



From Museumification to Performativization. A Performative Approach to Heritage Reuse. Cases from the United Arab Emirates

TECHNICAL ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

The notions of Performance and Performative are emerging in architectural design discourses including heritage processing and repurposing. The literature review shows that the terms are semantically wide and they are linked to a variety of concepts: the open form, the flexible, the dynamic, the event—based spatial settings and the active engagement with space.

The essay examines how – beyond museumification –the activation and the reuse of heritage sites can be seen through the lens of Performance and the concept of the Performative, and the difference between passive engagement and active engagement.

The essay has three folds aims unfolding as follow:

The first explores a literature review analysis of Performative and Performance in architectural discourse, arriving to explore those concepts in the discourses of reuse of historical heritage sites as exhibitions performative venues.

The second examines a proposed performative-oriented approach to the reuse of heritage sites which aims at a dynamic and active engagement with the space, opposing to museumification which usually leads to passive engagement while taking examples from Europe.

The third one will be centered on the case of the old heart of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates as a heritage site reinvented and inhabited by the Sharjah Art Foundation, which we will analyze through the lens of the Performative and the practice of Exhibiting.

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INTRODUCTION

Preservation and conservation practices and theories have evolved and keep evolving. Newer approaches seem to shift away from the traditional conservation and museumification of historic districts creating a passive touristic experience and purposes only. Contemporary practices are attempting to approach monuments and historic districts through a new holistic approach including performative and fluid processes seeing the heritage site as a living organism in the modern cities's new needs. Avoiding mono-functionality of the restored and preserved historical areas as only static museum objects, while still engaging them with holistic urban and cultural regeneration is still a challenge.

Museumification and performativisation are proposed and examined in this paper as two distinct approaches to the preservation, regeneration and presentation of historical districts. While museumification is a clear and defined concept in the discourses of conservation and heritage management, Performativisation or the Performative approach is still a semantically wide and flexible term that shall be investigated. The aims to investigate the concept, while examining international cases, arriving to study the case of Sharjah's historical heart where the performative practices of the Sharjah Art Foundation are taking place.

ESSAY'S ORGANIZATION AND METHODOLOGIES

Part 1 of the paper inquires the concept of Performativisation, first through starting with investigating the term in spatial design discourses – from exhibition design to architectural design – while tracking its importability into conservation and preservation discourses. Second through comparing it to Museumification.

Part 2 starts by examining international examples that shall clarify the semantic dimensions of Performativization and the manner of how this term can describe practices of preserving and transforming built heritage through engaging it with temporary and performative events.

Part 3 through a descriptive analysis of the Case of the historical heart of Sharjah in UAE, and then comparing it to the case of Al Shindagha museum district, draws and define a list of concrete and clearer differences between a case that deal with a heritage site as an active performative platform, and a case that deals with the site as static and passive museumified object. The comparative criteria(s) include: Engagement, Heritage presentation, Intensities of presence and occupancies, Heritage processing, Cultural objectives, Functional palette, and Spatial intervention.

The approach to the above research objectives is based on three methodologies:

Descriptive and Deductive: a theoretical investigation based on the properties of Performativisation as opposed to traditional Museumification regarding preservation, conservation and regeneration. This combines literature reviews, and key figures examples of performativised historical sites.

Descriptive and Inductive: a comparative analysis of two contrasting examples: One that represent museumification and one that represent performativization. The comparison is examined through the lenses of the seven criteria mentioned above.

Finally, the essay concludes by reflecting on the Pros and Cons of Performativisation and Museumification. And then it draws attention to common challenges and potentials for the evolving practices of managing and processing heritage sites.

1- PERFORMATIVISATION AND MUSEUMIFICATION OF HISTORIC DISTRICTS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

1-1 PERFORMATIVE SPACES

Performative as an emerging term in architectural and spatial design discourses is characterized with a semantic width. It goes beyond the simple analogy between space and performer or theater. A literature review analysis shows various interpretations and uses of the concept. Performative refers to the open-form and flexibility of the space that welcomes improvisation and changes (Signore, 2015). Performative is also linked to scenery and theatricality of spaces that induce a feeling of transportation into a certain mood or atmosphere (Janson, 2015). Performative refers to the play between intentional and unintentional, the planned and the unplanned, thus it is linked to a dynamic readiness of the space to perform and unfold beyond the original program of use (Leatherbarrow, 2005). Performative indicates a project in process with networked and non-linear mechanisms (McKenzie, 2002). Performative allows architecture to be liberated from disciplinarity and to borrow tools from performance (Lavin, 2011). However, despite the semantic width of performative, and the presence of various definitions, one can note that they all intersect around the concept of dynamic openness, and flexibility. Performative-oriented spatial design refers to the ability of the space to perform a multitude of tasks simultaneously and or individually-occasionally, in addition to its ability to communicate content (Kassem, 2022).

