

Chapter 12

Folk Music Heritage Conservation: Adaptive Reuse of Hason Residence

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Introduction

Hason Raja, a pioneer of Bengali folk music, mysticism, and philosophy, is a key figure in Bangladesh's cultural heritage. This research aims to preserve his legacy through the conservation of architecture, specifically his ancestral home. As a zamindar, Hason dedicated his life to shaping a distinctive music heritage, deeply intertwined with Sufi traditions. For over a century, his ancestral residence has been serving as a school of thought for folk music heritage, bearing his memories and authentic shreds of evidence. The goal of this study is to conserve Raja's legacy of Bengali folk music through architectural conservation, proposing an adaptive reuse approach, reimagining the space as a commemorative site honoring his literature, philosophical, and musical contributions. This fosters a timeless memory landscape merging cultural heritage with sustainable development, fostering a dynamic space where contemporary practitioners can engage with his legacy while preserving the essence of his philosophy integrated through architecture. Heritage policy and scholarship in Bangladesh, South Asia, emphasize physical monuments overlooking living traditions. The Antiquity Act of 1968 in Bangladesh protects historic buildings but includes no provisions for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage such as folk and mystical music practices. (Abeer, 2025). Similarly, UNESCO's 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage includes music, dance, and oral traditions as intangible cultural heritage worthy of protection. (Chatzigrigoriou et al., 2021). Such traditions may be celebrated in theory but lack concrete preservation mechanisms in architectural practice, as these have not yet been completely incorporated into local conservation frameworks. Moreover, research on adaptive reuse and heritage architecture typically focuses on material conservation (building form, authenticity, function) with keen attention to intangible cultural values specific to cultural backgrounds. The living traditions solely tied to a place are seldom considered in the design of a reuse project. This research highlights the critical gap in intangible cultural conservation approaches in Bangladesh and makes the link between built-environment strategy and the conservation of living musical traditions that remain underexplored.

Dewan Hason Raja (1854-1922) was a zamindar of Bengal who later turned mystic poet and songwriter from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh. Hason led his initial days off worldly privilege. He later underwent a very profound spiritual awakening. In this phase, he composed hundreds of folk songs that explore themes of love, enunciation, and the unity of existence Hason's work-deeply rooted in Bengali folk tradition-influenced South Asian culture, and his songs are cherished in devoted folk literature. This research is an attempt to preserve Hason Raja's folk music heritage combined with multiple conservation approaches, including intangible cultural heritage conservation, adaptive reuse, and architectural design.

This research aimed to address whether architectural intervention in Hason Raja's paternal residence serves as a living repository for his mystic poetic and musical legacy. With this acknowledged context of cultural heritage, the research question included the question: Can the adaptive reuse of Hason Raja's residence conserve and revitalize the intangible folk-music traditions associated with him? This research examines if reimagining this homestead as a "living memoryscape" adds value to the context for sustaining and sharing this spiritual and musical tradition of Hason Raja. This paper addresses the gaps discussed by proposing an ideal design framework that explicitly integrates intangible folk heritage into an adaptive reuse project. In contrast to conventional restorations that treat any historic building simply as an artifact, this approach treats Hason residence as a dynamic vessel for cultural memory. The study develops a concept of memory landscape design, in which physical spaces are aligned

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with the themes and narratives of Hason Raja's songs. For example, propose performance courtyards and exhibition spaces that reflect his mystical lyrics, as well as landscape interventions that evoke images from his poetry. The study offers a methodology for embedding intangible heritage into the site. It shows how architecture can be used not just to preserve a building but to embody and communicate the community's musical traditions and philosophy.

Intangible Cultural Heritage Conservation

The UNESCO 2003 Convention defines “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage” as intangible heritage. It is the transmission across generations and notes domains such as “oral traditions and expressions, including language,” “performing arts,” and “social practices, rituals, and festive events.” (Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage - UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003, Article 2). Cultural heritage is not just limited to monuments: “It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors...such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices [and] rituals.” (What Is Intangible Cultural Heritage? - UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2004).

