

Review Article

Riyadh's Architectural Metamorphosis: Weaving Modernity into Traditional Fabric

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Abstract - The research investigates Riyadh's architectural metamorphosis, focusing on balancing modernity and tradition. It analyses the historical evolution of Riyadh's architecture, identifies the cultural, economic, and social factors driving architectural transformation, and evaluates the role of urban planning and policies in preserving architectural heritage. The research adopted a comparative qualitative analysis to evaluate architectural transformations, using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis approach. The architectural development of Riyadh demonstrates how the city strives to unite modern expansion with the retention of its cultural identity. Riyadh evolved from a typical Najdi settlement of mud-brick structures with enclosed courtyards into a global city adorned by modern skyscrapers, urban projects, and extensive highways. This research analyzes how Riyadh handles its architectural evolution, emphasizing traditional elements in contemporary development. Thematic analysis of government documents, urban development forecasts, academic writings, and media content revealed three critical goals: the historical architectural evolution of Riyadh, the dominant cultural, economic, and social drivers behind transformations, and their impact on heritage preservation strategies. The results show an alignment between Vision 2030 economic policies and global integration, and that these initiatives frequently compromise traditional cultural values. Riyadh's story confirms the need for strategic management to safeguard historical value amid rapid urban expansion. Architectural success in Riyadh requires a strategy that accommodates modern development while maintaining cultural heritage through urban planning. Integrating Najdi traditional aspects with modern architectural practices can foster the development of sustainable cities that preserve cultural identity. This study provides essential knowledge for global urban development initiatives, benefiting both Saudi Arabian development and other cities facing similar modernization challenges.

Keywords - Riyadh architecture, Najdi architecture, Urban planning, Urban identity, Urban form.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

Riyadh is a city that was developed from various broken settlements established in 1740. Riyadh increased in status when King Abdulaziz Al-Saud became the independent governor in 1902, which started his plans to unite Saudi Arabia, even though it functioned as the capital of the second Saudi state in 1824 [1]. During the last century, Riyadh experienced tremendous architectural growth that transformed the geographic and political core of Saudi Arabia [2]. Riyadh's transformation manifests from technological progress and economic advancement powered by oil resources, while matching Vision 2030 objectives to become a worldwide innovation and business center and a tourism destination [3]. The transformation of Riyadh emphasizes postmodern urban theory through its fusion of international design elements, which disrupt traditional local cultural identity [4, 5]. Buildings in contemporary urban areas experience major changes because of globalization and modernity, which result in the diminution of traditional building types [6]. Modern urban cities need heritage discourse to protect cultural

identities, according to Abdelmonem (2017) [7]. The research uses critical regionalism developed by Frampton [8] and cultural frameworks presented by Rapoport [9] to investigate identity development in Riyadh architecture while studying the balance between new and old elements. Culture and heritage face growing risks of disappearance because modernization processes have expanded their speed [10, 11].

The link between world architecture patterns and regional building conventions brings forth an intricate problem concerning contemporary Riyadh's approach to development [12]. Understanding the architectural transformation of Riyadh requires critical theory examinations of place awareness, identity homogeneity, and regional authenticity. This research takes into account ongoing debates about modernization procedures while it analyzes how municipalities can manage their fast development alongside their traditional architectural history preservation efforts. Figure 1 showcases an old Riyadh building from the 1960s that adheres to the modern architectural movement, without considering the city's cultural and heritage character.





Fig. 1 An old Riyadh building from the 1960s that adopts the modern architectural style

Source: The Author.

1.2. Problem Statement and Research Gap

The quick architectural transformation of Riyadh occurs because of economic development and globalization. However, Alqahtany and Aravindakshan (2022) [13] reported that the process has separated the city's contemporary urban construction from its heritage background. Many modern structures in Riyadh currently follow international design patterns, although they fail to integrate their design with Riyadh's historical architecture and native roots [14, 15]. The urban transformation creates worry about cultural losses, while traditional Najdi architecture faces marginalization throughout the city area. The academic interest in Saudi Arabia's urban development has not yet filled the important knowledge gap regarding how architectural changes in Riyadh can be interpreted through cultural theory and spatial identity perspectives [16]. Existing research about urbanization, such as Alzahrani (2022) and Taha (2023) [15, 12], concentrates on its economic characteristics and technical elements but has not adequately explained the application of critical regionalism and Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity theory in the built environment, explained in De Bleeckere and Gerards (2017) [17] and Mouzakitis (2015) [18]. The research addresses this information deficit by establishing Riyadh's urban development through cultural principles that deliver guidance for equitable architectural metamorphosis.