1-2 A DOUBLE ROLE OF HERITAGE SITES: EXHIBITING AND SELF-EXHIBITING

Exposed architectural features, as in the cases of ruins, damaged buildings, sites in decay or archaeology can be seen as exposed exhibited layers. Layers of materiality, uses and traces of happenings self-exhibit and auto-narrate the history of space. Careful and gentle approaches to renovation/adaptive reuse succeed aims to add to this stratification of layers while keeping them readable at the same time. Thus, one may observe the contrast between the old and the new and read a chronological evolution of layers, detecting the different stages of the evolvement of the building, and the events that shaped its current form and performance.

As state of the art, the heritage space performs as the exhibit (exhibiting itself, auto-exhibiting), and by assigning to it the task of hosting exhibitions, additionally layers are created leading to explicit performative qualities. The spatial performance of the heritage site gets adapted to host temporary or permanent art, performances, and happenings. The functional palette of the space will therefore be diversified, hybridized and performative; the site will be playing a variety of roles, occasionally and/or simultaneously, networked and on-demand.

1-3 PERFORMATIVE AND PERFORMANCE BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND EXHIBITION DESIGN

Experimenting the space-performance experience started since the 70 s in the field of art installation. These trends of Performance through the mediums of objects, humans, and spaces had also influenced the space design discourse. The concept is to push the space from a latent silent status towards a performative status. This is mostly applicable in Performance-art, art-installation and exhibition design. This approach is emphasized by the expression of “Making spaces talk” of Uwe Brueckner, who believes that a given space can perform through a creative arrangement, choreography and dramatization (Brueckner, 2008). Thus, spaces could play a more complex communicative role, and it could perform new functions and acquire new behaviors – temporarily or permanently – through soft or solid interventions. The performance of the space exercised on and with the users is the media of communication or the communication itself.

In an art installation, an art-performance, and an exhibition display, sets of interactions between materiality and bodies may be generated. The relationship between spaces, visitors’ bodies, curiosities, emotional and intellectual engagement, determines this set of interactions with and in front of a public add to the performative quality of the space during the happening. Furthermore, the performance and the space influence action and meaning-making (Griswold et al., 2013).

1-4 MUSEUMIFICATION AND PERFORMATIVISATION OF HISTORICAL DISTRICTS

Preservation and conservation practices and theories have evolved and keep evolving. Contemporary approaches seem to replace fragmentary and isolated processing of historic sites, museumified monuments and cities by a new holistic approach including all scales and all participatory processes including the promotion of synergies between educational institutions and stakeholders for the identification of the genius loci and the cultural heritage. The historic city – or at least the historical parts of cities – are now seen as a living organism that continues to exist in the modern society’s new needs. Thus, it should not be treated as a museum that will function only for tourism (Dimelli, 2019). Newer approaches avoid such mono-functionality of the historical areas in order not to let them gradually lose their other urban role. Furthermore, and through participatory processes the identity of the place can be recognized, and the cultural heritage can become a common consciousness, through strategies that shall contribute to the emergence of cultural activities, while the strengthening the diverse use of the spaces (Dimelli, 2019). For here the importance of temporary and performative uses of the historical spaces, as a way to allow other type of uses. The in-betweenness of the events exhibitions, biennials, performances, etc...) shall give place and times of other practices and presences in the space. While the traditional museumification of the historical area may dictate a limited set of scenarios possible to happen in the preserved place. An example that can be recalled in those regards is Frankfurt’s Altstadt, which is the historical center that was reconstructed as a simulated museumified historic setting, is facing the challenge as remaining empty sparking worries about lack of authenticity and homogeneity. The reconstruction project has faced criticism for its ability to erase historical scars and the challenge of long-term sustainability (Čamprag 2016).

Museumification and performativisation are two distinct approaches to the preservation and presentation of historical districts, and they represent different philosophies in heritage conservation and cultural management. While museumification is a clearer known term, performativisation – as semantically wide and flexible term- is proposed to indicate a comprehensive approach to preservation, presentation and performative repurposing of historical sites. We seek to clarify performativization through the key differences between the two concepts listed below:

Museumification:

- Static Preservation: Museumification tends to emphasize the static preservation of historical districts. It involves the careful restoration and conservation of historic buildings and sites to

maintain them as they were in the past. The focus is on freezing the district in time to showcase its historical authenticity.

- The first stage of museumification is usually restoration, and preservation of preserve the site. However, it is necessary to understand and comprehend restoration as a complex, historically diverse process divided into different forms of activity (Darmanjan, 2021, p155).
- Passive Engagement: Museumification often encourages passive engagement with the historical district. Visitors are expected to observe and learn about the history and culture of the area through displays, exhibits, and informational plaques. It rarely encourages active participation.
- Authenticity and Accuracy: Museumification prioritizes the authenticity and accuracy of historical representation. It aims to present a faithful and accurate portrayal of the past, often adhering to strict historical standards.
- Preservation of Material Culture: This approach places a strong emphasis on preserving the material culture of the historical district, including architecture, artifacts, and structures. These elements are carefully conserved and protected.
- Educational: Museumification is primarily educational. It serves as a means of preserving history for future generations and fostering a deeper understanding of the past.
- Museumification seen as the transformation of history and heritage into valuable assets for commercial activities and development initiatives aiming at dual connection between heritage and development. The approach may be linked to consumption development strategies leverage built heritage to draw visitors to cities, whereas production-oriented strategies utilize heritage as a driver for creativity and innovation. Museumification as the transformation of heritage sites into tourist attractions or museum-like places aims to profit from their economic value (Čamprag, 2016)

