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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PHILOSOPHY OF URBAN SPACE AND ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE: CONTEMPORARY THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. *The contemporary city is a complex entity where historical heritage faces pressures from globalization, digitalization, and post-colonial reconsideration. This theoretical study aims to analyze how urban space, as an arena for socio-cultural and political interaction, is transformed by architectural heritage, and to define the role of digital technologies in its preservation and conceptualization. The research employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating methods from philosophical analysis and critical urban studies. Its foundation is a comparative analysis of key transformation concepts: reconstruction, revitalization, renovation, and gentrification. These are examined not merely as urban practices but as philosophical constructs for deconstructing contemporary urban processes. The study finds that architectural heritage is evolving from a passive object of preservation into an active symbolic resource that shapes cultural identity and collective memory. Digitalization is identified as a key factor, not only documenting but also fundamentally redefining how heritage is conceptualized and engaged with. Furthermore, processes like gentrification and renovation are shown to be not just economic mechanisms but also instruments of cultural policy, influencing the inclusion or exclusion of social groups from the urban narrative. The scientific novelty of the work lies in synthesizing classical philosophical approaches with digital heritage practices. We conclude that modern urban philosophy must account for the dialectic of the material and the digital, where architectural heritage becomes a platform for cultural sustainability. This interdisciplinary perspective offers a refined framework for analyzing the evolving urban environment, highlighting heritage's role as a dynamic agent in city formation. The findings provide a theoretical basis for developing integrated urban strategies that balance technological innovation with the preservation of cultural authenticity.*

Keywords: *philosophy of urban space, architectural heritage, spatial transformation, revitalization, renovation, gentrification, cultural policy*

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ҚАЛАЛЫҚ КЕҢІСТІК ФИЛОСОФИЯСЫ ЖӘНЕ СӘУЛЕТ МҰРАСЫ: ЗАМАНАУИ ТЕОРИЯЛЫҚ КӨЗҚАРАСТАР

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Аңдатпа. Қазіргі қала жаһандану, цифрландыру және постколониалдық қайта ойлау үдерістерінің қысымына ұшырайтын тарихи-мәдени мұра тоғысқан күрделі конгломерат болып табылады. Осы теориялық зерттеудің мақсаты – қалалық кеңістік мәдени, әлеуметтік және саяси өзара әрекеттестіктер аренасы ретінде сәулет мұрасының ықпалы арқылы қалай трансформацияланатынын талдау және оны сақтау мен тұжырымдамалаудың құралы ретіндегі цифрлық технологиялардың рөлін айқындау. Мақаланың ғылыми жаңалығы – классикалық философиялық тәсілдерді заманауи цифрлық мұра тәжірибелерімен ұштастыра отырып, қалалық ортаны талдаудың пәнаралық болашағын қалыптастыруда. Зерттеу нәтижелері сәулет мұрасының тек қорғауға тиісті материалдық нысан ғана емес, сонымен қатар мәдени сәйкестікті, ұжымдық жады және мәдени тұрақтылықты қалыптастыратын символдық ресурсқа айналатынын көрсетеді. Зерттеу философиялық талдау мен сыни урбанистика әдістерін біріктіретін пәнаралық тәсілге сүйенеді. Әдістемелік негіз ретінде трансформацияның негізгі ұғымдары: реконструкция, ревитализация, реновация және джентрификацияға жүргізілген салыстырмалы талдау алынды. Бұл ұғымдар урбанистикалық тәжірибелер ретінде ғана емес, қазіргі қалалық үдерістерді деконструкциялауға арналған философиялық конструкттар ретінде қарастырылады. Зерттеу барысында сәулет мұрасының қазіргі контексте сақталған пассивті нысаннан мәдени сәйкестік пен ұжымдық жады қалыптастыратын белсенді символдық ресурсқа айналып келе жатқаны анықталды. Цифрландыру мұраны тек құжаттандыратын емес, сонымен қатар оны тұжырымдамалау мен онымен өзара әрекеттесу тәсілдерін қайта анықтайтын негізгі фактор екені айқындалды. Джентрификация мен реновация үдерістері жай экономикалық механизмдер ғана емес, қалалық нарративке белгілі әлеуметтік топтардың кірігуі немес шеттетілудің айқындайтын мәдени саясаттың тетіктері екені көрсетілді. Қорытындылай келе, қазіргі қаланың философиясы материалдық пен цифрлықтың диалектикасын ескеруді талап етеді, ал сәулет мұрасы мәдени тұрақтылықты қамтамасыз ететін платформаға айналады. Зерттеу нәтижелері технологиялық инновациялар мен мәдени түпнұсқалықты сақтауды теңгеретін кешенді қалалық стратегияларды әзірлеу үшін теориялық негіз қалайды. Сонымен қатар, қаланы тарихи сабақтастық пен өзгермелі цифрлық болашақ арасындағы тірі диалог ретінде тереңірек түсінуге септігін тигізеді.

Түйін сөздер қалалық кеңістік философиясы, сәулет мұрасы, кеңістік трансформациясы, ревитализация, реновация, джентрификация, мәдени саясат

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ФИЛОСОФИЯ ГОРОДСКОГО ПРОСТРАНСТВА И АРХИТЕКТУРНОЕ НАСЛЕДИЕ: СОВРЕМЕННЫЕ ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЕ ПОДХОДЫ