In this project, Hason Raja's musical legacy clearly falls within intangible heritage. His folk songs are oral/performing arts and devotional practice. UNESCO has recognized related traditions in Bengal. Bangladeshi Baul songs were inscribed on the Representative List of Intangible Heritage (2008) as embodying a syncretic mystic tradition. UNESCO describes Bauls as “mystic minstrels” whose “music and way of life have influenced a large segment of Bengali culture.” (Baul Songs - UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2008). Such descriptions underscore how Hason Raja's corpus of folk music and oral poetry—likewise rooted in mystic and syncretic philosophy—constitutes a living intangible heritage. Safeguarding his heritage thus requires attention not only to his house but also to the music, lyrics, and spiritual practices that animate it.



Figure 1. LOCAL MUSICAL GATHERING AT THE BANK OF SURMA RIVER ACROSS HASON RAJA'S HOUSE, 2024

Vernacular Architecture Heritage in Sylhet region

Sylhet city's traditional urban fabric includes the unique Bangla Baton house type—a late 19th-century urban vernacular style evolved from Assam-style dwellings. Research on these houses notes that Bangla Baton houses are an “urban vernacular archetype” of Sylhet, historically introduced when this region was part of colonial Assam. These houses (also called “Ikra houses” for their reed walls) replaced older mud-bamboo huts by offering a more fire-resistant, comfortable home. They use light timber post-and-beam frames with hand-planed wood planks and bamboo lattices, onto which local ikra reed and plaster were applied. Iron bolts and sheet-metal joints were adopted after the 1897 earthquake to provide flexibility. (Saha et al., 2021).

Materially and spatially, Bangla Baton houses are climate-adapted. Sylhet's subtropical monsoon climate (high humidity and heavy rains) led builders to emphasize ventilation and shelter. Rooms are very tall (typically 4-5m ceiling height) and sit on raised platforms. The houses include overhanging eaves and a continuous front veranda that provide deep shade. Floor plans are often organized around an open, semi-outdoor courtyard: a veranda running the length of the façade leads through an “inner court” buffer into the private zones. (Saha et al., 2021).