1.3. Research Objectives

1. Analyze the historical evolution of Riyadh's architecture: To trace the changes from traditional Najd architecture to contemporary styles, identifying key periods and influences. This could involve examining the urban transformation of Riyadh from the beginning of the twentieth century until the present day.
2. Identify the cultural, economic, and social factors driving architectural transformation: To determine the impact of

globalization, economic diversification, and socio-cultural shifts on Riyadh's built environment.

3. Evaluate the role of urban planning and policies in preserving architectural heritage: To examine the effectiveness of current regulations and initiatives in protecting historical buildings and cultural sites.

1.4. Research Question

How can Riyadh balance rapid modernization and the preservation of its architectural heritage to maintain a strong sense of cultural identity?

1.5. Significance of the Study

This research holds importance because it analyzes architectural developments along with their impact on cultural heritage and urban development within Riyadh, which stands as Saudi Arabia's key transformation center. This research establishes important insights about developing cities by applying critical regionalism and identity in the built environment perspectives. The study provides essential knowledge to architects, urban planners and government agents who work toward heritage protection with innovative practices. This research extends knowledge about sustainable urban practices while revealing architectural abilities to form a collective recall of national identification.

1.6. Structure of the Paper

The paper is organized into five chapters. The introduction gives the background, context, problem statement, research objective, questions, and significance. The materials and methods chapter details the study design, setting, participants, materials and equipment, procedures, protocols, and data analysis. The results chapter presents the key findings. The discussion chapter interprets key findings, compares them with previous studies, identifies strengths and limitations, and provides implications and future directions. The conclusion summarizes key findings and explains implications of the findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design and Setting

A qualitative method was used. Through qualitative research, scholars achieve a deep understanding of meaningful elements found within architecture, since this approach enables capturing the subjective responses and interpretations [19, 20]. Specifically, a comparative qualitative analysis helped in the evaluation of architectural transformations, including a comparative analysis of building typologies and neighborhood evolution. A case study design was chosen and included. Through case studies, one can explore Riyadh's architectural transformation because this methodology allows for an in-depth analysis of particular buildings and neighborhoods [21, 22]. Riyadh stands out as the research site because it currently experiences quick urban development

alongside traditional Najdi architecture that meets modern global architectural elements. The research adopts critical theory to study place, memory, and identity in built settings to gain enhanced knowledge about architectural involvement with cultural preservation.

2.2. Participants or Subjects

The researcher used purposive sampling to identify sources through which they gathered secondary data that covered Riyadh's architectural evolution. Campbell et al. (2020) and Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024) [23, 24] stated that purposive sampling helps to select cases rich in information. Peer-review journal articles, academic books, policy documentation, urban planning reports, architectural websites and cultural heritage databases that university libraries and open-access platforms provide access to were used in this study. The researcher selected literature containing themes about urban development in addition to architectural identity, alongside cultural heritage, alongside modernization within Riyadh. The research objectives guided source selection, enabling the study to retrieve data that is appropriate for analytical thematic assessment.

2.3. Materials and Equipment

Only secondary data and the selected sources examined architectural identity and its global management, together with urban heritage preservation and Saudi Arabian urban management policies. The evaluation of these resources provided knowledge about historical and current developments in architectural styles and city planning approaches, alongside cultural transformations. Visual evidence, such as spatial representations and architectural drawings, along with urban development documents, supported structural evaluations of physical spaces. The analysis used secondary qualitative data that demonstrated pertinent connections with preservation culture, modern city development, and social identity patterns. Through theoretical examination of Frampton's critical regionalism with Rapoport's cultural meaning in architecture and postmodern urban theory, the study provided conceptual instruments to analyse changes in Riyadh's built environment. The technique provided an organized method for both the theoretical foundation and analytical system of the study.

2.4. Procedures and Protocols

The qualitative research approach started with a comprehensive literary assessment regarding the historical development of Riyadh's architectural and urban transformation. Secondary data was chosen through purposive sampling because it focused on urban identity, together with architectural transformation and cultural heritage. The analysis of selected architectural case examples and texts used critical regionalism and identity in the built environment as organizing concepts. The analysis of spatial development relied on performing visual assessments with Riyadh's city maps and urban development plans throughout

different years. The research used findings derived from literature, policy documents, and visual sources to discover patterns and meanings. A combination of research methods produced theoretical cohesion and a deep understanding of how Riyadh adjusts between historic conservation and global urban modern development.