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Аннотация. Современный город представляет собой сложный когломерат, в котором историческое наследие подвергается давлению со стороны процессов глобализации, цифровизации и постколониального переосмысления. Цель данного теоретического исследования – проанализировать, как городское пространство, выступая ареной культурных, социальных и политических взаимодействий, трансформируется под влиянием архитектурного наследия, и определить роль цифровых технологий как инструмента его сохранения и концептуализации. Научная новизна статьи заключается в интеграции классических философских подходов с современными практиками цифрового наследия, что позволяет формировать междисциплинарную перспективу анализа городской среды. Исследование демонстрирует, что архитектурное наследие становится не только материальным объектом охраны, но и символическим ресурсом формирования культурной идентичности, памяти и культурной устойчивости. Исследование опирается на междисциплинарный подход, интегрирующий методы философского анализа и критической урбанистики. Методологической основой выступает сравнительный анализ ключевых концептов трансформации: реконструкции, ревитализации, реновации и джентрификации. Данные понятия рассматриваются не только как урбанистические практики, но и как философские конструкты для деконструкции современных городских процессов. В ходе исследования выявлено, что архитектурное наследие в современном контексте эволюционирует от пассивного объекта сохранения в активный символический ресурс, формирующий культурную идентичность и коллективную память. Установлено, что цифровизация выступает ключевым фактором, не только документирующим, но и переопределяющим способы концептуализации и взаимодействия с наследием. Показано, что процессы джентрификации и реновации являются не просто экономическими механизмами, но и инструментами культурной политики, определяющими включенность или исключение определенных социальных групп из городского нарратива. Делается вывод о том, архитектурное наследие является платформой для обеспечения культурной устойчивости. Результаты исследования создают теоретическую базу для разработки комплексных городских стратегий, балансирующих технологические инновации с сохранением культурной аутентичности. Работа вносит вклад в понимание города как живого диалога между исторической преемственностью и цифровым будущим.

Ключевые слова: архитектурный проект, идейная концепция, архитектурная среда, формообразование, устойчивое развитие

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest.

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT) solely for editorial assistance, such as improving phrasing and checking grammar, spelling, and punctuation. All ideas, interpretations, and conclusions are the responsibility of the authors, who take full accountability for the content of the article.

АЛҒЫС / ҚАРЖЫЛАНДЫРУ КӨЗІ

Зерттеу Қазақстан Республикасы Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігі Ғылым комитетінің AP26105029 «Алматы қаласының тарихы мен мәдениетінің сәулет ескерткіштерін концептуалдау және қорғау үшін цифрлық ақпараттық порталды (ЦАП) құру» гранттық қаржыландыру аясында орындалды.

МҮДДЕЛЕР ҚАҚТЫҒЫСЫ

Авторлар мүдделер қақтығысы жоқ деп мәлімдейді.

Мақаланы дайындау барысында авторлар жасанды интеллект құралдарын (ChatGPT) тек редакциялық көмек мақсатында пайдаланды: тұжырымдарды жетілдіру, грамматикалық, орфографиялық және тыныс белгілеріндегі қателерді тексеру үшін. Барлық идеялар, интерпретациялар мен қорытындылар авторларға тиесілі, және олар мақаланың мазмұнына толық жауапты.

БЛАГОДАРНОСТИ/ИСТОЧНИК ФИНАНСИРОВАНИЯ

Исследование проводилось в рамках грантового финансирования Комитета науки Министерства науки и высшего образования Республики Казахстан AP26105029 «Создание цифрового информационного портала (ЦИП) для концептуализации и защиты архитектурных памятников истории и культуры г. Алматы».

КОНФЛИКТ ИНТЕРЕСОВ

Авторы заявляют, что конфликта интересов нет.

При подготовке рукописи авторы использовали инструменты искусственного интеллекта (ChatGPT) исключительно для редакторской поддержки: корректировки формулировок, проверки грамматических, орфографических и пунктуационных ошибок. Все идеи, интерпретации и выводы принадлежат авторам, которые несут полную ответственность за содержание статьи.

1 INTRODUCTION

Modern cities are becoming complex cultural and political constructs where architectural heritage plays a central role. Under the influence of globalization, digitalization, and postcolonial cultural policy processes, architectural heritage is no longer only an object of preservation. It becomes an active space that forms cultural identity, collective memory, and social dialogue. The philosophical tradition of analyzing urban space offers strong conceptual tools to better understand these processes.

The relevance of this research is defined by the fact that in conditions of rapid urbanization and global modernization, architectural heritage becomes vulnerable to commercialization, gentrification, and the loss of local values. However, this same heritage is recognized as a key mediator between the past and the future, shaping the stability and adaptability of urban communities. Today, urban space is under strong pressure from globalization and cultural standardization. As L. Aukhadiyeva and G. Abdrasilova note, the main mission of architecture in Kazakhstan in the XXI century is to preserve regional identity and to synthesize the national cultural code with modern technologies. In Central Asia, where post-Soviet and postcolonial transformations go together with processes of digitalization, the issue of preserving and transmitting architectural heritage becomes especially important. Cities are at the same time searching for new models of urbanism and facing the risk of losing their local cultural identity. This shift is reflected at the international level in UNESCO programs. Architectural heritage has traditionally been considered as a material resource that must be protected, restored, and transmitted to future generations. The 1972 UNESCO Convention and international documents such as the ICOMOS Charters describe heritage as an object with “outstanding universal value” and confirm that technical and legal protection measures are necessary for its preservation. However, in recent decades this understanding has been reconsidered in the context of social, cultural, economic, and political transformations within the urban environment.

In recent years, special attention has been given to digital heritage. This means that forms of documenting, presenting, and representing architectural and cultural heritage in virtual space are becoming more important. As Giaccardi notes, digital heritage helps to engage audiences, support participation, and create new forms of collective memory. Kenderdine shows the effectiveness of using digital technologies in the museification of architectural heritage.

The classic thinker of spatial philosophy, Henri Lefebvre, considers space because of social practices and also as an arena of power, rights, and struggle for participation in urban life. A representative of critical urban studies, David Harvey, studied how the logic of capitalist urban transformation shapes space and how this process leads to alienation and social inequality.

At the intersection of these theoretical approaches, a research question appears: how does architectural heritage, passing through processes of reconstruction, revitalization, renovation, and gentrification, become an arena of cultural, social, and political transformations? And in this process, what role does digitalization play as a tool for preserving and rethinking urban space?

This article is focused on theoretical and philosophical conceptual analysis. The theoretical significance of the research is in developing an interdisciplinary framework for analyzing architectural heritage as a cultural and spatial phenomenon. The practical significance lies in forming a methodological basis for cultural policy, educational strategies, and digital platforms aimed at heritage preservation.