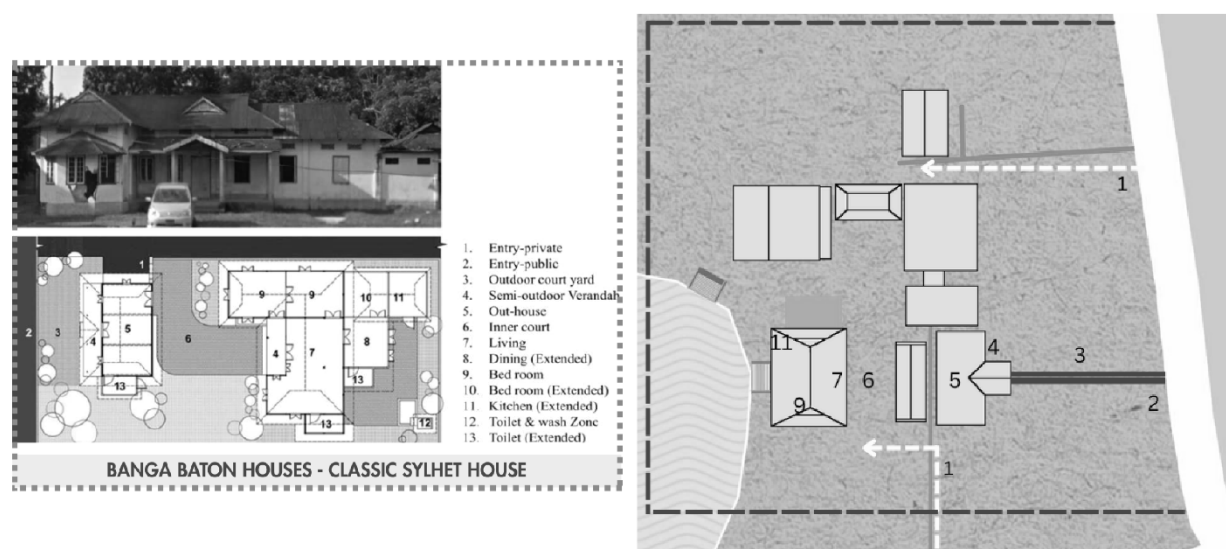


Figure 2. COMPARING LOCAL BANGLA BATON HOUSES TO COMPOSITION OF HASON RESIDENCE

Hason Raja's own residence shares some vernacular traits but also contrasts sharply with the Baton style. His family home is now a museum, a century-old "tin shade" building with a large front piazza. The house has a pitched roof in corrugated metal sheets and its walls are solid masonry or timber rather than bamboo weave. It features a formal gate opening onto a front courtyard. (Wikipedia contributors, 2024). The composition of the Hason Residence aligns with the generic pattern of Bangla Baton houses, such as separate public/private entries, outhouse-in-house features buffered with courtyards, etcetera.

Spirituality, Mysticism and preserving memory in Architecture Design

Architectural expressions of mystic ideas and memory are seen in sites like Lalon Shah's shrine and in institutions like Santiniketan. Fakir Lalon Shah (a 19th-century musician) left a deep spiritual legacy in Bengal. After his death, his burial place at Cheuriya (Kushtia) was deliberately transformed into an akhara (spiritual gathering ground). A concrete mausoleum was erected over his tomb, and later an academy building with an auditorium and museum was added to the complex. This architecture is modest—a simple shrine rather than a grand mausoleum—reflecting Lalon's teaching that "the body itself is my temple." It functions powerfully as a living memorial: each year thousands of disciples convene here in song and prayer. UNESCO observes that this tradition is conveyed through oral transmission and thus recognizes it as an intangible cultural heritage.

In contrast, Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan (West Bengal) illustrates a philosophically driven campus. UNESCO's World Heritage description highlights Santiniketan as an "outstanding crystallization of Tagore's universalist vision." The campus architecture deliberately departs from colonial conventions, drawing instead on ancient, medieval, and folk Indian traditions to embody Tagore's ideals. Buildings are simple, often open-sided structures set beneath tree canopies, open-air classrooms under banyan trees that reflect Tagore's emphasis on unity with nature and fusion of learning and art. In sum, both the Lalon shrine and Santiniketan demonstrate how built form can embody and preserve memory: they make tangible the mystical or pedagogical ideas of a culture, using architectural layout and style as mnemonic vessels.

The Antiquities Act, 1968 - Bangladesh

The Antiquities Act, 1968, was established to "consolidate and amend the law relating to the preservation and protection of antiquities." (Antiquities_Act_1968_English, 1968). The Act defines "ancient" as anything dating to more than a century prior to enactment and an "antiquity" as "any ancient product of human activity, movable or immovable, illustrative of art, architecture, craft, custom, literature, morals, politics, religion, warfare, science, or any aspect of civilization or culture." (Antiquities_Act_1968_English, 1968). Crucially, however, the act's scope is grounded in tangible objects or places—it does not address intangible expressions (such as songs, oral poetry, or rituals) in its definitions or provisions.

A historic building (such as Hason Raja's residence) could be declared an immovable antiquity of archaeological and historical interest, activating these protective measures. Indeed, ancient monuments previously declared under the older 1904 act were automatically deemed protected antiquities under the 1968 act. However, the Act's tangible focus reveals a critical limitation: it says nothing about living traditions or intangible heritage.

Adaptive Reuse for historic architecture conservation

Heritage scholarships view adaptive reuse as a sustainable conservation strategy that adds new life to old buildings. The aim is to extend a structure's useful life by finding compatible new functions while safeguarding its character. Authors note reuse "extends the building's life" and is often "the most environmentally sound approach" to conserving heritage structures. Reusing avoids demolition waste and thus aligns with ecological sustainability. Technical guidelines in preservation echo these themes through principles of minimal intervention and reversibility. Researchers argue that adaptations should follow the rule "as much as is needed, as little as required, ensuring that new work does not obliterate historic fabric. Any additions or alterations "should be capable of being removed" in the future. In practice this means retaining original materials and forms wherever possible and choosing new uses that fit the existing structure.

