
Research Paper

Cultural Heritage and the SDGs: Bridging Gaps in Iraq's Urban Recovery

Chawan MRASHEED, Iraq

Sebnem HOSKARA, Eastern Mediterranean University, North Cyprus via Mersin, Türkiye

Abstract

Iraq with its rich yet fragile built heritage, holds significant potential for sustainable development. However, this potential remains largely untapped due to the fact that cultural heritage is often sidelined in global initiatives like the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among the SDGs, SDG 11.4 specifically mentions heritage, its broader influence on social, economic, and environmental recovery. In post-conflict settings, heritage sites are socio-economic rebuilding and recovery tools—a reality that is deeply relevant to Iraq's current recovery.

This study examines how cultural heritage has been integrated into urban recovery. The research reveals the gap in implementing the DSG by comparing the Old City of Mosul and the Erbil Citadel across four dimensions: safeguarding, economic impact, inclusivity, and governance. Heritage efforts in both cities have focused primarily on physical conservation. While this fulfills SDG 11.4, it fails to address broader goals related to decent work, institutional strength, and community participation (SDGs 8, 16, and 17). The significance of this research lies in identifying the disconnect between orbicular heritage frameworks and topical governance in Iraq. This misalignment restricts how communities participate in the process and how institutions coordinate their efforts. By investigating these gaps, the study highlights lack of heritage led urban regeneration. Accordingly, the research proposes a framework that better aligns heritage initiatives with the SDGs. Ultimately, the findings advocate for a shift in Iraq's strategy: moving away from physical preservation toward a model that is inclusive, sustainable, and grounded in local development.

Keywords

Cultural Heritage, Preservation, Iraq, Sustainable Development Goals



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1. Introduction

Iraq is home to one of the world's most significant cultural legacies, stretching from ancient Mesopotamian sites to historic Islamic urban centers. Yet, this heritage is under steady pressure from decades of conflict, political instability, and unchecked urban growth. The current situation of preserved cultural heritage is best observed through the Old City of Mosul, which faced total destruction during the ISIS occupation, and the Erbil Citadel, a UNESCO World Heritage site struggling with the pressures of up-to-date expansion. Together, these sites represent the dual crisis facing Iraqi heritage—surviving both the violence of war and the challenges of planning and fragile preservation. While international groups have turned their attention and effort toward Iraqi heritage preservation, it remains unclear if these efforts are actually sustainable. Most projects point to the UN's 2030 Agenda—specifically SDG Target 11.4—as their primary guide for safeguarding heritage. However, the true value of cultural heritage goes far beyond just "fixing buildings." It is a driver for economic growth (SDG 8), inclusive city planning (SDG 11.3), and building peace and stronger institutions (SDG 16).

The problem is that recovery initiatives in Iraq rarely connect the international policies and on ground practice. Preservation is not systematically linked to the broader goals; Iraq is missing the chance to use heritage as a tool for long-term urban resilience and social recovery. While the international community increasingly recognizes that cultural heritage supports social cohesion and economic life, this integration has yet to become a reality on the ground in Iraq (UNESCO, 2016); (Francesca & Sophia, 2021).

UNESCO in Urban Future report, highlighted cultural heritage as both a driver and an enabler of sustainable development. As a driver, cultural heritage supports cultural industries, tourism, and creative economies (UNESCO, 2016). As an enabler, it fosters social inclusion, strengthens community identity, and promotes resilience in urban recovery. Then in 2021, UNESCO introduced the Culture 2030 Indicators to assess how culture contributes to all 17 SDGs, expanding the perspective beyond SDG 11.