Performativisation:

- Dynamic and Evolving: Performativisation emphasizes the dynamic and evolving nature of historical districts. It encourages active engagement with the district and recognizes that heritage is not static but a living entity that continues to evolve.
- Active Engagement: Performativisation encourages active engagement and participation. It involves cultural events, performances, and interactive experiences that enable visitors to immerse themselves in the culture and history of the district.
- Living Heritage: Performativisation considers heritage as a form of “living heritage.” It recognizes that traditions, customs, and cultural practices may

continue to evolve and adapt to contemporary contexts.

- Balancing Tradition and Modernity: Performativisation acknowledges that historical districts can adapt and coexist with contemporary elements, making them relevant to the present and future.
- Cultural Revitalization: This approach often leads to cultural revitalization and the preservation of intangible heritage, such as performing arts, rituals, and local traditions.
- Hybrid functional palette: This approach often aims at diversifying the uses of the historical district while reusing it.
- Occasionality: Performativisation is frequently linked to temporariness and ephemerality of the happenings occupying the spaces through exhibitions, meetings, workshops, seasonal performances, etc., which leads to in betweenness of occupancies.

In summary, museumification is a more conservative and preservation-oriented approach, while performativisation is a more dynamic and interactive approach that embraces change and modernity. The choice between these approaches often depends on the cultural, economic, and educational goals of the stakeholders involved in the management of historical districts. Some districts may combine elements of both approaches to strike a balance between preservation and active engagement.

2- EXHIBITIONS AND HERITAGE SITES: DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Recent trends in heritage practices, management and reuse/repurposing, encourage the awareness towards heritage via facilitating the study of heritage, and engaging these heritage sites in the cultural scene on a local, national, and international level, instead of a pure concentration and dedication on the touristic perspective and the ‘classical’ museumifications of those sites. Through the lens of performance and exhibitions, three types of strategies may be described:

2-1 EXHIBITING THE HERITAGE SITES

Creative strategies to exhibit the heritage on-site and off-site, and curate its spaces on-site and its exhibitions off-site is growing popular among museums and cultural institutions. The off-site scenario recalls the concept of travelling exhibitions that aims at promoting its content at various remote locations. The on-site scenario is mostly manifested in the visitors’ centers.

Visitor centers describe an environment used to enjoy a cultural, or landscape experience. It may form part of an existing heritage building or site, or it may be purposely built. It acts as a starting point from which visitors can orientate themselves both physically and emotionally while visiting the historical site. Visitor centers inform

and educate the public about their visit (Locker, 2011). Furthermore, when the visitors' center is located and designed within the heritage site and its fabric, it does not act as a simple gate to the site but it manifests itself as a stage overlooking the site, ensuring a level of scenery and theatricality. A significant example is the Whitby Abbey visitor centre, Whitby, UK, designed by Stanton Williams in 1998. The Abbey's visitor center has been sensitively created in a building of historic significance on site, and views of the abbey can be seen through the windows of the center. The Visitor centers act as a gateway to the heritage sites and an observation platform in addition to its strong educational value where school groups and workshop activities linked to the theme of landscape or heritage take place. What interests us is the visitor's center, inserted within the site, seen as a dramatic architectural intervention in the heritage site, which adds to the dramatization of the experience, the scenery-narrative relationship, and the performative theatrical qualities of the site.

2-2 EXHIBITING ABOUT HERITAGE

The strategy consists of holding exhibitions on-site or off-site about the heritage-related professions (archaeology, archiving, restoration, etc.) aiming at informing the public about such practices. Some of such exhibitions employ a performative and scenographical approach to communicate the content. For instance, an exhibition that simulates an archaeological digging site in progress. A good example is Westphalian State Museum of Archaeology, Herne, Atelier-Brückner, Permanent exhibition, 2003. In this exhibition the aim was not only to exhibit excavated materials and inform visitors about them, but also to inform the public about the methods and results of archaeology as a discipline relevant to cultural history, via creating a simulation of a walk-in archaeological digging field. The exhibition concept consisted on transforming the space into archaeological landscape in a stylized way by exhibiting below the ground level (Atelier Brückner, 2011). In addition to exhibiting two skull fragments of a member of *Homo sapiens* and a Neanderthal man – which are unspectacular at first glance – but then exhibiting their oversized x-ray pictures of the skulls awakened the curiosity of the visitor. In such scenarios Brückner's "form follows content" philosophy is highly applicable (Brückner, 2008).