Adaptive reuse often involves layering new meanings onto a site. Converting a historic house into a museum or cultural centre is an "interpretive" reuse that both conserves the building and activates it as an educational narrative. (Armstrong et al., 2023). For instance, transforming Hason Raja's residence into a folk-music museum would add an interpretive layer-galleries or displays narrating his story—while preserving the house's architecture. Reuse planning should engage community values and local traditions, not just physical conservation. By following minimum-change, reversible design practices and thoughtfully interpreting heritage, adaptive reuse can ensure that buildings like Hason Raja's house remain both intact and socially meaningful for future generations.

Methodology of the research

This research employs a multidisciplinary, qualitative, design-led methodology combining literature and archival research, site investigation, and, in the end, conceptual design development. The study starts with reviewing Hason Raja's life, Bengali folk music, and heritage conservation literature to comprehend the cultural context. Parallel to this, an in-depth case study of the Hason residence documenting its existing architecture, landscape, and community significance. Thorough discussions have been done with great-grandchildren of Hason Raja, local experts, and community stakeholders to capture intangible memories, narratives, and values attached to the site. Spatial analysis techniques and cultural memory mapping are used to identify and assess the tangible and intangible attributes of the place. The study also incorporates a value assessment tool and comparative analysis with regional vernacular house types to ensure proposed interventions align with both conservation best practices and local traditions. Based on this contextual analysis, conservation strategies have been proposed, including floor plans, visualizations, and narrative design that translate intangible heritage values into architectural design. This iterative process is similar to other heritage conservation studies on field surveys and stakeholder input guiding these strategies. For example, research emphasizes that "data from field surveys, stakeholder interviews, and secondary research inform recommendations for conservation strategies." Integrating these methods, this study develops a coherent design strategy: adaptive reuse and landscape design layout that integrate Hason Raja's musical memory.

Identifying heritage values and attributes with site analysis

Hason Raja's residence has evolved from a 19th-century private rural estate into a focal point of cultural memory in Sunamganj, Sylhet. Over time, it has become a public heritage symbol and museum associated with Hason Raja's legacy. Today, even in a neglected state, the site attracts visitors who revere Hason's contribution to Bengali folk culture. It reflects a broader trend in enshrining an artist's home as a site of collective heritage. This historic site has suffered from decades of abandonment and damage during the great 1897 Assam earthquake, yet it remains an emblem of Hason Raja's era. It now stands as a tangible reminder of a mystic-poet landlord's life and the history of late-colonial Sylhet.

Spatial Configuration

The architecture of Hason Raja's house exemplifies vernacular Sylheti residential design, sharing features with regional "Bangla Batton" houses. There is an inner courtyard (angan) wrapped with generous verandas. A continuous veranda along the front façade as a semi-outdoor living space and transition between inside and outside. These facilitate ventilation, light, and family activities while also ensuring privacy in line with indigenous spatial norms. This arrangement parallels the Bangla Batton houses of Sylhet. The Hason residence followed this model, integrating public-facing spaces (for receiving guests or tenants) with more secluded private quarters around the courtyard, much like Sylheti urban vernacular compounds. (Saha et al., 2021).



Figure 3. SITE IMAGES OF outhouse, gate to inhouse and inhouse

Material and Structural Features

The residence's construction also reflects regional techniques. These buildings had shallow foundations with a masonry plinth, and in some cases, no deep foundation at all due to the lightweight ikra (reed and bamboo) construction of the walls. The walls of Hason Raja's home were likely of the ikra type—a lattice of reed or bamboo plastered with mud and lime—which was common in Sylhet's vernacular architecture. Its modular wooden panels and infill of reeds created a distinctive black-and-white grid appearance once white lime plaster was applied over the dark structural wood. The roof was almost certainly a pitched corrugated iron (CI) sheet roof with gabled ends, as was fashionable in late 19th-century Assam and Sylhet, often adorned with floral eave boards and drop ornaments in the Assamese style. Ornamented wooden posts would have supported the wide eaves of the veranda, and high jalousie windows and ventilators were used for circulation, reflecting both aesthetic detail and adaptation to heavy rains. These correspondences with regional architecture not only affirm the dwelling's authenticity but also provide a baseline for architectural analysis. (Saha et al., 2021).