Academic literature reinforces this multidimensional role. Tweed and Sutherland argued that built cultural heritage enhances urban sustainability by reinforcing identity, continuity, and a sense of place (Christopher & Sutherland, 2007). Bandarin and Oers developed the Historic Urban Landscape approach, which promotes integrating cultural heritage into planning processes to balance conservation with modernization (Francesco & Oers, 2012). Then Christer demonstrates that when cultural heritage governance aligns with sustainability principles, it can reinforce environmental, economic, and social development pathways (Christer, 2019). Despite this conceptual progress, gaps remain in practice. Scholars highlight the absence of concrete indicators to measure how cultural heritage contributes to development, which often reduces Cultural Heritage projects to symbolic gestures (Francesca & Sophia, 2021). In conflict-affected areas, cultural heritage is often marginalized in recovery planning. Prioritizing housing and infrastructure in the emergency face (Benjamin & Meskell, 2019) (Chawan, 2021). Territorial studies provide more information. Drawing on studies conducted in Homs and Aleppo, Belal and Shcherbina highlight the difficulties in reconstructing cultural heritage after a conflict. They point out that recovery efforts frequently continue to be dispersed because of inadequate governance, a lack of SDG-based coordination, and limited legal frameworks (Belal & Shcherbina, 2021). Their conclusions are strikingly similar to Iraq's experience, where recovery has focused on visible monuments at the expense of more extensive urban system, social inclusion and semipermanent sustainability. This territorial perspective offers a useful lens through which to assess how Iraq's recovery projects could be more effectively matched with the 2030 Agenda's tenets.



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Typically, urban rebuilding focuses almost entirely on physical infrastructure treating cultural heritage isolated from the larger recovery plans.

The Old City of Mosul and the Erbil Citadel demonstrate that while heritage can theoretically drive sustainable development, its impact is often stifled by a lack of coordination. Currently, reconstruction efforts in Iraq remain siloed. The preservation efforts happen in one corner while urban planning happens in another. This disconnect prevents heritage from becoming a recovery tool and catalyst for long-term growth.

The Old City of Mosul is the most emblematic case of cultural heritage destruction in Iraq. The ISIS occupation (2014–2017) and subsequent liberation battles left vast areas of the city in ruins. In response, UNESCO launched the *Revive the Spirit of Mosul* initiative in 2018, followed by other projects funded by international donors (UNESCO, 2025). While the initiative successfully mobilized global attention and resources, it has largely focused on physical reconstruction, with broader contributions to SDG 8 (jobs and livelihood), SDG 11.3 (inclusive urbanization), and SDG 16 (peace & institutions) remaining underdeveloped. Community participation has also been limited, raising concerns about local ownership and sustainability (Chawan, 2021).



Figure 1. Al-Hadba Minaret pre-post reconstruction. Source: Mrasheed, C.O.

The Erbil Citadel in contrast to the destruction in Mosul, represent heritage management in a more stable environment. After the designation of the citadel in 2014 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it has been managed by the High Commission for Erbil Citadel Revitalization (HCECR), established in 2007. So far, the focus has been on physical stabilization and boosting the site's profile as a regional tourism icon (UNESCO, 2021). Unfortunately, this progress has come with significant social trade-offs. The restoration process led to the displacement of many long-term residents. The project has struggled with inclusivity and sustainability. With massive preservation efforts, it remains somewhat isolated from the city's broader urban planning (Mohammed, et al., 2020).



Ultimately, while Erbil has successfully met the goals of SDG 11.4 by safeguarding the physical site, it has yet to unlock the Citadel's full potential. It remains a historic property that lacks supportive broader governance or social goals.



Figure 2. Erbil Citadel. Source: Mrasheed, C.O.

Larkin and Rudolf mentioned a critical perspective on Iraq's recovery, in Mosul, the restoration process is often driven more by international donor agendas than by local needs. As it has concluded, UNESCO has led major recovery programs, while the World Bank, European Union, UAE, and other donors have provided financial and technical support (Benjamin & Lynn, 2024). Their field research suggests that while large-scale projects make for good symbols, they often sideline the actual people who live there. They argue that the real power for social healing doesn't lie in massive monuments, but in spaces like; the local markets (souqs), family homes, and small public squares where everyday life happens (Larkin & Rudolf, 2023). Recent data supports this idea. A study, which surveyed 108 Mosul residents, found a troubling trend: despite the reconstructing of 19 major religious sites, the community's emotional bond with those sites had actually weakened. For these residents, the value of a building is not just in its bricks; it is tied to spiritual meaning (64%) and personal memories (43%) (Chawan, et al., 2025).