2.5. Data Analysis

Secondary data analysis relied on thematic methods that followed the six-step procedure explained by Lochmiller (2021) [25]. The analyst reached an understanding of the data following several readings, which led to developing initial coding frameworks that revealed common patterns depicting Riyadh's architectural evolution. The research team performed an analysis of selected data themes, which they precisely named and defined to ensure accuracy in their interpretation. Researchers applied multiple theme assessment rounds (as described by Belotto in 2018) [26] to identify new connections that allowed them to study identity and modernization relationships with heritage. The research methodology provided both structure and flexibility according to Majumdar (2022) [27] so researchers could understand Riyadh's complex built environment.

2.6. Methodological Limitations

The findings from this study are limited by using only secondary data because it provides insufficient information about the real-life perceptions and experiences from residents and architects in Riyadh. The research suffers from insufficient empirical evidence because it does not include first-hand interviews or field observations of buildings. Data selection performed with purposeful criteria potentially leads to selection bias because only texts related to urban critique and heritage preservation will be included.

3. Results

3.1. Integration of Tradition and Modernity

The evaluation of secondary publications proves that Riyadh requires the fusion of Najdi architectural heritage with contemporary progress to achieve effective urban renewal. Alnaim (2022) [28] argued that modern architectural works that involve traditional elements such as courtyards, geometric patterns, and mud-brick aesthetics maintain cultural identity alongside contemporary functionality requirements. According to Alobailan and Alawad (2022) [29], critical regionalism asserts that contemporary architecture should fight against widespread impersonality by implementing regional elements in modern construction. Riyadh implements Frampton's concept through its modern architectural language, which adopts selective contemporary adaptations of Najdi architectural characteristics. Al-Qamadi, Qahtan and Al-Tamimi (2019) explained that selective traditional motif adaptation in contemporary developments prevents superficial copy and creates an authentic built environment identity [30]. The integration method produces usable buildings with attractive designs that preserve cultural symbolism compatible

with Paul Ricoeur's ideas about memory as connected to place and identity (Alnaim, 2022; Alobailan and Alawad, 2022) [28, 29]. Gharipour (2011) showed that contemporary buildings do not need to maintain a uniform traditional appearance [31]. The correct approach demands heritage elements to be preserved in meaningful contexts, specifically within historical priority areas, but not generalized across all parts of the urban infrastructure. The targeted approach enables Riyadh to implement Vision 2030 by developing contemporary progress that respects cultural heritage. Al-Qamadi, Qahtan and Al-Tamimi (2019) [30] agreed that the global modern age and urbanization process affect Riyadh's challenge to combine involvement in worldwide architectural styles with protecting its regional distinctiveness. The architectural policy of the city needs to walk the path between global trends and local heritage while developing a balanced model that keeps traditional values present in its evolving cosmopolitan heights. Traditional Najdi design components become more than surface improvements in urban planning because they represent a cultural resistance strategy against global challenges.



Fig. 2 The At-Turaif district in ad-Dir'iyah is an example of traditional Najdi design

Source: The Author

3.2. Policy and Community Engagement in Heritage Preservation

According to secondary sources, the preservation of heritage in Riyadh relies on equal importance between well-established policies and active citizen involvement. Mazzetto (2024) stated that although heritage protection legislation exists, it is commonly applied inconsistently because modern development projects may obscure or destroy historically significant buildings [32]. The situation matches what postmodern urban theorists identify as neoliberal urban policies force heritage marginalization through economic modernization [33]. Almakaty (2025) and Mazzetto (2024) argue that the recommended solution to overcome this challenge includes financial incentives through grants alongside tax relief programs and public-private partnership structures to assist property owners in saving their historical architectural structures [32, 33]. The findings validate Amos

Rapoport's environment-behavior studies framework because people express stronger spatial attachment when they participate in sustaining their built environment [34]. Ashour (2020) indicated that through discourse on identity and heritage that heritage preservation with citizen involvement develops shared memories and strengthens community identity while fighting against global homogenization [35]. Hmood (2023) further argued that the single implementation of policies will not achieve effective heritage preservation because residents need to understand heritage conservation as an inclusive social enterprise, not as a governmental edict [36]. To evolve into a sustainable city, Riyadh needs two approaches that combine strict protection measures with educational and financial systems that strengthen community empowerment. Integration between top-down policies and bottom-up participation enables Riyadh to defend its architectural heritage and attain international urban objectives.