2-3 EXHIBITING IN HERITAGE SITES

The heritage site is adapted to host exhibitions which are not necessarily related to it, neither to the theme of heritage. The space is used as art and performance stage. Such site-specific exhibitions push the heritage space to acquire performative qualities and allow it to be re-discovered with different experience.

In their study of the participatory arts initiatives in Java, Indonesia, Ernest Irwandi, Setiawan Sabana, Andryanto Rikrik Kusmara & Tisna Sanjayandonesia examined how dealing with the villages as a living gallery

in a participatory manner helped shaping the place's identity transforming them from slums into colorful villages and tourist destinations. The participatory art project helps residents to reimagine their place, and connect ideas with place's history and culture. The authors have emphasized on the importance of a participatory art pedagogy oriented toward incorporating art with social empowerment (Irwandi et al., 2023).

The interest of this paper is "Exhibiting in heritage sites", considered as the scenario where the performative qualities and mechanisms – when reinventing and repurposing a heritage space – are central. The following two examples from Milan and Venice represent such approaches to using heritage site as an active platform for temporary events. Such practices reveal the latent performative and spatial potential of the historical space:

Milan's Design weeks

During the design week, such a Fuorisalone, the furniture design event, temporary spatial interventions invade the architecture of the city, mainly the historical center. Site-specific display installations are installed in courtyards of historical villas, atriums of palaces, halls and corridors of castles. Most of those works consist of spatial installations designed to create a narrative for the exhibited brand through a dynamic spatial performance. Such happening invites people to rediscover places in their historical and industrial parts of the city from newer perspectives. It is also an opportunity to access private palaces and courtyards which are usually private and closed to the public. This recalls the Open Courtyards initiative, an event organized by the Italian Historic Houses Association which, for over twenty-five years, has allowed access to the hidden courtyards and gardens often closed to the public of the most prestigious historical buildings in Milan. The strategy is useful in cases where the built heritage is within the private domain but worth exposing to the masses.

Made by architects, designers or artists, the practice of installing temporary display in historical places manifests a kind of curatorial, experimental, and soft approach to architectural interventions, more like a temporary adaptive-reuse. The interventions in play are made only through a creative dialogue with the existing space and objects. The intervention aims at grafting the functional power of the new onto the historical through interrogating the building, strengthening of the monument, and transforming it into a new work of art involved in the present. The seasonal repetition of such events puts the hosting buildings – especially the neglected ones – in the center of the daily lives of the city. However this may lead sometimes to a territorialization of events and functions. From a space rearranged to host exhibitions and events, to a space reinvented to generate ones, such practices gradually regenerate heritage instead of simply museumify it.

Venice Biennial Off-site Pavilions

Similar scenario happens in Venice during the Biennials, where churches, schools, palaces, universities and others are rented entirely or partially to house the off-site Pavilions for the participating countries who do not have a space within the Giardini or the Arsenals. This actually offers a very interesting parallel experience. In fact, for some the experience of the biennial at the Arsenals can be seen as tiring and monotonous. Despite the variety of the pavilions installed inside, the dominant experience is still a big non-human scale ex-industrial space, where the spatial quality is the same everywhere you are in the areas of the arsenals. The amount concentration of exhibits is overwhelming. Furthermore, the whole arsenal area seems actually like an independent island within Venice far from the center (Fonda, 2023). However, the Giardini of the biennial offers a more interesting spatial experience due to the spatial-architectural diversity, and the indoor-outdoor breaks where each pavilion is an independent building with a different architectural style. On the other hand, the off-site national pavilions which are spread in the city's historical fabric; in schools' courtyards, churches, ex-hospitals, etc. offer a diverse spatial experience, where the exhibitions act as site-specific installations (Kassem, 2024). In this case the visitor enjoys historical heritage and the contemporary exhibits at once. Furthermore, the off-site installations draw attention to hidden corners within the historical fabric of the city as the attention of the crowd is taken to the less touristy and mainstream Venetian monuments. Example; the Complesso Ospedaletto in Venice an ex-historical hospital complex which is used as exhibition venue during the Biennials.

3- THE HEART OF SHARJAH. FROM EXTREME CONSERVATION TO PERFORMATIVIZATION

3-1 SHARJAH'S HISTORICAL HEART. BACKGROUND

The historical heart of Sharjah, often referred to as the "Heart of Sharjah," is the city's old and culturally rich

district. It offers a glimpse into the emirate's rich history and heritage. The restoration of this area has been a significant effort to preserve and showcase the historical and cultural significance of Sharjah.

The historical heart of Sharjah represents the city's past and is a reflection of its traditional architectural and cultural heritage. It includes various historic buildings, traditional souks (markets), mosques, and other structures that have been integral to the emirate's history.

The historical district was restored and reconstructed after the demolition of the modernist constructions which showed a lack of identity. The historical vernacular buildings were originally pulled down to be replaced by modern buildings. The new fabric became "a contemporary reinterpretation of the old in a polished and structurally sustainable form, recapturing the quality of the vernacular aesthetic, while restoring a particular local cultural image that was attached to the original urban fabric" (Damluji, 2006). Such radical conservation measures, were necessary to restore the new vernacular that has "a valid and functional design ethos; and it is architecturally far more pleasing in style, and sympathetic to the environment, social life and the natural surroundings, than the 'modern' mediocrity that preceded it" (Damluji, 2006).