What this tells us is that physical rebuilding is not a "magic fix" for a broken community. If we don't include the intangible heritage, the recovery will remain hollow. Ultimately, both Mosul and Erbil show the same gap. We are getting better at fixing buildings, but we are still failing to use that preservation as a true catalyst for social and economic recovery.

As shown in the figure, recovery works best when four key elements act as a single, moving system. We can look at these in two halves: Process and Enablers. On one side, "Urban-Recovery Planning" and "Inclusive Participation" define the strategy—they determine what the city needs and how the community wonder to live. On the other side, "Governance" and "Economic Growth" act as the engine—they provide the legal structure and the money needed to keep the project alive. When these four pieces are connected, they create a plan covering feedback loop. Good planning leads to better jobs, and community participation ensures that the government is actually meeting local needs. By linking these together, Iraq can move away from "one-off" projects and toward a comprehensive model of urban renewal which fits the 2030 Agenda.



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Figure 3. Interconnected Dimensions of SDG-Aligned Cultural Heritage-Based Urban Recovery. Source: Authors.

Bringing the SDGs into Iraq's heritage and urban recovery is not a theoretical goal; it is the only way to build a city that is actually resilient. There is a concerning gap between this vision and what is happening on the ground. In the post conflict rebuilding phase, the focus almost always shifts to "bricks and mortar"—the immediate, physical repairs. Fixing buildings is essential, but it often crowds out the more complex work of ensuring that heritage actually supports the people and the economy.

2. Methodology

To understand these dynamics, this research uses a qualitative comparative case-study approach. The Old City of Mosul and the Erbil Citadel have been analyzed through four specific lenses: safeguarding, economic impact, inclusivity, and governance. By drawing on a mix of UNESCO reports, policy documents, and recent academic data, the study evaluates how these sites align—or fail to align—with SDG targets 8, 11, 16, and 17.

The selection of Erbil and Mosul define two very different realities in Iraq. The Erbil Citadel as a model for heritage management in a stable environment. It shows that while a long-term strategy can successfully preserve a physical site, it can still struggle to meet the "human" side of the SDGs, such as community participation and social inclusion. Mosul, on the other hand, presents the challenge of total recovery after a crisis. Projects like UNESCO's "Revive the Spirit of Mosul" are ambitious attempts to link reconstruction with the SDGs, but they often run into practical hurdles. Poor coordination, lack of local participation and displaced experts are usually faced in the reality. By comparing these two cities, the study identifies the systemic gaps that prevent heritage from driving recovery. The collected material was examined through qualitative content and thematic analysis:

- Related SDG themes:
 1. (SDG 11.4) Safeguarding Cultural Heritage
 2. (SDG 8) Economic & livelihood impacts
 3. (SDG 11.3 & 16) Inclusive urban recovery & participation
 4. (SDG 16 & 17) Governance & partnerships
- Comparative analysis and gap assessment:
To identify common systemic barriers, convergences, and divergences, patterns were observed within each case (Mosul v. Erbil) and across cases. Then, it was compared with the SDG targets.



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3. Cultural Heritage Recovery and SDGs (Old Mosul and Erbil Citadel)

While cultural heritage recovery in Iraq is progressing, its alignment with SDGs is fragment and uneven. Most of the efforts still focus on the "bricks and mortar" of restoration. They fulfilling SDG 11.4 in a narrow sense, yet they seldom connect heritage with the wider SDG agenda that emphasises livelihoods, community participation, comprehensive governance, and long resilience. As data shows in Mosul and Erbil, reconstruction efforts frequently operate as isolated projects quite than components of a broader development strategy. Heritage has been prevented from contributing to efficient opportunity (SDG 8), participatory planning (SDG 11 .3), robust institutions (SDG 16), and efficient partnerships (SDG 17). To realise the ample potential of social heritage, recovery must be reframed as a developmental process that integrates preservation with social, efficient, and uninteresting priorities. Four pillars structured as urban recovery planning, comprehensive participation, governance and partnerships, and efficient and economic growth.