Figure 4. STRUCTURAL RELEVANCE OF HASON RESIDENCE TO BANGLA BATON

Material and Structural Features

Hason Raja composed many of his mystic folk songs, drawing inspiration from the natural beauty of the haor (wetland) landscape and the spiritual traditions of Bengal. His songs directly invoke imagery of home and impermanence. He famously sang “Loke bole bolere, ghar-bari bala nay amar” (“People say I have no grand house; what dwelling can I build as an unseen shrine?”), (Issue-I, 2019). expressing a philosophical detachment from material wealth. The residence thus served as a space of poetic creation: oral histories suggest Hason Raja often wrote and performed on the wide front veranda, accompanied by indigenous instruments, for both family and local audiences. Hason Raja held court in the semi-public outer rooms, engaging with community members that gave the house a second life as a cultural salon under Hason’s patronage.

Hason Raja underwent a transformation from a life of luxury to one of spiritual introspection—he embraced Sufi ideals of love and divine unity, and in his songs, he even referred to himself as a *baula* (mad ecstatic devotee). The residence was not merely a home but a sacred locale where Hason practiced and reflected on metaphysical themes that later flowed into his lyrics. His compositions intertwine Islamic Sufi concepts with Vaishnava and Baul imagery, exemplifying Bengal’s syncretic spiritual culture. (Safi Ullah, 2023).

Condition Assessment

A survey of Hason Raja’s house raises urgent conservation concerns. The structure stands in ruin due to decades of neglect that led to crumbling walls, rotten woodwork, and a partially collapsed roof. Weathering and biological growth affected the earthen plaster and timber elements over time. The historic courtyards are overgrown, and the once-plinth has eroded, undermining structural stability. It is on the verge of ruin, with debris accumulating and unsympathetic alterations by squatters or local users over time. A large pond is alive in the back, once integral to the setting, now polluted like the overall environmental degradation of the site. Despite the physical decay, important authentic materials survive. Many original construction elements—such as portions of the *ikra* reed walls, carved wooden posts, and iron roof trusses—are extant, albeit in fragile condition. The surviving fabric offers the opportunity to preserve and showcase original 19th-century craftsmanship if stabilized properly. Any adaptive reuse effort will need to balance conservation of these authentic elements with necessary reconstruction. The philosophy of “minimal intervention” would suggest reinforcing the existing structure to the extent possible to keep the patina of age and original materiality visible. (Issue-I, 2019) (Siddiquee, 2013).

The decaying site causes onlookers to spontaneously remember lines of his music—“*matir o pinjirar majhe bondi hoiya re, kandey Hason Rajar mon moyna re*” (“caged in this earthen prison, Hason Raja’s soul” weeps)—effectively linking the physical ruin to the poet’s own words. The house’s current state carries a poignant sense of age value and historic aura that many modernized sites lose. Its weathered surfaces and original materials anchor the authentic “story” of Hason Raja’s life, providing a tangible link to the past that people can experience directly. Preserving some portion of the ruin as a ruin—consolidating it rather than completely rebuilding it—could thus serve to honor this memory value. Any adaptive reuse plan must document the current condition. It should also catalog the provenance of materials to guide decisions about repair or replacement in a manner that respects material authenticity.

Value Assessment

Tangible and intangible heritage values are assessed on Hason Raja’s residence in accordance with contemporary conservation theory. On the tangible side, the house possesses evident architectural-historical value: physical structure, layout, and materials embody a vernacular building tradition. (Saha et al., 2021). The tangible fabric also has technical value as a record of indigenous craftsmanship and age value in the weathered surfaces enduring for over a century.

Equally, the intangible values are attached to the site—the living heritage of music, myth, and meaning that it symbolizes. The intangible heritage associated with the site includes the oral traditions of Hason’s lyrics, the folklore and anecdotes about his life, and the spiritual practices that were once carried out there. UNESCO and ICOMOS frameworks increasingly emphasize that such intangible aspects must be safeguarded. In heritage management terms, the site continues to inspire community identity and spiritual reflection. The memory of Hason Raja’s mysticism is inseparable—a classic case of “sense of place” where tangible and intangible fuse. Modern conservation practice advocates identifying all such values through stakeholder engagement and research, then managing the site in a way that respects the multivalence of heritage—its multiple layers of value.