4. Discussion

4.1. Interpretations of Key Findings

The findings indicate that the city of Riyadh manages to unite both contemporary development and heritage protection by implementing complex strategies. Research indicates that modern developments must incorporate traditional Najdi architectural features, including geometric designs with enclosed courtyards, into their architecture. The findings indicate that the city of Riyadh manages to unite both contemporary development and heritage protection by implementing complex strategies. Research indicates that modern developments must incorporate traditional Najdi architectural features, including geometric designs with enclosed courtyards, into their architecture. Almakaty (2025) and Mazzetto (2024) stated that through this method, the preservation of aesthetic and cultural values creates a local identity that rejects international globalization and modern urbanization forces [32, 33]. The approach to architecture exemplifies critical regionalism principles postulated by Kenneth Frampton because it combines global modern elements with local Najd architectural characteristics.



Fig. 3 An example of building in Riyadh that combines global modern elements with local Najd architectural characteristics

Source: The Author.

Alnaim (2022) and Alobailan and Alawad (2022) confirmed the simultaneous functional importance and symbolical worth of traditional building designs, thus substantiating Amos Rapoport's theories about environmental design as social symbolism [28, 29]. The approach demonstrates support for Kenneth Frampton's critical regionalism theory, whereby Frampton (2016) [8] and Popescu (2020) argued that the framework promotes buildings that maintain regional values instead of promoting global architectural trends [37]. The findings validated Rapoport's (2019) interpretation of built environments and identity development by confirming both functional aspects and symbolic value of traditional design [9]. The analysis reveals regulatory problems as the main obstacle to historical site protection because existing regulations are not effective. The development of educational programs, along with participatory planning projects, will foster town pride and a sense of ownership in Riyadh's cultural assets that promotes collective community self-understanding, according to Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity concept explained in the findings of De Bleeckere and Gerards (2017) and Mouzakitis (2015) [17, 18]. Sustainable development of Riyadh needs approaches that simultaneously protect traditional architecture and pursue architectural sensitivity, regulatory changes, and financial programs while engaging residents in civic matters. The combination of heritage protection with its transferability makes this approach useful for globalizing cities that need to resolve modernity-tradition dilemmas.

4.2. Comparison with Previous Studies

The research highlights essential steps for achieving sustainable development between heritage preservation and modern planning in Riyadh by enforcing proper architectural protection policies and public involvement. The results align Alghamdi et al. (2023) and Bahammam (2019) regarding continuing challenges related to policy enforcement weaknesses as well as funding shortages and insufficient heritage education for the public [4, 5]. Elsheshtawy (2021) [10] illustrates through his study of Dubai and Istanbul that strategic Ottoman architectural element retention produces culturally appropriate results in modern development projects. The presented cases verify financial incentives running as essential protective mechanisms for heritage properties through tax reduction programs and grants. The study upholds principles of critical regionalism as described by Frampton (2016) [8] by promoting modernization rooted in local cultures instead of producing environments dominated by global standardization. Using traditional architectural elements, including courtyards along with geometric forms, enables Riyadh to combat the disappearance of local identity, which characterizes international urban developments, while establishing its own unique place. Through Amos Rapoport's research on cultural meanings in built environments, architecture should maintain its community's social and cultural patterns. Hadrovic (2024) [11] points out that contemporary urban development pays little attention to

heritage preservation since it chooses to eliminate older structures to make room for new infrastructure. The development activities ought to receive parallel consideration with heritage preservation since both economic goals and cultural objectives can harmonize without conflict. The public interest needs in different communities vary according to Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity theory [17, 18], and therefore, public participation might not consistently lead to preservation success. An adaptive approach for heritage preservation in Riyadh requires universal best practices and solutions that incorporate national heritage conservation goals into modernization plans. The study highlights the need to merge traditional architectural elements into modern designs in Riyadh, as well as strict preservation rules and public involvement, because cultural preservation matters for sustainable urban development.