In the context of globalization and urbanization changes, the issues of preserving and transforming architectural heritage have been widely discussed in the works of foreign and domestic researchers. The theoretical foundations of architectural heritage can be connected with the work of Henri Lefebvre ([Lefebvre, 1992](#)), who explained urban space as a social product. David Harvey ([Harvey, 2000](#)) critically analyzed the role of neoliberal logic in the organization of space. Researchers also relied on international normative documents to develop their theoretical and methodological approaches. Among them are the 1972 UNESCO Convention ([UNESCO, 1972](#)), the ICOMOS Charters ([ICOMOS, 2008](#)), and the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape ([UNESCO, 2011](#)). These documents are aimed at ensuring the preservation of architectural and ur-

ban space objects as material cultural heritage. Therefore, these documents play an important role in the reconsideration and transformation of architectural heritage.

The growth of cities in developing countries and urban transformations raise an important question: should cultural heritage be preserved and cultural identity be reconsidered, or should cities change according to Western models? For the development of urban space in the XXI century, there are debates among scholars about moving from the urban tradition of the Chicago School to the postmodern concept of the Los Angeles School. However, according to Anaya Roy, the future of urbanization lies in the cities of the “third world” (Roy, 2011).

To better understand the philosophy of urban space and the contemporary context of architectural heritage, it is important to mention L. Coelho’s decolonial studies in urban planning (Coelho, 2025). While developing the Creative Cities Index, C. Landry also emphasizes that in urban space architectural construction should be understood not only as a material structure, but also as an expression of cultural sensitivity (Landry, 2021).

According to Landry, cities can be considered creative only when they have a culture, attitudes, and ways of thinking that are open to imagination and innovation. These qualities become visible through different initiatives. The functional characteristics of architectural objects can also be a sign of creativity. S. Kenderdine discusses the issues of museification and the use of immersive technologies in the preservation of architectural heritage (Kenderdine, 2021).

In contemporary Kazakhstani research, special attention is given to the development of regional architecture. A. Aukhadiyeva and G. Abdrasilova in their works raise the issue of preserving national identity and the national code through architectural heritage in the era of globalization. In their view, architecture in Kazakhstan in the XXI century should be based on the synthesis of local cultural code and innovative technologies. They also argue that it is necessary to combine the concept of the smart city with the principles of “green architecture” (Aukhadiyeva & Abdrasilova, 2024). This perspective allows us to understand the philosophy of urban space not only as the preservation of historical monuments, but also as their transformation according to modern ecological and technological requirements.

Within the historiography of architectural conservation theory, a seminal role is occupied by the concept of restoration articulated by the nineteenth-century French architect and theorist Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. His methodological framework posited that restoration entails the potential to reconstitute an architectural monument to a state of “ideal” or logical completion, even in instances where specific structural components have been irrevocably lost. Viollet-le-Duc conceptualized restoration as a dualistic process - simultaneously creative and scientific aimed at re-establishing the fundamental architectural logic of a building. However, this paradigm encountered significant academic criticism, as such reconstructions frequently resulted in the production of historically speculative forms that did not necessarily align with the authentic historical empirical evidence of the monument. (Viollet-le-Duc, 1990)

A divergent theoretical trajectory was established by the British thinker Sebastiano Barassi, who categorically opposed interventionist restoration, advocating instead for the preservation of architectural monuments in their accrued historical state. Central to Barassi’s doctrine is the principle of minimal intervention and a profound difference to the “vestiges of time,” which he viewed as the true indicators of a structure’s ontological history. Barassi argued that hyper-restoration inevitably precipitates a loss of historical veracity, reducing a monument to a mere artificial simulacrum. His intellectual legacy has profoundly shaped contemporary heritage preservation philosophy, wherein the preservation of historical authenticity remains a paramount objective (Barassi, 2009).

In the field of modern heritage studies, the construction of authenticity has emerged as a cornerstone of architectural conservation. Authenticity is defined as the maintenance of a monument’s genuine attributes, encompassing original lithic or tectonic materials, primordial architectural forms, socio-cultural contexts, and traditional constructive methodologies. This paradigm necessitates not merely the protection of the physical substrate but also the safeguarding of the historical and cultural significations evolved over the building’s lifecycle. Consequently, contemporary con-

ervation practices are predicated upon non-invasive techniques and the scientifically substantiated preservation of the historical fabric (Fayez, 2024).

In the twenty-first century, architectural heritage is increasingly interpreted as a vital catalyst for sustainable urban development. The preservation of historic environments facilitates ecological sustainability through the adaptive reuse of existing structures and the consequent mitigation of construction-related waste. Furthermore, heritage assets serve as significant drivers of cultural tourism and the enhancement of the economic potential of urban territories. Historic architecture also reinforces localized identity and collective memory, articulating a unique urban character and bridging the temporal gap between antiquity and modernity. In this light, the preservation of architectural heritage transcends the traditional boundaries of monument protection, evolving into a fundamental instrument for broader cultural and social resilience.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted in the format of a theoretical and analytical review. It was focused on systematizing and critically analyzing modern conceptual approaches that explain the transformation of architectural heritage and urban space. The methodological basis of the work combines interdisciplinary approaches, including critical urban studies, cultural studies, sociology of space, theories of cultural landscape and cultural heritage, and philosophy of the city. The article integrates elements of conceptual analysis and interpretative strategies based on post-structuralist ideas (Lefebvre, 1992) and the critical tradition (Edensor, 2019).

To achieve the aim of the research, the method of studying the works of key representatives of postcolonial urban studies, urban culture, and philosophy of space, as well as contemporary scholars, was applied. The work of Henri Lefebvre is considered one of the fundamental studies in this field. To understand the conditions of urban space transformation, normative documents of UNESCO and ICOMOS were used as a basis. The identification of current theories and concepts was carried out through peer-reviewed journals available in the Google Scholar and Academia.edu databases. The sources were selected according to the relevance to the research topic.

