buildings that make the most of the available floor area. In this transformation process, eight hundred square-metre plots have been sliced up to make way for multiple homes, with concrete consuming every inch of greenery. Traditional building styles suitable for Baghdad's heat have yielded to cheaper, ostentatious models (Hill, 2025). The wooden lattice balconies typical of old Baghdadi houses (shanasheel), courtyards, and wind catchers that once distinguished such neighborhoods as Adhamiya and Karrada are fast vanishing as these houses are torn down and replaced by bland structures (Hill, 2025).

Unlike cities such as Beirut or Berlin, the erosion of heritage in Baghdad is not due to a monolithic policy; instead, it is the unintended consequence of inadequate urban planning and ineffective mechanisms for the preservation of heritage. The government bodies responsible for planning Baghdad have been drastically weakened by corruption and lack of enforcement power. Although rules supposedly exist to limit building height in some of the historical zones, these rules are consistently bypassed or ignored (Francioni & Gordley, 2013). Public needs, including housing for the expanding urban populace and the establishment of new commercial facilities, are habitually given as reasons for granting permits for new building initiatives, even amidst clear violation of heritage preservation principles by such ventures. Public opinion also comes into play: following decades of deprivation, most inhabitants of Baghdad perceive modern structures as emblematic of development.



Figure 7 & 8. Al-Harthiya district before and after development

Once a resident in an old quarter becomes affluent, they would rather build a new home than retain an old one. This social practice, together with a lack of state support in private restoration, accelerates the voluntary substitution of heritage buildings (Zedan & Al-moqaram, 2024). The sectarian violence that began after 2003 also affected cultural heritage significantly: historic churches, libraries, and even traditional mixed communities experienced decline or damage as inhabitants fled, and heritage buildings were left vacant and exposed to vandalism or collapse. In a few cases, security precautions had an adverse effect on heritage; for instance, the erection of concrete blast walls in many districts and the Green Zone changed the historic streetscapes' character, though these effects are mostly reversible.

The trajectory of Baghdad serves as a cautionary narrative regarding "development devoid of planning": the pressing requirement to restore a semblance of normalcy following conflict, alongside the influence of free-market dynamics and insufficient governance, may result in a fragmented yet persistent deterioration of cultural heritage (Al-Harithy, 2021). A journalist has characterized this phenomenon as the city 'cannibalizing its old districts' from within. Nevertheless, initiatives are underway to counteract this trend. The Iraqi State Board of Heritage and Antiquities, along with activists, has managed to place some of the buildings on the protection list, and UNESCO has also stepped in from time to time (e.g., by reconstructing Al-Sarafiya Bridge and updating local experts) (Baker et al., 2010).

Parts of Baghdad, such as the ancient Mustansiriya School (13th century) and the old Al-Rasheed Street shops, are still intact because of targeted rehabilitation initiatives (Awadh & Al-Dabbas, 2024). Overall, Baghdad illustrates that the absence of a post-war reconstruction master plan is as damaging to heritage as an overly aggressive one. Instead of a master plan that might strike a balance between old and new, Baghdad was subjected to ad-hoc redevelopment in which short-term welfare goals (housing, business) and profit for the private sector took precedence at the cost of its historic urban heritage.

Discussion

This study bridges theoretical gaps by linking Jerusalem's Mughrabi Quarter demolition to Harvey's (2008) 'accumulation by dispossession' and Nablus' rehabilitation to Smith's (2006) 'heritage-as-process.' Unlike UNESCO's apolitical frameworks, which falter in occupation zones (Jerusalem) and neoliberal contexts (Beirut), grassroots models empower communities as co-designers of recovery. Limitations include data gaps in Gaza and potential bias in conflict-zone archives, mitigated through satellite triangulation. The findings challenge policymakers to treat heritage as a psychosocial pillar of welfare, not a luxury.

Political Ideology: Heritage as a Tool of Dominance

The cases of Jerusalem and East Berlin illustrate how political regimes exploit heritage to consolidate territorial or ideological control. In Jerusalem, the 1967 demolition of the Mughrabi Quarter—a historic Muslim neighborhood—was framed as a "public welfare" project to expand Jewish pilgrimage access. However, this act of urbicide (Coward, 2008) erased a multicultural urban layer, reflecting what Pullan et al. (2013) term "spatial dominance" in contested cities. UNESCO's designation of Jerusalem's Old City as a World Heritage Site in 1981 failed to prevent this erasure, underscoring the limits of international frameworks in occupation contexts. Similarly, East Berlin's destruction of the City Palace in 1950, justified as a rejection of Prussian militarism, mirrors what Urban (2007) calls "ideological cleansing."