3.1. Recovery and Safeguarding

Both cases demonstrated impressive progress in the physical restoration, aligning well with the basic requirements of SDG 11.4. In Mosul, the high-profile rebuilding of major monuments and the stabilization of historic homes was a necessary step. The initiatives provided a sense of symbolic recovery and helped secure international support. Also in Erbil, the long-term work has successfully met the strict structural standards set by UNESCO. However, in both cities cultural heritage was mostly seen as an objective in itself. By focusing almost entirely on the buildings, both projects have largely overlooked the intangible side. Because these "human" elements were missing, the safeguarding efforts haven't done much to move toward poverty reduction or community well-being. This highlights a profound gap where cultural heritage preserved, it is not fully integrated into resilience planning.

3.2. Economy and Livelihood Impacts

The potential of cultural heritage to function as an economic driver of recovery remains largely untapped. In Mosul, some programs provided valuable training in traditional skills like masonry and carpentry. They did provide immediate, short-term relief for workers. However, these initiatives rarely transitioned into long-term careers or sustainable small businesses. As a result, the role of cultural heritage remains precarious and disconnected from the broader economy. Similarly, in Erbil, the ambitious plans to use the Citadel as a tourism engine have largely stalled in the implementation phase. Because the practical steps were disorganized, the local community—specifically the displaced residents and traditional craftspeople—did not see much benefit. The gap here is lack of clear roadmap for creating livelihoods or accessing markets. In another word, they are not considering SDG 8 for decent work and economic growth.

3.3. Inclusive Urban Recovery and Participation

Community participation remained very limited across both contexts. In Mosul the recovery process was largely top-down, driven by national stakeholders and international donors. The residents of the Old City that survived the conflict and faced displacement had very little influence over their own neighborhoods being rebuilt. The situation in Erbil is almost the same with a different stage of the process. The conservation of the Citadel came at a significant human cost, about 800 families were relocated to make way for the project. There was little consultation with them, nor fair ways to share benefits that came from the Citadel's revitalization. Crucially, excluding the families has diminished the vitality and authenticity of



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the restoration. If these residents had been treated as factors for succussing the restoration through sharing their lived memories and their knowledge of traditional space—the project would have benefited more from deeper cultural accuracy and social continuity. Their dynamic participation could have brought life back into the conserved structures. How Cultural Heritage adapted to contemporary needs, and enhanced public support for the project's long success. In both situations, the loss of immaterial Cultural Heritage limited the sites' contribution to comprehensive recovery.

3.4. Governance and Partnership

Effective governance provides the necessary funding and structure, in the same time it becomes a major source of fragmentation. Heritage initiatives are too often treated as one phase projects not considering Iraq's long-term national development goals.

In both cities, the lack of a clear governance roadmap has stifled progress. In Erbil, excluding resident families from the decision-making process at the Citadel hurt the community and weakened the institutional legitimacy of the project. They could have served as a vital link between traditional knowledge and modern conservation then created a much stronger sense of local stewardship.

Such patterns suggest that Iraq is stuck in a "project-based" cycle. The efforts are not fully integrated into wider urban frameworks struggling to meet the goals of SDG 17. Without an inclusive and integrated governance, cultural heritage management will be isolated, limiting their impact on the country's broader recovery.

3.5. Comparative Insights

The comparative analysis of Mosul Old City and Erbil Citadel reveals how Cultural Heritage in Iraq is approached under two contrasting conditions. They exhibit systemic misalignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. Table 1 summarises the two cases across the four thematic lenses.

SDG-Linked Theme	Mosul Old City	Erbil Citadel	Main Gaps vs SDGs
Preservation (11.4)	Rapid debris clearance, reconstruction of Al-Nouri Mosque & historic houses; mainly architectural focus.	Structural stabilisation, illegal additions removal; conservation crafts, and living traditions recognised by UNESCO.	Intangible Cultural Heritage, and living traditions insufficiently addressed.
Economic Impacts (8)	Short-term construction jobs & youth vocational training; limited sustainable benefit for enterprises/tourism.	Tourism potential identified but under-implemented; minimal benefit for displaced residents/craftspeople.	Gains fragmented, donor-dependent, <u>unsustained</u> ; weak local economic linkages.
Inclusivity (11.3 & 16)	Decision-making dominated by UNESCO/donors; residents' participation minimal.	~800 families displaced with little consultation or return; limited public engagement.	Both failed to achieve participatory recovery or inclusive institutions.
Governance (16 & 17)	Strong global-local partnerships but fragmented between UNESCO, SBAH, governorate, donors.	HCECR shows local institutionalisation but weak municipal integration & finance.	Partnerships not embedded in coherent national/local frameworks; limited sustainability.