Intangible and tangible values help inform an adaptive reuse strategy. Tangible values—such as historic layout and architectural ambience suggest that any new use should adapt in a way that preserves key spatial features and showcases original materials. Intangible values—the songs, the memories, the spiritual resonance suggest that the new use should actively celebrate and continue those living traditions. Integrating new uses, such as an exhibit or performance space for folk music, will keep Hason’s music alive on-site. These will commemorate intangible heritage in line with the idea of “living heritage” conservation. (Zhang & Zhang, 2023). Adaptive reuse will transfer not just physical fabric but also cultural content to future generations, interpreting the poetic legacy and

maintaining the site as a place of inspiration and reflection. This assessment aligns with current heritage conservation paradigms; preserving a folk musician's residence is not only about maintaining an old structure but also safeguarding the songlines and stories woven into its fabric. The adaptive reuse must be conceived as a synergy of conservation and cultural continuity so that the songs, values, and creative spirit it embodies are passed onto future generations.

Spatial Value Assessment of the Historic Area

At the entrance, a gate and outer court serve as a semi-public gathering space, while an inner court is reserved for family and close guests. The outer courtyard, buffered by the Mughal wall and granary storage, historically functioned as a social hub for the community. By contrast, crossing the outer court into Hason Raja's living quarters marked a threshold into the intimate, contemplative domain of the poet, illustrating a pronounced public-to-private gradient in spatial experience. (Khan, 2022).

Hason Raja's own courtyard and pond likely witnessed informal music sessions and gatherings, reinforcing a living connection between architecture and intangible heritage. The design of the residence—with a welcoming front yard and water body— would have naturally supported folk song performances, storytelling, and contemplative solitude by the water. It reflects cultural zoning where secular and sacred activities comfortably coexisted on site. (Khan, 2022).

The spatial layout embodies intangible values and memories tied to Hason Raja's life and work. Hence, preserving the spatial configuration—the courtyard where he may have sung or recited poetry and the pond where he reflected—is vital to retaining the site's spirit of place.

Identifying Architectural Heritage Values and Defining Adaptive Reusing Policy

The songs, poetic legacy, and associated rituals of Hason Raja are as important to conserve as his house. Any adaptive reuse policy must therefore uphold cultural continuity: the storytelling, musical performances, and spiritual practices linked to the site rather than leaving the site in silence. Hason Raja's residence can be conserved as a living heritage site that celebrates both his architecture and his art.

Policy: Under Bangladesh's Antiquities Act (1968), the site qualifies as a protectable antiquity. It has historic, architectural, and cultural significance and must be conserved under government oversight. (Negligence in Conserving Heritage Sites Unacceptable, 2025). This framework establishes that any alteration to the site should respect its original character, and obliges authorities to ensure the site's protection according to global standards. Principles from UNESCO and ICOMOS provide a conservation ethos: the Venice Charter states not only the monument but also its setting are integral to its significance. The ICOMOS Charter on the Protection of Cultural Heritage and other doctrinal texts advocate for safeguarding intangible values.

Table 1. TABLE OF COMPARISON AND RELEVANCE OF SITE ELEMENTS AGAINST ASPECTS OF MEASURE

Element	Cultural	Philosophical	Literary	Lifestyle	Historical	Aesthetic	Total Score (30)
Pond	5	5	5	4	5	5	29
Granary Pavilion	1	2	1	4	4	3	15
Plinth of the House	5	5	5	5	5	4	29
Assembly Porch	2	3	2	5	5	4	21
Old-Wall	1	1	1	1	3	4	11

Adaptive Reuse Principles

Reversibility: Any modern addition has to be designed as reversible, so it can be removed or undone in the future without permanent damage to the original fabric.

Minimum Intervention: The design adheres to the maxim of retaining the authentic building materials and layout to the greatest extent and only undertaking works that are absolutely required for structural stability, safety, or new function. The historic architecture is seen as a document of the past— its original walls, form, and

finishes should remain legible and not be obscured by excessive alterations. Repairs can be done using traditional materials to maintain material integrity. (Heritage, 2021).