To identify the main paradigms, discourses, and theoretical contradictions, the method of critical conceptual analysis was used. Special attention was given to the ideological and socio-cultural deconstruction of the concepts of revitalization, renovation, and gentrification. A comparative analysis was carried out to examine how urban processes are explained in different theoretical traditions, and to define their methodological differences and similarities. The comparative method was also applied to clarify the concepts of spatial philosophy, urban and postcolonial theories, as well as the processes of renovation, revitalization, and gentrification.

As an analytical basis, a post-structuralist analysis grounded in Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space was applied. In addition, a critical discourse analysis method was used, aimed at revealing the ideological dimensions of linguistic practices that describe urban transformations.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Philosophy of urban space is an interdisciplinary field that studies not only the physical organization of the city, but also its essential, cultural, and symbolic dimensions. At the core of this approach is the idea that the city is a complex system of relations between people, space, and time. Philosophy of urban space stands at the intersection of social philosophy, phenomenology, critical urban studies, and cultural geography. It considers the city not only as a set of material objects, but as a complex socio-cultural and symbolic construct where power, memory, identity, and everyday practices are interconnected. The philosophy of urbanism developed by the classic theorist of urbanization, Henri Lefebvre, defines space as a social product that is formed through the interaction of material structures, symbolic meanings, and everyday practices. In his concept of the "production of space," the city is seen as an arena of political struggle for the right to define and use territory

(Lefebvre, 1992). Lefebvre’s idea of the “right to the city” describes the relationship between residents and urban objects. In his view, residents can participate in shaping the city and turn it into a place of social and cultural interaction. For example, the transformation of Panfilov Street in Almaty into a pedestrian space can be seen as an example that reflects Lefebvre’s concept of the “right to the city.”

Space is not only a physical object; it should have a certain identity. According to the research by T. Kiseleva and others, this identity consists of five factors: genetic (historical), mental, functional, event-related, and compositional elements (Kiseleva et al., 2024). These factors deepen the philosophical meaning of urban space and transform it from a “dead” environment into a “living” social place.

Developing this idea, David Harvey connects urban planning with the mechanisms of capitalist accumulation and social inequality (Harvey, 2000). From this perspective, architectural heritage is understood as part of a dynamic, contradictory, and politically loaded urban process. At the same time, Harvey also sees urban space as a source of economic profit. For example, coworking centers, fairgrounds, and shopping malls are not only elements that decorate the city, but also important sources of economic income.

Contemporary philosophical approaches to urban space include several main directions. The anthropological approach gives priority to the relationship between the person and the environment. It studies how architectural forms influence residents’ perception, behavior, and emotional state. The critical urban studies approach analyzes spatial justice, access to resources, and the role of heritage in the struggle for the city. The postcolonial approach aims to deconstruct colonial hierarchies in urban planning and symbolic structures, and to reveal hidden forms of cultural dominance. The digital approach studies how technologies influence the perception and preservation of urban space, and develops the concepts of “smart cities” and digital heritage.

Thus, the philosophy of urban space understands architectural heritage as a system of meanings that becomes part of a complex dialogue between the past, the present, and the future. This approach allows us to see fundamental issues of cultural identity and symbolic meaning within urban transformation. The city is not only a material landscape, but also a stage where socio-cultural events take place (Kenderdine, 2021).

Table 1.
Concepts of the Philosophy of Urban Space (author’s analysis)

Author and concept	Main idea	Explanation	Case	Practical significance
Henri Lefebvre – philosophy of urbanism	Space as a social product and the idea of the right to the city	Space is constructed through power, everyday practice, and cultural meaning. Space becomes a stage for residents.	The transformation of Panfilov Street in Almaty into a pedestrian public space; the development of the Esil river embankment in Astana into an “Arbat” walking street, a handicraft fair area, and an open space for free artistic performances.	It justifies civic participation in organizing space and supports the protection of urban space.
David Harvey – critical urbanization	Space as a tool of capitalist accumulation	Infrastructure and large-scale projects influence and reshape socio-cultural identity	Astana as a new administrative center, EXPO-2017 exhibition, large shopping malls	Considers architectural heritage and urban space as sources of economic profit
Anaya Roy – anthropological approach	Connection between human and space. Creative clusters	Architectural form influences emotional perception and cultural meaning	The impact of Esentai Mall in Almaty on residents; POINT coworking center as a space for cultural and creative meetings	Makes it possible to study residents’ everyday experience in architectural places
L. Aukhadiyeva, G. Abdrasilova – regional synthesis	Integration of local cultural code and high technologies	Preservation of urban identity and sustainable development in the context of globalization	Visitor centers of the “Ulytau Reserve” in Ulytau. Modern museum architecture	Connection of national heritage with modern digital systems

To systematize the above-mentioned concepts, we present the following table (**Table 1**). This systematization table allows us to identify the differences and similarities between philosophical approaches to urban space.

The conceptual systematization presented in the table is only a simple example. Today, there are many different views and critical opinions about the philosophy of urban space. Reinterpreting urban space and ensuring the direct participation of residents in its creation are important for understanding and explaining architectural heritage, as well as for shaping national cultural identity.

For most of the XX century, architectural heritage was explained within a normative paradigm that focused on preserving material authenticity, stylistic integrity, and documented value. In this approach, heritage was seen as a static entity with an objective cultural or artistic importance. This paradigm was institutionally formalized in several key international documents, including the “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage” (**UNESCO, 1972**), the “Charter for the Architectural Heritage of Europe” (**ICOMOS, 2008**), and the “Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape” (**UNESCO, 2011**). However, from the late 1990s and especially after 2000, a shift can be observed in academic discourse. Architectural heritage started to be understood as a dynamic phenomenon that is socially constructed and politically meaningful. Critical, interpretative, and cultural approaches became more influential in heritage studies.