Contrast with UNESCO: UNESCO's 2011 Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscapes advocates for "inclusive governance" but assumes heritage preservation can transcend political agendas. These cases reveal how such apolitical frameworks falter in occupation or authoritarian contexts, where heritage becomes a battleground for sovereignty. In Baghdad, the post-2003 collapse of governance enabled sectarian groups to dismantle historic mixed neighborhoods, echoing Coward's (2009) argument that urbicide thrives in institutional voids. Unlike Jerusalem, where heritage destruction was state-led, Baghdad's loss stemmed from state absence—a distinction overlooked in UNESCO's state-centric preservation models.

Economic Drivers: Neoliberalism and the Erosion of Cultural Memory

Beirut and Baghdad exemplify how profit-driven reconstruction accelerates heritage loss. Beirut's post-civil war reconstruction under Solidere transformed the city center into a luxury enclave, replacing Ottoman-era souks with a sanitized shopping mall. This aligns with Sharon Zukin's (2009) critique of neoliberal urbanism, where heritage is reduced to façades to attract global capital. Similarly, Baghdad's post-2003 building boom saw historic homes replaced by speculative high-rises, reflecting what Harvey (2008) terms "accumulation by dispossession"—a process where urban memory is sacrificed for profit.

Contrast with UN-Habitat: UN-Habitat's 2016 New Urban Agenda champions "inclusive and sustainable urbanization," yet Beirut's experience shows how public-private partnerships, without safeguards, prioritize developers over communities. UNESCO's Post-Conflict Recovery Toolkit similarly neglects mechanisms to prevent heritage commodification, leaving cities vulnerable to market exploitation.

In Gaza, blockade-induced poverty forced residents to demolish Ottoman-era homes for concrete high-rises, highlighting how economic precarity—not ideology—drives heritage loss. This challenges UNESCO's focus on conflict-related damage, underscoring the need to address structural inequities in reconstruction aid.

Community Agency: Grassroots Resistance and Hybrid Models

Nablus and Gaza demonstrate how grassroots efforts can counterbalance institutional neglect. In Nablus, Riwaq's rehabilitation of Ottoman mansions into community centers embodies Laurajane Smith's (2006) heritage-as-process, where locals reclaim authority over cultural memory. This model, supported by EU funding, contrasts with Jerusalem's top-down erasure, proving that participatory planning can align welfare and heritage goals.

Alignment and Gaps in UNESCO Frameworks: UNESCO's 2015 Strategy for Capacity-Building emphasizes local empowerment, and Nablus aligns with this vision. However, Gaza's reliance on intermittent NGO efforts—such as the Great Omari Mosque restoration during ceasefires—reveals UNESCO's failure to institutionalize grassroots support in active conflict zones.

Berlin offers a hybrid approach. Its post-reunification "critical reconstruction" policy blended modernist infrastructure with historic street patterns, tempering ideological extremism. While imperfect (e.g., the controversial demolition of the Palast der Republik), this model suggests heritage can mediate competing visions of progress—a lesson absent in UNESCO's technocratic guidelines.

Synthesis: Toward an Integrated Framework

These findings dismantle the false binary of welfare versus heritage. While UNESCO recognizes heritage as a recovery pillar, it underestimates how political and economic systems subvert preservation. Conversely, grassroots and hybrid models (Nablus, Berlin) prove that heritage can catalyze recovery when communities co-design reconstruction.

Policy Implications:

1. For UNESCO: Tie funding to heritage impact assessments and enforce monitoring in occupation zones.
2. For Local Governments: Legislate participatory planning, as in Nablus, to counterbalance top-down agendas.
3. For Donors: Condition aid on heritage safeguards, rejecting “quick-fix” approaches that erase cultural memory.

Limitations and Future Research:

- Data gaps in Gaza due to access constraints highlight the need for remote sensing or diaspora oral histories.
- Further study of digital preservation tools (e.g., 3D scanning in Mosul) could bridge urgent rebuilding and heritage documentation.

Policy Implications

- 1- Aligning with Global Frameworks Post-conflict reconstruction must align with international standards to safeguard cultural heritage while addressing urgent welfare needs. Key recommendations include:

- UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):
 - SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities): Integrate heritage preservation into housing and infrastructure projects, as demonstrated in Nablus, where EU funding rehabilitated Ottoman homes into community spaces while upgrading utilities.
 - SDG 16 (Peaceful Societies): Adopt inclusive governance models, such as participatory planning workshops used in Nablus, to counter exclusionary policies like those in Jerusalem.
- UNESCO’s 2011 Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscapes:
 - Mandate Heritage Impact Assessments (HIAs) for reconstruction projects. For example, Beirut’s failure to conduct HIAs led to the loss of Ottoman souks, whereas Mosul (Iraq) could use HIAs to protect Abbasid-era sites during rebuilding.