4.3. Implications and Future Directions

Riyadh's urban development strategies should combine modernization with profound cultural heritage protection. Urban planners need to create an urban development plan that directs modernizing efforts and cultural identity preservation to avoid heritage demise in Riyadh. Planners and architects should follow adaptive reuse practices and maintain traditional building elements in modern development. The government should strengthen heritage preservation regulations by providing financial benefits such as grants and tax benefits to motivate stakeholders to protect heritage sites. Community engagement through education-based initiatives and participatory programs will help develop public awareness about Riyadh's cultural heritage and group responsibility. Future investigations need to analyze best-practice models from different global cities which deal with heritage preservation under conditions of fast urban development. Research into the economic advantages of heritage preservation would help prove the necessity of blending cultural values with Riyadh's developing urban architecture.

5. Conclusion

The research examined how Riyadh can balance rapid modernization and the preservation of its architectural heritage to maintain a strong sense of cultural identity. A combination of secondary data analysis together with theoretical frameworks and case examples, operated to achieve the study objectives systematically for understanding Riyadh's complex urban transition based on a comparative qualitative analysis. The first objective examined the historical evolution of Riyadh's architecture, tracing the changes from traditional Najd architecture to contemporary styles. The research studied the city's development from traditional Najd architecture, which used mud-brick structures in enclosed courtyards, until modern skyscrapers and metropolitan layouts appeared by identifying dominant stages of growth. The city's development strategy underwent three noticeable stages, starting from King Abdulaziz's seizure of

Riyadh in 1902 until the contemporary period under Vision 2030.

The second objective examined the cultural, economic, and social factors driving architectural transformation. It was achieved through theoretical analysis that applied principles of globalization, urban modernity and the built environment's identity creation. Economic diversification strategies launched during Saudi Arabia's oil wealth growth period brought about new architectural styles that borrowed elements from worldwide design patterns. These transformations gained momentum because of social modernization alongside shifting lifestyles, while the government sought to establish Riyadh as a global metropolitan center. This study demonstrates that economic growth and social advantages from modernization come with the danger of losing traditional architectural identity unless proper control measures are implemented.

The third objective examined the role of urban planning and policies in preserving architectural heritage. The findings showed that urban planning and policy creation maintain key roles in safeguarding Riyadh's architectural heritage under its urbanization expansion. The findings reveal that the current protective heritage site laws feature weak enforcement controls, and modern development usually outpaces regulatory action. Modern developments across urban areas and infrastructure initiatives sometimes invade historical sites, thus diminishing their value. The preservation efforts face setbacks because of low public knowledge about heritage preservation and minimal involvement in these activities. The effectiveness of urban policies depends on establishing historical building adaptive reuse requirements, proper zoning requirements, and financial programs to save heritage structures.

The research question was also answered, which focused on how can Riyadh balance rapid modernization and the preservation of its architectural heritage to maintain a strong sense of cultural identity. The research finds that Riyadh requires critical regionalism to create its sustainable architecture because modernization must integrate genuine

Najdi elements properly. Government authorities need to implement stricter heritage safeguarding systems, provide economic support to the private sector and generate broader public culture knowledge. Riyadh will preserve its distinct architectural heritage through a balanced acceptance of worldwide ambitions and individual cultural traditions to develop into a powerful international center.

This research used theoretical models to illustrate the process of retaining worldwide architectural patterns and cultural identity to acquire sustainable knowledge about city development. The research delivers foundational instructions to professionals in architecture, urban planning, and development, requiring them to utilize traditional methods and adaptive reuse principles in current practices. Urban expansion development must defend architectural, cultural values and historic landmarks of built constructions. The research results indicate that heritage preservation laws need strong conceptual support from community-based policy implementation methods. The push from professional groups results in institutional partnerships that develop urban spaces through cultural heritage principles in combination with economic progress and social mechanisms.

5.1. Limitations of the Study

Results from Riyadh only extend through city limits since different geographic areas possess distinct cultural, economic and political aspects. The current academic study limitations can be addressed through primary data acquisition and analysis involving multiple cities in future research work.

5.2. Recommendations for Future Research

Additional research should study Riyadh against modernized urban zones to establish universal guidelines that ensure heritage protection in development projects. The research quality can improve from several stakeholder viewpoints, including local people, policymakers, and architects. Future researchers must expand inquiries beyond preservation work effects to identify the socio-economic role of preservation activities for improving the practical application of research results.

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