The 1972 Convention, adopted at the 17th session of UNESCO, established the modern international legal foundations for the protection of cultural and natural heritage. The main idea of the document is to recognize certain objects (monuments, memorial ensembles, landscapes) as the “world heritage of mankind” (**UNESCO, 1972: Article 1**) and as having “outstanding universal value” (**UNESCO, 1972: Article 2**). From the perspective of architectural heritage, the Convention is based on an object-centered and material paradigm, where protection means preserving the authenticity of the object’s form, structure, and function. The document assigns to the States Parties the obligation to “identify, protect, conserve, present and transmit to future generations the cultural and natural heritage” (**UNESCO, 1972: Article 4**). The Convention also approves the World Heritage List, where objects that meet certain criteria are included. These criteria reproduce a modernist understanding of value, for example defining heritage as an “outstanding example of an architectural or technological ensemble,” where value is based on technical, scientific, or artistic features. At the same time, local, social, or intangible meanings are often not fully considered. Although the 1972 Convention was progressive for its time, today it is often seen as part of an “authorized” heritage discourse (**UNESCO, 1972: Article 5**), which relies on expert evaluation, formal criteria, and a hierarchy of values.

The “Charter for the Architectural Heritage of Europe,” adopted in 1975 within the framework of the Council of Europe and ICOMOS (**ICOMOS, 2008**), was aimed at clarifying and supporting the architectural structure of cities and settlements. The Charter states that architectural heritage is not limited only to outstanding monuments but also includes traditional urban quarters that form a “historic integrity” (**ICOMOS, 2008, p. 3**). The document gives special attention to a contextual approach, which focuses on protecting the integrity of the historic urban environment. However, work with heritage in this Charter is built on a technical and expert-based model: legal regulation, inventory, zoning, and control over the use of objects. In Part 3 of the Charter, it is stated that “the best way to ensure the conservation of buildings is to use them for a socially useful purpose” (**ICOMOS, 2008, p. 5**). This allows adaptation, but within strict limitations. Thus, the Charter represents a codified set of European normative discourse, where architecture is seen mainly as a fixed physical structure, rather than as a result of cultural processes and socio-political practices.

The “Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape,” adopted at the 36th session of UNESCO in 2011 (**UNESCO, 2011**), was developed as a response to criticism of normative models of heritage protection and to propose a new paradigm of interaction between the city and heritage. The document suggests an integrated and contextual approach that combines physical, social, visual, and intangible dimensions. The main innovation of the Recommendation is the rejection of an isolated view of heritage objects. In paragraph 8, it is stated that the historic urban landscape includes not only buildings, but also “spatial organization, social relationships, perception and visual

interaction” (UNESCO, 2011, p. 3), as well as intangible elements such as traditions, images, and memory. On this basis, architectural heritage can be seen as being in a transitional stage from a normative view to a more inclusive and process-oriented understanding. The document includes the rhetoric of sustainable development, cultural participation, and multi-level governance. However, as S. Labadi and W. Logan note, the practical implementation of the principles of the historic urban landscape faces obstacles such as institutional inertia and the insufficient adaptation of these principles at the local level (Labadi & Logan, 2016). Thus, the document on the historic urban landscape can be understood as an attempt to institutionalize a critical perspective, while remaining within the general framework of normative logic.

The main international documents adopted in the XX century gave priority to the material protection of architectural heritage and were based on scientific-expert and normative approaches. These approaches often limited historical value to physical structure and pushed social relations and intangible meanings to the background. However, contemporary academic discourse goes beyond this framework. Architectural heritage is now increasingly understood in connection with urban life, memory, power structures, and the experience of participating in communities. In this context, cultural geography, critical urban studies, and decolonial theories are widely used. Heritage is no longer seen only as a witness of the past, but as a space of symbolic negotiation between the present and the future. Thus, modern approaches allow us to recognize architectural heritage as a transforming space, where meanings are constantly reconsidered and different interests intersect. This position also creates new tasks for heritage policy, such as increasing participation, recognizing cultural diversity, and ensuring spatial justice.

To see the evolution of these theoretical approaches more clearly, we can examine a comparative table of discourses in the interpretation of architectural heritage (Table 2). The differences between normative and critical discourses clearly show how attitudes toward heritage have changed over time.

Table 2.
Normative and Critical Discourses in Architectural Heritage (author’s analysis)

Criteria	Normative discourse	Critical discourse
Understanding	Heritage is seen as a static, material entity	Heritage is understood as a dynamic phenomenon with social, political, and cultural meaning
Legal basis	UNESCO and ICOMOS evaluate the authenticity, stylistic integrity, and value criteria of architectural heritage	UNESCO promotes the idea of the historic urban landscape, material and living heritage, and focuses on the relationship between heritage and people
Main condition	Documented value and authenticity	Local experience, cultural diversity, and issues of cultural memory
Subject defining value	International organizations and experts	Participating communities, multi-level governance, and research actors
Tools	Inventory, legal restrictions, functional adaptation, relocation, preservation, transmission	Community participation, cultural geography, critical urban studies, decolonial theory, cultural landscape approach
Weaknesses	Western universalism	Institutional inertia

The differences shown in the table are visible not only at the level of abstract theory, but also in the management of urban space and architectural heritage. In the development of large cities, the concept of the “old city” and the “new city” often appears. The emergence of new architectural objects also influences the formation of new views and new lifestyles among people. At the same time, the creation of new spaces can lead to a critical attitude toward the “old city,” especially toward historical quarters. For example, the transformation of the “Old City” quarters in Almaty or Astana demonstrates a real conflict between normative and critical discourses in practice. If we evaluate from a normative approach, the value of historical buildings (mosques, residential houses, mausoleums, churches, museums, administrative buildings and others) is defined through architec-

tural style, historical significance, and authenticity. The city master plan usually includes them in an inventory and understands “protection” mainly as physical restoration. In this case, socio-cultural memory, cultural practices, and social-historical meanings are often not fully taken into account.

From a critical perspective, urban researchers who study the “Old City” quarters see this space not only as a physical form, but as a place of historical experience of local residents, ethnic diversity, and social interaction. In this approach, heritage is understood as a witness of the past and as a cultural negotiation space between the present and the future. In cultural landscape theory, architectural heritage is seen as a concept of identity that reflects culture, history, nature, and folk traditions.