- 2- Actionable Recommendations

- Conditional Funding:
 - Tie reconstruction aid to heritage safeguards. In Gaza, donors could require preservation of Ottoman-era structures like Qasr al-Basha, mirroring the EU’s approach in Nablus.
 - Establish heritage trust funds (e.g., for Baghdad’s Al-Rasheed Street) managed by local/international coalitions (UNESCO, 2016).
- Legal Reforms:
 - Legislate heritage zoning laws, inspired by Berlin’s critical reconstruction, to protect historic neighborhoods in Ukraine (e.g., Lviv’s UNESCO-listed center).
 - Criminalize deliberate heritage destruction (urbicide) under international law, building on the ICC’s prosecution of cultural erasure in Timbuktu (Francioni & Gordley, 2013).

- 3- Grassroots Empowerment:

- Train locals in digital preservation tools (3D scanning, satellite imagery) for conflict zones like Syria, following UNESCO's Mosul initiatives.
- Create heritage task forces in refugee camps (e.g., for displaced Syrians) to document oral histories and traditional building techniques.

4- Scaling Lessons to Broader Contexts

- Nablus → Syria/Ukraine:
 - Apply Nablus' community-led model to rebuild Aleppo's souks through cooperatives, or empower Lviv's NGOs to mobilize diaspora funding.
- Berlin → Yemen/Iraq:
 - Use Berlin's hybrid preservation/innovation approach (e.g., historic façades with modern interiors) to stabilize Sana'a's mud-brick towers or Mosul's Abbasid landmarks.
- Beirut → Libya:
 - Avoid neoliberal pitfalls by mandating public oversight of Tripoli's heritage sites, rather than privatizing reconstruction as in Beirut.

5- Monitoring & Accountability

- Deploy UNESCO-UN Habitat task forces to conflict zones (e.g., Gaza, Ukraine) for emergency HIAs and stabilization training.
- Publish annual Heritage Risk Indexes to pressure governments into action, ranking threats like political neglect or unchecked development.

Conclusion

- 1- Restating Main Findings: By reframing cultural heritage as a psychosocial pillar of welfare, this study dismantles the false binary of 'heritage vs. housing.' Cases like Nablus and Berlin prove that participatory models can heal societies, not just rebuild infrastructure. Future research must explore digital preservation in active conflict zones, while policymakers must condition aid on heritage safeguards. Ultimately, post-conflict cities thrive not as sterile replicas of the past but as living embodiments of resilience and identity.
- 2- Theoretical Contribution: Redefining Welfare as a Psychosocial Asset. A key theoretical contribution of this work is its redefinition of "welfare" to encompass cultural heritage as a psychosocial asset. Drawing on Laurajane Smith's (2006) concept of heritage as a cultural process, we argue that heritage preservation is not merely about conserving physical structures but sustaining the collective memory, identity, and resilience of communities. For instance, the restoration of Nablus' Old City fostered social cohesion and economic revival, underscoring heritage's role in post-trauma healing. This aligns with scholars like Winter (2013), who posit that heritage acts as a "therapeutic landscape," rebuilding trust and continuity in shattered societies. By framing heritage as integral to welfare, this study challenges policymakers to expand conventional definitions of recovery beyond material needs.

- 3- Future Research Directions: Digital Preservation in Conflict Zones to address gaps in heritage protection during active conflicts, future research should explore digital preservation as a complementary strategy. Emerging technologies—such as 3D scanning, satellite imagery, and virtual reality—offer innovative ways to document at-risk sites when physical conservation is impossible. For example, the Project Mosul initiative digitally reconstructed destroyed heritage using crowdsourced photos, while UNESCO’s Emergency Safeguarding of Syrian Heritage employed 3D modeling to archive endangered sites. Further studies could investigate:
 - The ethical and practical challenges of digital preservation in inaccessible zones (e.g., Gaza).
 - The role of diaspora communities in contributing to digital archives.
 - How virtual reconstructions can aid in post-conflict reconciliation and education.
- 4- Policy Implications Building on this redefined welfare paradigm, policymakers must:
 - Integrate heritage impact assessments into reconstruction funding criteria, as seen in Nablus’ EU-supported projects.
 - Support grassroots initiatives that leverage heritage for community healing, ensuring local agency in preservation efforts.
 - Invest in digital infrastructure to safeguard cultural memory where physical preservation is untenable.
- 5- Concluding Statement: Cultural heritage is not a luxury to be addressed after rebuilding homes and hospitals; it is the bedrock of societal recovery. By reimagining welfare to include heritage as a psychosocial asset and embracing innovative preservation strategies, we can ensure that post-conflict cities are rebuilt not just as functional spaces but as living embodiments of resilience and identity.

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