The restoration work has been carried out by the Directorate of Heritage and Conservation, under the auspices of the Department of Culture and Information, the Government of Sharjah. In the restored historical quarter, now called the Heart of Sharjah, four houses (al Sirkāl (Figure 1), now an art gallery, Bayt 'Umayr, 'Ubayd al Shāmsī and Bayt al Sarī, now the Arts Fen Café (Figure 2) and al Dalīl mosque have all been renovated. "The impression of the old quarter cluster – narrow shaded streets, whitewashed façades, pedestrian walkways, articulated openings and elaborately carved wooden doors – have all been recreated" (Damluji, 2006). The buildings have been repurposed as art galleries and cultural venues, restored using the original building materials with integrated lighting, air-conditioning and upgraded additions. At al Murayjah quarter, the houses



Figure 1 Left: the renovated Bait Alserkal, Sharjah. Right: A path between the art galleries, Sharjah (photos by authors).

of Āl Nābūdāh (the Heritage Museum now), Bayt Saʿīd al Shāmsī (now housing the Islamic Museum), and others were also renovated.

The restoration work has focused on preserving the traditional Arabic architecture, including wind towers (barajil), courtyards, and other architectural elements that are significant to the region's heritage. Care has been taken to ensure that the historical authenticity of the structures is maintained. One of the most iconic landmarks in the historical heart of Sharjah is Al Hisn Sharjah, also known as the Sharjah Fort (Figure 3). It was the former residence of the ruling Al Qasimi family and has undergone extensive restoration to become a museum. The district includes various traditional souks and markets, such as the Al Arsa Souk and the

Al Shanasiyah Souk, where visitors can buy traditional crafts, textiles, spices, and other goods. These markets add to the overall cultural experience. The restoration and preservation of the historical heart of Sharjah have made it a popular tourist destination, attracting both local and international visitors interested in exploring the heritage and culture of the UAE.

However, beyond restoration, urban regeneration of the historical district is becoming the real challenge in the post-restoration. There are more potentialities in relying on urban regeneration of historical neighborhoods or districts rather than individual restoration, and museumification of historic landmarks. The striving challenge is to reinforce the existing restored urban identity and or create a new one. The old districts can



Figure 2 Left: Reconstruction and renovation in progress at the heart of Sharjah. Right: The pathway to the Fen Café. (photos by authors).



Figure 3 Al Hisn, Sharjah Fort (photos by authors).

be the starting points to direct future urban regeneration of an entire city. Thus, stakeholders and planners must consider newer concepts of regeneration such as diversity of rehabilitation aims and adding a variety of new functions/mixed uses to the old district. The role of culture is central to any regeneration process, including both tangible and intangible components, and the participation of inhabitants and stakeholders (Boussaa et al., 2023). From those arguments – in the following paragraphs -we will discuss the major role of the Sharjah Art Foundation and the its performative approach the the reuse of the historical district.

3-2 THE SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION (SAF)

The Sharjah Art Foundation is a prominent cultural institution located in the emirate of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. Established in 2009, the foundation plays a vital role in promoting and supporting contemporary art and cultural activities in the region. It was founded by Sheikh Hoor Al Qasimi, who serves as its President. The foundation's mission is to nurture the growth and understanding of contemporary art and culture within the emirate of Sharjah, the UAE, and the broader Middle East region. The Sharjah Art Foundation organizes and hosts a wide range of programs and initiatives. These include exhibitions, artist residencies, film screenings, educational activities, public art projects, and cultural events.

The foundation operates several cultural spaces and venues in Sharjah, including the Sharjah Art Foundation Art Spaces, which are converted heritage buildings serving as exhibition spaces and studios. It also includes the Sharjah Art Foundation's Art Center, which offers workshops and courses, and the Rain Room, an immersive permanent art installation.

One of the foundation's most significant contributions to the global art scene is the Sharjah Art Biennial and recently the Sharjah Architecture Triennial. This Biennial has been a platform for artists from around the world to showcase their work and engage in dialogues about important social and political issues. The Sharjah Architecture Triennial is also a recent initiative by SAF. It is gradually becoming a major international event dedicated to the fields of architecture and urbanism. It provides a platform for architects, urban planners, designers, artists, and academics to engage in critical discourse, exhibition, and exploration of architectural and urban issues. The Triennial, first launched in 2019, is a part of the Sharjah Art Foundation's extensive program of events and initiatives.

The foundation actively engages with the local community in Sharjah, offering educational programs, workshops, and events that aim to inspire and educate residents about contemporary art and culture. The Sharjah Art Foundation has helped the region gain recognition in the global art world and has fostered a greater appreciation for contemporary art and culture.