Today, the rethinking of architectural heritage is connected with many pressing issues: post-colonial critique, climate instability, digital transformation, and the deepening inequality in access to space and memory. In these conditions, new theoretical directions are emerging. They expand the object of analysis and introduce into academic discussion such concepts as spatial justice, cultural sustainability, decolonization of memory, and digital mediation. These approaches allow us to see architectural heritage as a constantly changing phenomenon.

Postcolonial turn. The strongest critique of universal concepts of cultural heritage comes from postcolonial theory. This approach sees heritage as a tool for reproducing symbolic dominance and hierarchies of memory. In the works of T. Edensor (**Edensor, 2005**) and Anaya Roy (**Roy, 2011**), heritage is described as a political field that legitimizes certain values, norms, and ideas about reality. According to Edensor, official heritage represents only a limited segment of national memory, while the histories of migrants, minorities, or oppressed groups remain marginalized (**Edensor, 2005**). In this case, heritage becomes a mechanism of exclusion, preserving only those objects and narratives that correspond to the dominant ideology. Roy calls this “epistemological violence” (**Roy, 2011**), because UNESCO and ICOMOS standards often privilege Western models of knowledge and memory, while alternative approaches are ignored. For example, this can be seen in the replacement of certain monuments, especially monuments to Soviet figures, or in the change of functional use of Soviet buildings.

Cultural sustainability. In the conditions of urbanization, climate change, and cultural fragmentation, the concept of cultural sustainability becomes important. According to Bertacchini, sustainable heritage should adapt to changing conditions and integrate new identities and meanings (**Bertacchini, 2021**). Cultural sustainability moves heritage away from conservative and “museum-like” approaches and promotes a living and process-oriented understanding. In this view, heritage is seen as a social practice based on the lifestyle and experience of local communities. For example, the revival of ethno-villages can be considered as a manifestation of cultural sustainability.

Digital heritage and algorithmic mediation. Since the 2020s, digital technologies have entered the heritage field very deeply. According to Giaccardi, the concept of digital heritage includes not only the digitization of material objects, but also new forms of interaction with heritage: augmented reality, virtual tours, 3D models, and open platforms that increase access and participation (**Liang, X., Lu, Y., & Martin, J., 2021**). At the same time, this process also causes criticism. If digital platforms are based on corporate interests or visual hierarchies, there is a risk of algorithmic distortion of historical memory. In addition, new forms of digital inequality appear because of technological infrastructure gaps and language barriers. For this reason, digital heritage becomes a dual phenomenon: on one hand, it is a tool of democratization; on the other hand, it can marginalize informal and local forms of memory. For example, the restoration of old cities such as Otyrar and Sarayshyk, and the creation of their VR projects, have become important initiatives. The emergence of the Google Arts & Culture platform is also an example of the practice of digitizing historical architectural heritage.

Digitization of architectural heritage is a complex process of creating, processing, storing, and disseminating digital representations of heritage objects based on modern information and communication technologies (3D scanning, photogrammetry, geographic information systems, BIM/HBIM modeling, and digital archives). The main goal of this process is preservation, documentation, research, and popularization. According to UNESCO’s “Charter on the Preservation of Digital Herit-

age” (UNESCO, 2003) and the ICOMOS “Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites” (ICOMOS, 2008), digitization is considered as a tool for ensuring the long-term preservation of information about heritage objects, increasing access to cultural resources for the scientific community and the wider public, and integrating architectural heritage into sustainable development, education, and cultural tourism processes.

Digitization of architectural heritage is not limited only to the technical conversion of analog data into digital format. It also includes the development of standardized metadata, as well as legal and organizational mechanisms that ensure the authenticity, integrity, and interoperability of digital resources at national and international levels.

Creative turn. Within the programs of UNESCO and the European Union, the Cultural Creative City (CCC) model is actively developing. According to this model, architectural heritage is considered as an important part of the cultural and creative capital of the city. Architectural heritage is seen as a factor that shapes urban identity, attracts investment, and supports the development of creative industries. A specific feature of the CCC model is that it treats both tangible and intangible heritage as resources for creative development. First, heritage forms symbolic capital as a cultural environment (historical and cultural memory, the image of the city, and others). Second, it creates unique spaces for cultural and creative practices (museums, restored buildings, creative hubs, and others). Third, it becomes a foundation for cultural tourism.

Another important task of the CCC model is the integration of architectural heritage into creative industries to build a creative economy. This includes adaptive reuse of buildings (creation of coworking spaces, art centers, studios); development of digital products (3D, 4D, 5D models, VR/AR tourism, media content); and support of event and cultural tourism through festivals and meetings in cultural-historic places. In this way, architectural heritage becomes a driver of the “cultural creative city”: it acts as an anchor of cultural identity, infrastructure for creative industries, and a source of innovation in tourism, education, and the digital economy. The transformation of industrial buildings into creative spaces is one of the practical examples of this creative turn.

A systematic description of the above-mentioned theories can be seen in the analytical table (Table 3).

Table 3.
Analytical Table of New Directions in Architectural Heritage Studies

Theoretical turn	Authors	Main idea	Strengths	Weaknesses	Examples
Postcolonial theory	T. Edensor, Anaya Roy	Epistemological heritage. Heritage as a field of power and hierarchy Reveals the political dimension of heritage	Reveals the political dimension of heritage	Political dominance in practical mechanisms	Tensions around Soviet monuments in Central Asia
Cultural sustainability	E. Bertacchini	Architectural heritage as a resilient process	Involvement of local communities	Possible weakening of authenticity criteria	Adaptation of architectural heritage to climate change and tourism; preservation through festivals
Digitalization theory	E. Giaccardi	Use of digital technologies in heritage field	Accessibility, democratization, new forms of experience	Algorithmic distortion	Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum and others
Creative turn UNESCO (Cultural Creative City)	UNESCO (Cultural Creative City)	Heritage as a driver of tourism and economy	Strong connection between culture and economy; development of cultural and creative industries	Risk of destruction or loss of authenticity of architectural heritage because of commercialization	-

In general, the new theoretical turns in architectural heritage studies allow us to understand heritage not only as a witness of the past, but as a dynamic resource that adapts to social, cultural, and economic changes. Postcolonial critique encourages a reconsideration of dominant narratives in heritage discourse. The concept of cultural sustainability shows the importance of developing heritage in connection with contemporary social life. Digitalization increases access to heritage and creates new possibilities for documentation and popularization. The CCC model views architectural heritage as the core of cultural and creative capital and turns it into a strategic driver of urban development, tourism, and innovation.