Tabel 1: Comparative Summary: Mosul vs Erbil by SDG-Linked Themes. Source: Authors.



3.6. Towards a Contextual Framework for SDG-Aligned Cultural Heritage-Based Recovery

Comparing Mosul and Erbil, the study shows that Iraq's heritage is currently treated as a relic to be saved not a catalyst for the future. Fixing this requires a shift in strategy. The study suggests a new framework that moves beyond physical repairs and aligns cultural heritage with the broader Sustainable Development Goals. This can be achieved through four interconnected pillars:

1. Integrated Urban-Recovery Planning Heritage cannot exist in a vacuum. Preservation goals must be woven directly into city masterplan and its wide strategies. This means linking historic sites to the basic needs of a city—housing, transport, and infrastructure—ensuring that the "Old City" is a functional part of the modern urban fabric.
2. Inclusive Participation and Social Safeguards. Decision makers must move beyond "top-down" decisions and consider bottom-up efficiency. True recovery requires the active involvement of displaced residents, women, and youth. This will not be accomplished via a few initial meetings; it's about using tools like public storytelling, local crafts and heritage education to ensure that the social memory of a place survives the reconstruction.
3. The Cultural Heritage-Led Livelihood projects should not be measured in short-term construction contracts. Instead, Iraq needs a roadmap for long-term growth implementing the SDGs. This includes incubating small businesses, supporting local artisans, and building tourism networks that actually return profits to the local community. Accordingly, the real intent of SDG 8 will be fulfilled.
4. SDG-Based Monitoring and Governance – align Cultural Heritage indicators with SDG 11.4, 8, 11.3, 16, 17, using measurable targets (e.g., jobs created, households resettled, partnership effectiveness, attracting tourists) and strengthen coordination between the municipalities, and international agencies.

Integrating these four pillars could embed cultural heritage objectives into city planning and reconstruction and enhance comprehensive social, economic, and environmental recovery efforts.

4. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine how cultural heritage fits into Iraq's broader urban recovery—specifically where the current practices fall short of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. By comparing the Old City of Mosul and the Erbil Citadel, post conflict recovery in Iraq has made impressive strides in saving physical monuments. Although the efforts are still too narrow. Iraq successfully met the basic requirements of SDG 11.4, but still need to turn heritage into a genuine engine for long-term, inclusive growth.

The study defines four critical gaps that are holding back the integration of the SDGs: fragmented institutional coordination, a heavy reliance on short-term donor funding, a lack of community voice, and a general failure to see heritage as a social and economic asset. These gaps are why Mosul's recovery is still focused on projects instead of the community, even though it has a lot of international support. They also explain why Erbil's preservation, while technically successful, seems to be getting further away from the people who should be bringing the site to life.

Bridging these gaps is the only way to transform heritage from a static monument into a driver of development. This shift requires moving away from isolated projects toward a model that connects history with livelihoods and urban planning. This means strengthening the link between national and local governments, restoring the presence of families in historic sites, and building financing models that don't just rely on international aid. Iraq needs to consider better tools to measure success of the cultural heritage

projects. The tools should be locally developed tracking social cohesion and economic vitality, not just how many bricks were laid.

Reframing Cultural heritage as a living part of the city offers Iraq and the Kurdistan Region a chance to build resilient, culturally grounded urban environments. Treating such sites as platforms for youth empowerment, artisan revival, and social healing. It should be ensured that heritage does more than just survive the past—it helps build the future. This is not just a technical adjustment; it is a transformative path toward a more stable and vibrant Iraq.



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