The restoration of the historical heart of Sharjah has been a priority for the local government and the Sharjah Art Foundation with its architecture department. The Sharjah Art Foundation, in particular, has been instrumental in transforming the area into a vibrant cultural district, hosting art exhibitions, performances, workshops, and other events in these historic spaces. The restoration efforts aim to maintain the original architecture and design of the buildings while also making them functional for contemporary use. The historical heart of Sharjah has become a hub for cultural and artistic activities. The renovated and reconstructed courtyard houses are now platforms for temporary exhibitions.

The historical heart of Sharjah, the SAF, contemporary art, and performance are all interconnected in a complex web of mutual influences and relations. Together, they have played a significant role in shaping Sharjah's cultural landscape and fostering a dynamic creative environment.

The historical heart of Sharjah served as a backdrop of inspiration for contemporary artists and performers. The preservation and restoration efforts in this area have not only maintained its historical and architectural significance but also provided a unique and culturally rich setting for contemporary art and performance. Sharjah Art Foundation's Initiatives were key player in the region's contemporary art scene, has utilized the historical heart of Sharjah as a canvas for creative expression. The Foundation has organized exhibitions, installations, and performances within the historic district. This integration of contemporary art with the traditional environment showcases a juxtaposition of old and new, highlighting the continuity of cultural expression.

The dialogue with tradition became a relevant mechanism for artistic and cultural productions. Contemporary artists and performers often engage with the historical and cultural elements of the area. They draw inspiration from the architecture, heritage, and traditions found in the historical heart of Sharjah and site specific art installations and art performances. The Sharjah Art Foundation's international collaborations and residency programs have brought contemporary artists from around the world to Sharjah. This exchange fosters a cross-cultural dialogue that influences and enriches the local art and performance scene. This dialogue between the contemporary and the traditional allows for a deeper exploration of local culture and identity. Contemporary artists and performers in Sharjah often reinterpret traditional elements found in the historical heart of Sharjah. They may incorporate traditional materials, motifs, or cultural symbols into their work, creating a fusion of old and new that reflects the evolution of culture and identity. However, the audience for those shows is still limited. A good example is the annual event "Perform Sharjah" curated by Tarek Abou El Fetouh.

The Sharjah Art Foundation organizes also cultural programming that often includes a wide range of contemporary art and performance events. These may be held in historical buildings, courtyards, and other traditional spaces, creating a unique and immersive experience for audiences (Figure 4). They offer educational programs and cultural events to involve and educate the local population. This helps in bridging the gap between the traditional and the contemporary and fosters a sense of cultural continuity. Bait Obeid Al Shamsi with its spacious courtyard has been the main venue for such activities.

The interconnectedness of the historical Heart of Sharjah, the SAF, contemporary art, and performance showcases the dynamic and evolving nature of culture and creativity in the region. It highlights the way in which tradition and innovation can coexist and mutually enrich each other, creating a vibrant and culturally diverse environment (Figures 4–6).

The activities of the Sharjah Art Foundation has also extended towards modernist heritage sites in Sharjah. The Sharjah Architecture Triennial in particular has a notable relationship with modernist heritage in Sharjah,

particularly concerning the “Flying Saucer” (Figure 7) or “Roundabout Building” and the Qasimia School (Figure 8). The Flying Saucer is a modernist architectural landmark in Sharjah. It was originally built as a roundabout, housing a cafeteria and a petrol station. The building’s unique circular shape and futuristic design made it an iconic structure in the city. During the Sharjah Architecture Triennial, this structure has been the subject of architectural exploration and interpretation. It has been discussed as a symbol of modernist architecture and urban planning in the region. Al Qasimia School is one of the oldest and most prestigious educational institutions in the UAE. It is known for its distinctive modernist architectural design, characterized by its clean lines and simple geometric shapes. The Sharjah Architecture Triennial concentrates their exhibitions and workshops in that school in particular.

The Sharjah Architecture Triennial encourages critical examinations of architectural heritage, including modernist structures like the “Flying Saucer” and the Qasimia School, and how they fit into the broader context of urban planning and architectural evolution in the region. Through exhibitions, installations,



Figure 4 Left: Outdoor spaces. Right: The Fen Café. (photos by authors).



Figure 5 Left: Exhibitions at one of the galleries. Middle: Exhibitions at the renovated Bait Alserkal during Sharjah Art Biennial 2023. Right: The use of the coral stone as tribute to the traditional vernacular emirati architecture. (photos by authors).

discussions, and workshops, the Triennial fosters a deeper understanding of architectural heritage, the challenges of urban development, and the role of architecture in shaping the future of Sharjah and the Gulf region. The Flying Saucer in particular with its domed hall, manifested as convenient for temporary exhibitions, site-specific installations and art-performances in particular.

The performance of Laurence Bou Hamdan during the March Meetings 2022, an annual event organized by SAF that includes art exhibitions, talks and performances was a great example benefitting from acoustic qualities of the hall. The performance titled *Daght Jawi*, a live-audio visual Essay, was a site-specific presentation at the Flying Saucer. The occasional and on-demand



Figure 6 The square in front of the offices of the SAF and Bait Alserkal used as a public space by the local residents.