Debates about the transformation of contemporary architectural heritage cannot be conducted without clarifying the key concepts that describe different types of intervention in the historical urban structure and different ways of preserving cultural memory. The concepts of reconstruction, revitalization, renovation, and gentrification show the foundations for rethinking the nature of heritage, its function in the city, its social consequences, and its symbolic significance.

Reconstruction, as an act of symbolic representation, performs the function of restoring urban space and architectural heritage. It is the process of rebuilding lost or destroyed architectural objects based on historical form and style. A classic example can be seen in the post-World War II reconstruction of cities in European countries. Such projects aimed at archival accuracy and at rethinking pre-war architectural heritage as part of national identity. According to ICOMOS documents, reconstruction is allowed only based on reliable historical evidence and only when it helps to understand the cultural significance of the object. As stated in the document, “reconstruction should not prevail over the original structure nor create a false historical interpretation” (**ICOMOS, 2008, Article 1, Article 8**).

However, today reconstruction is often seen as an ideological tool of the state and as an instrument of memory policy. In this case, the past is structured according to present political interests. N. Smith describes such practices as part of the “authorized heritage discourse” (**Smith, 2006**). For example, the restoration of a mosque or a palace is not only a technical act of preservation, but also an act of political representation aimed at constructing an “official” history. In the context of Kazakhstan, this process is closely linked to the search for cultural identity. As noted by Abdrassilova et al., the architectural identity of cities like Almaty is a result of layering various historical layers, where the Soviet period played a crucial role in adapting global trends to the regional context (**Abdrassilova et al., 2024**). Thus, reconstruction today must be viewed as a tool for preserving the “unique spatial text” of the city against the backdrop of globalization.

Revitalization activates architectural heritage as a strategy of sustainability. Formally, revitalization means the reintroduction of life activity, social meaning, and cultural practices into urban space. This term is usually used for areas that have lost their importance because of economic, demographic, and urban changes, and became neglected or marginalized. Such practices became more visible with the development of creative and cultural industries. Unlike reconstruction, revitalization does not focus on material accuracy, but on adaptive reuse according to new social needs. This approach was widely used in the 1990-2000s within the concepts of sustainable city and urban reuse. Successful examples include the transformation of London Docklands and the Balat district in Istanbul, where residential or former professional spaces were turned into areas that combine cultural and creative functions. According to Bertacchini, if revitalization is implemented with the participation of local communities and with attention to intangible identity, it can become a tool of cultural sustainability. But if public participation is not ensured, even if the external appearance is preserved, the social content may be displaced, and the process can take the form of symbolic violence (**Bertacchini, 2020**). A philosophical understanding of architectural heritage leads not only to its conservation, but also to the idea of adaptive reuse. In this context, “participatory design” plays an important role (**Aukhadiyeva & Abdrasilova, 2024**). The participation of residents in the design process increases their responsibility for space and strengthens its social value.

Renovation is aimed at renewing architectural heritage as a form of urban compromise. Renovation means technical repair, modernization, and re-equipment of buildings in order to increase their comfort and market value. It does not necessarily require consideration of historical or cultural

significance. Among researchers, attitudes toward renovation are ambivalent. On one hand, it is seen as a necessary part of maintaining the city. On the other hand, it is viewed as a threat to historical authenticity. For example, renovation projects of Soviet era “Khrushchevka” and “Stalinka” buildings often aim at replacing old housing stock with new construction. This can lead to the loss of insufficiently studied historical and cultural heritage. In the context of preserving and promoting architectural heritage, the renovation approach is often considered ineffective.

The problem is particularly acute for public green spaces. Kostcova et al. point out that many city parks from the Soviet period have lost their “former grandeur of architectural forms and landscapes” (Kostcova et al., 2025). Their study suggests that renovation should not be limited to technical repair but should involve a “reboot” through environmental analysis and placemaking to restore their role as vital ecological and social nodes in the urban fabric.

A current and complex example of this architectural compromise in Kazakhstan is the upcoming renovation of the Natalia Sats State Academic Russian Theater for Children and Youth in Almaty (Figure 1). This project highlights the tension between the need for technical modernization and the preservation of heritage. The technical survey revealed that the 1980s engineering systems and facade elements have deteriorated significantly, posing safety risks (Vecher.kz, 2025). However, as the theater is a protected monument, the project also focuses on the meticulous restoration of historical elements like the foyer's mosaic and original flooring, supporting the search for cultural identity described by Abdrassilova et al. (2024).



Figure 1 – Building of the Natalia Sats State Academic Russian Theatre for Children and Youth in Almaty (Welcome.kz, 2023)

Figure 1 shows the Natalia Sats State Academic Russian Theater for Children and Youth; a prominent architectural monument built in 1980. Its style represents a mature period of Soviet modernism, characterized by the synthesis of monumental scale, geometric clarity, and the integration of fine arts – specifically, exterior mosaics and expressive volumetric forms into the functional structure of the building. Currently, this object is undergoing a comprehensive renovation project, which serves as a case study for the balance between preserving historical architectural identity and the necessary modernization of engineering and technical infrastructure to meet contemporary safety and functional standards.

Furthermore, the project goes beyond simple repair by including the construction of a new 10,000 sq. m. block connected by a gallery (Figure 2). This expansion demonstrates the role of advanced technical systems and specialized equipment, which Nabiyeu et al. (2024) identify as essential for transforming heritage sites into sustainable and competitive urban centers in the digital age.