Figure 7 The Flying Saucer has been renovated to become an exhibition venue for the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF).



Figure 8 The Qasimia School in Sharjah (<https://www.allzonedesignall.com/project/set-the-controls-to-the-heart-of-the-sun>).

performativization of those buildings gave them a new life and saved them from demolition and neglect.

3-3 ACOMPARISON WITH THE AL SHINDAGHA MUSEUM DISTRICT IN DUBAI

Al Shindagha museum district is the result of the museumification of a number of historical houses in Al Shindagha historical neighbourhood in Dubai. The museumification refers to the process of transforming this historical district into an open-air museum complex to preserve its cultural and architectural heritage. Al Shindagha area is located along the Dubai Creek and is known for its traditional vernacular Emirati architecture. The project aims to conserve and showcase the district’s rich history, offering visitors a glimpse into Dubai’s past. Al Shindagha is one of the oldest residential areas in Dubai, dating back to the late 19th century. It is characterized by its wind tower architecture, narrow alleyways, traditional courtyard houses, and cultural heritage. The museumification of Al Shindagha converted the space into a cultural district that houses several museums, such as:

- Story of the Creek Museum.
- Perfume Museum.
- Al Maktoum Museum, which was once the residence of Sheikh Saeed Al Maktoum, the former ruler of Dubai.
- Life on land Museum.
- Life and society Museums.
- Navigation Museum.
- Poetry Museum.
- Beauty, jewelry, traditional crafts and medicine Museums.
- Horse Museum.

Al Shindagha museums often host cultural and educational events, including workshops, lectures, and exhibitions that aim to engage the community and tourists.

A notable aspect is the refined exhibits design and interior interventions that occurred within the restored museumified buildings resulting in an interesting marriage between the vernacular language and the contemporary

one. The interior interventions become a major interior architectural exhibit.

Performance differences between Al Shindagha and Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF)

The concepts of museumification and performativization represent two different approaches to the use and transformation of historical spaces. These approaches have distinct characteristics that influence the performance and experience of the spaces involved. The key differences between the cases of Al Shindagha and the Sharjah Art Foundation’s occupation of the historical heart are as below (see Table 1):

- Museumification (Al Shindagha Museum):
- Static Presentation: Museumification typically presents historical spaces in a static and preserved manner. The focus is on maintaining the authenticity and historical accuracy of the space, allowing visitors to observe and learn about the past.
- Passive Engagement: Visitors to museumified spaces are often passive participants. They interact with the space by observing exhibits, reading informative plaques, and learning about the history and culture associated with the site.
- Conservation of Heritage: The primary goal of museumification is the conservation of heritage, focusing on the preservation of historical architecture, artifacts, and cultural authenticity.
- Educational and Reflective: Museumified spaces are primarily educational and reflective. They serve as places for learning and contemplation, providing historical context and insights.

Performativization (Sharjah Art Foundation in the historical Heart of Sharjah):

- Performativization encourages dynamic and interactive engagement with historical spaces and neglected corners of the city. The space becomes a platform for a wide range of creative and cultural activities.
- Temporariness and renewal: the exhibitions, the events and the public programs hosted in the Heart

	ENGAGEMENT	HERITAGE PRESENTATION	INTENSITIES OF PRESENCE AND OCCUPANCY	HERITAGE PROCESSING	CULTURAL OBJECTIVES	FUNCTIONAL PALETTE	SPATIAL INTERVENTIONS
Museumification The Case of AlShindagha	passive	Static	Permanent but diluted	Conservation	education	Definded Mostly monofunctional	Fixed
Performativization The case of SAF	active	Dynamic &interactive	Occasional and seasonal but concentrated	Living heritage Reuse	Cultural revitalization	Hybrid and changing	Changing and temporary

Table 1 Key differences between museumification (the case of Al Shindagha) and performativization (the case of SAF).

of sharjah are mainly temporary and site-specific which put the spaces in a continuous rediscovery and experimentations.

- Active engagement: Visitors actively engage with the space, participating in cultural and artistic events, performances, and activities. They become part of the performance of the space and part of the performance in the space.
- Living heritage: Performativization views historical spaces as “living heritage.” The space adapts to the present, hosting contemporary art and cultural expressions that may incorporate or reinterpret traditional elements.
- Balancing tradition and modernity while introducing contemporary expressions, creating a fusion of the old and the new.
- Cultural revitalization through the transmission of cultural knowledge and practices to new generations through performances and events.

In summary, the primary difference between museumification and performativization lies in their approach to historical spaces. Museumification focuses on static preservation and educational reflection, while performativization transforms spaces into dynamic, interactive hubs of cultural and artistic activities that engage visitors and foster cultural vitality. Both approaches have their merits, and the choice between them often depends on the goals of cultural preservation, community engagement, and economic development.