Figure 2 – Conceptual design of the reconstruction and extension of the Natalia Sats State Academic Russian Theatre for Children and Youth in Almaty (Akimat of Almaty via Sputnik Kazakhstan, 2025).

Figure 2 shows the architectural concept of the new extension of the Natalia Sats Theater. This design project encompasses not only the main stage but also introduces multifunctional spaces, including a 200-seat hall, rehearsal studios, educational classes for the youth theater, and professional production workshops. By integrating these diverse creative zones, the new facility transforms the theater into a comprehensive cultural and educational hub, aligning with modern principles of adaptive reuse and sustainable urban development.

A systematic conclusion about the above-mentioned concepts can be made through a comparative table (**Table 4**).

Table 4.
Comparative Analysis of Concepts of Architectural Heritage Transformation (author’s analysis)

Concept	Main characteristics	Theoretical basis	Example	Global practice
Reconstruction	Restoration of lost or destroyed objects with historical accuracy	UNESCO documents	Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum in Turkistan and the surrounding objects	Post-World War II reconstruction of Warsaw
Revitalization	Introduction of new socio-cultural functions into urban space, adaptive reuse	E. Bertacchini	Transformation of the old tram depot in Almaty into a cultural and creative space	Balat district in Istanbul
Renovation	Technical modernization of residential buildings or other structures in order to increase their market value	Urban development theories	Projects of replacing “Khrushchevka” and “Stalinka” buildings in Almaty or Astana	Panel housing renovation in Berlin
Gentrification	Change of social composition in historical districts, displacement of lower-income groups by the middle or upper class; division into “old” and “new” city, formation of rich and poor areas	Coelho, Landry, Kenderdine	Transformation of the EXPO area in Astana and the Esentai Mall area in Almaty into elite centers	Galataport in Istanbul, SOHO district in New York

Gentrification is one of the most politicized and critically loaded terms in urban studies. This concept was first introduced by the sociologist R. Glass to describe the process of replacing working-class districts in London with middle-class residents. Later, this term became a theoretical basis for analyzing social transformation in urban environments under market pressure. Architectural her-

itage, especially old industrial and historical districts, has become an attractive asset for investors. Gentrification often leads to a new wave of regional rebranding. According to Zukin, in the process of gentrification heritage is not the main goal but plays the role of a marketing resource. Heritage is used as an “authenticity anchor” and helps to create an attractive historical and cultural image for tourism (Zukin, 2006). However, the contemporary theoretical perspective suggests that such transformation should be balanced by technological innovation. Nabiyeu et al. emphasizes that the integration of digital technologies (BIM, AI, 3D printing) allows for "sustainable and functional architecture" (Nabiyeu et al., 2024) that respects the cultural-historical context while meeting modern socio-economic requirements. In this sense, the digital transformation of heritage becomes a philosophical bridge between tradition and innovation. The goal of gentrification is renewal through interaction with environment, history, and culture (Yermagambetova, 2023). In my view, this is one of the requirements for competitive cities in the XXI century.

In general, the concepts of architectural heritage transformation are important theoretical and practical tools for understanding the relationship between preservation of historical environment and urban development. These concepts reinterpret the material and symbolic meaning of heritage at different levels and change its social, cultural, economic, and political functions. A comprehensive analysis of these concepts makes it possible to develop a balanced approach in strategies for managing architectural heritage.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The conducted analysis shows that the paradigm of understanding contemporary architectural heritage has significantly changed: there has been a shift from a normative-protective discourse to a critical, spatially oriented, and postcolonial rethinking. Institutional documents such as the UNESCO Convention, the ICOMOS Charter, and the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape formed a normative basis that understands heritage mainly as a material object. According to this approach, objects must be protected, restored, and included in a universal canon of cultural values. However, since the beginning of the XXI century, attention has shifted to social relevance, conceptual understanding, and the political multiplicity of meanings of heritage.

1. Considering architectural objects as places of memory, as carriers of cultural memory, and as tools for shaping urban, state, and national identity makes it possible to define their strategic role in contemporary cultural development. The memorialization of architectural objects helps to fix historical narratives and strengthen collective memory, while cultural memory ensures the long-term transmission of values and meanings between generations. In this understanding, architectural heritage becomes an active mediator in the processes of identity formation.

2. Architectural objects form the model of the creative cultural city. This model integrates architectural heritage into the creative economy and cultural infrastructure of the city. In this context, both the tangible and intangible aspects of heritage become resources for the development of tourism, cultural industries, education, and innovation.

3. The transformation of architectural heritage is at the same time a challenge and an opportunity: on one hand, there is a risk of commercialization and displacement; on the other hand, there is potential for inclusive reinterpretation of the past, sustainable urban development, and the formation of spaces of cultural justice. In this context, revitalization, reconstruction, renovation, and gentrification are conceptualized as important tools for shaping and interpreting urban space. According to the results of the research, *revitalization* is understood as a method of cultural sustainability and renewal of urban life; *reconstruction* as a tool for re-presenting the historical and cultural image of the city; renovation as a technical modernization process oriented toward market efficiency; and gentrification as a mechanism that reveals issues of spatial justice and social inequality.

4. Digitalization through 3D modeling, GIS mapping, virtual tours, and open databases strengthens this potential, increases accessibility, attracts new audiences, and forms an inclusive digital memory space. As a result, architectural heritage appears as a multi-level resource that at the

same time can strengthen identity, stimulate cultural and economic development, and integrate into global cultural networks. Strategies for managing architectural heritage should take into account this complex nature and combine protection and preservation with innovative forms of representation and use.

5. The future of research lies in developing multidisciplinary models of working with heritage that take into account architectural objects together with cultural codes, community practices, forms of digital representation, and also historical traumas. It is also important to expand the postcolonial interpretation of architectural heritage. In addition, it is planned to pay attention to the inclusion of Kazakhstan's architectural heritage in global digital heritage lists and to study its influence on historical memory.

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