CONCLUSION

A COMMON CHALLENGE

From restoration, conservation and museumification, to soft intervention, to curatorial work on the built heritage space, all of those practices shall complement each other around a performative-oriented strategy. However, one of the major common challenges noted at the two cases is that whenever there are no events, no performance, no happenings, the spaces returns to a quietness and emptiness. Obviously, a lack of an authentic sustainable engagement with the context is a major reason for this. The common challenge faced by museumification and performativization is a strongly contrastful lifelessness of the spaces in their post-performance and post-event status. This issue opens many questions and reflections; is it a matter of lack of authentic engagement with the context? What is the impact on the overall experience and vitality of these spaces? Is quietness and emptiness a favourable quality?

The quietness and “dead” feeling in these spaces is often influenced by seasonal and temporal variations. Many cultural and art events are scheduled during specific times, and during the off-season or in-between events,

spaces may lack vibrancy whenever the functional palette is not rich enough to compensate.

Another challenging aspect is functional and social sustainability. The sustainability of programming in both museumified spaces and those undergoing performativization is a crucial challenge and potential. Organizing continuous events can be resource draining and may not always be feasible. In this case it will be useful to extend the program to include collaborations with local organizations, educational institutions, and cultural initiatives can help ensure a steady flow of events and activities in the spaces.

The involvement of the local community can play a significant role in addressing this challenge as well through encouraging residents to use these spaces for various purposes, such as gatherings, community events, or small-scale performances, can help maintain a sense of authenticity and life. In this regard, incorporating permanent or semi-permanent interactive installations in these spaces can provide opportunities for visitors to engage with the context even when no formal events are scheduled.

The third challenge concerns gentrification and authenticity. It is the challenge of balancing authenticity and softening gentrification in cultural preservation. Continuous engagement is an ongoing challenge for heritage spaces. The key is to find creative ways to sustain interest and activity while respecting the historical and architectural significance of the space. It often requires a combination of community involvement, creative programming, and adaptability to ensure these spaces remain vibrant and culturally relevant including lively public spaces. Specific reconstruction, re-design, reuse taking in consideration the urban regional culture is a necessity in creating personalized urban public space (Ya Li & Sahari 2022).

From those reflections, we believe that it is necessary to return to the lens of Performative and Performance elaborated from the vast definitions of Performative as a project characterized by flexible mechanisms and openness for a various intensities of presences and uses, and an openness for the play between the planned and the unplanned, the temporary and the permanent, while maintaining a hybrid multifunctional palette. Performative qualities become a mode of survival and liveliness. This paper aimed at exploring and defining Performativism in the field of conservation and preservation, seen as a concept under construction that shall require further semantic and theoretical research and its impact on the practices of conservation of built heritage.

PERFORMATIVIZATION'S PROS AND CONS

Transforming a historical district into art spaces can have several advantages and drawbacks. The decision to do so should take into account various factors, including the district's historical and cultural significance, the local community's needs and aspirations, and the goals of the

transformation project. Here are the pros and cons of such a transformation:

Pros:

Territorilazion of art exhibitions and performances can bring new life and vibrancy to a historical district. Attracting artists, performers, and cultural enthusiasts, in addition to collaboration within the creative sector will lead to a cultural revitalization. The revitalized area will be transformed into a hub of cultural activity. This in its turn will lead to an economic development and a boost for the local economy.

Transforming historical buildings into art spaces can help preserve their architectural and historical value. This reuse ensures that these spaces are maintained, which is a form of sustainability. Furthermore, the art foundation often offers educational programs, workshops, and cultural events that engage the local community, which will lead to a sort of social sustainability. This can foster a sense of ownership [belonging] and pride among residents.

Cons:

- **Gentrification:** The transformation of a historical district into art spaces can lead to gentrification. Rising property values and rents may displace long-time residents and businesses, changing the socio-economic fabric of the area.
- **Loss of Authenticity:** The influx of art galleries, boutiques, and trendy cafes may dilute the district's authentic character, leading to a loss of the historical and cultural essence that made it unique.
- **Accessibility and loss of familiarity:** The overintellectualization of historical districts transformed into contemporary art platform makes it less familiar to its immediate context, while being targeting a certain audience and intellectual elites. The transformation may make the area less accessible to low-income individuals and families who may find it difficult to afford the new cost of living or the prices of art-related activities.
- **Cultural bubble and Commodification:** There is a risk of turning culture into an ephemeral temporary happenings and seasonal events that fade away without a long transformative effect, which questions the transformative power of the performative. There is also the risk to transform art into commodity, where art spaces primarily serve tourists and commercial interests, rather than genuinely nurturing local artistic and cultural expressions.

In conclusion, transforming a historical district into art and performance spaces can be a double-edged sword. While it can bring cultural and economic benefits, it may also bring about gentrification, loss of authenticity, and other social and economic challenges. Successful projects often require careful planning, community involvement, and a commitment to preserving the district's unique heritage while promoting artistic and cultural activities.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGpt in order to improve the verbalization and phrasing of some ideas in English. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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