Authenticity: The adaptive reuse will uphold the truthful expression of the site's cultural identity. It is preserving both the physical authenticity and the intangible spirit of the place. As the Nara Charter notes, authenticity is conveyed through a heritage site's ability to express its historic meaning and context. In practice, this means we will avoid falsification of history: new elements will be contemporary and distinguishable on close inspection, and will not reconstruct lost features unless there is solid evidence, nor introduce themes that contradict Hason Raja's story. The goal is to let Hason Raja's own legacy "speak" through the site—maintaining the ambience of his era and the atmosphere of mysticism tied to his persona. By following charters like the Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS), the adaptive reuse strategy ensures that any adaptation "does not distort the meaning of the place" and that the cultural significance, including use and associations, is respected in design decisions. (Heritage, 2021).

Referential Cases

Lalon Shah's Akhra, Kushtia (Bangladesh): The complex of another mystic songwriter, Lalon Fakir, integrates intangible heritage with site conservation. The living sacred place annually hosts thousands of devotees for music festivals and spiritual gatherings. The site is managed to support performances and accommodate pilgrims, protecting the site's use and spirit and enhancing its relevance. This approach shall make Hason Raja's residence a venue for folk music events and contemplation, not merely an artifact under glass.

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India: Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan is a UNESCO World Heritage cultural landscape, a model for holistic conservation of a cultural campus. The site preserves early 20th-century university buildings and ashram spaces, continuing to function as an educational and artistic community. UNESCO praised Santiniketan as "the physical manifestation of a utopian ideal... a crucible for intellectual and artistic ideas" that still conveys Tagore's philosophy. (Chakraborti & Chakraborti, 2023). This case underlines the importance of keeping Hason Raja's site active and interpretive: encourage educational and cultural programming so that the site remains intellectually and artistically alive in spirit.

Bhitargaon Temple Interpretation Zone, Kanpur, India: Bhitargaon Terracotta Temple has been coupled with the creation of an interpretation zone, with visitor access and understanding. The temple, being fragile, is protected by a buffer, and information panels and guided paths allow visitors to appreciate its history from a respectful distance. This approach enhances public engagement and tourism, ensuring the monument's safety. (Singh, 2019). This conservation strategy for Hason Raja's residence incorporates a dedicated interpretation strategy to educate visitors about Hason Raja's life and Bengal's folk music heritage without overcrowding or physically straining the tangible heritage.

The adaptive reuse policy identifies the residence and its landscape as a multi-valued heritage, architecturally as a vernacular landmark, and culturally as a cradle of mystic folk music. The policy suggests minimal, reversible interventions that safeguard these values, guided by both local laws and international best practices. This framework aims for a balanced approach: protect the past while breathing life into the present, ensuring the site's relevance for future generations.

Preparing Master Plan and Architectural Design

The design intention is to treat the entire premises as an experiential landscape of folk music heritage, where every zone has a sympathetic use and nothing is arbitrary. This subdivides the site into functional zones, both meeting new user needs and respecting the historic spatial order. The circulation is carefully planned so that visitors intuitively move from public to more private/sacred spaces, as in the original spatial composition of the estate. This journey ensures that the sanctity of Hason Raja's personal spaces is maintained.

Key design strategies and architectural approach:

Peripheral Slabs: New structures built along the periphery of the built forms, rather than crowding the historic houses. Concentrating new construction at the edges, to preserve open sightlines and the central void of the courtyard, keeping the historic sites as the focal point. This creates a buffer between the historic area and the outside context.

Pathways & Controlled Circulation: The design introduces defined pathways, that harmonize with the site, ensuring that foot traffic does not trample sensitive areas. Controlled circulation implies that certain routes are designated for general visitors, while other areas might remain restricted or accessible only during guided tours. It is informed by heritage site management practices where visitor flow is engineered to balance access and conservation. This becomes a journey through his poetry. Small seating areas or pause points along the way allow visitors to stop, listen to recorded music, or read interpretive plaques, enriching the experience.

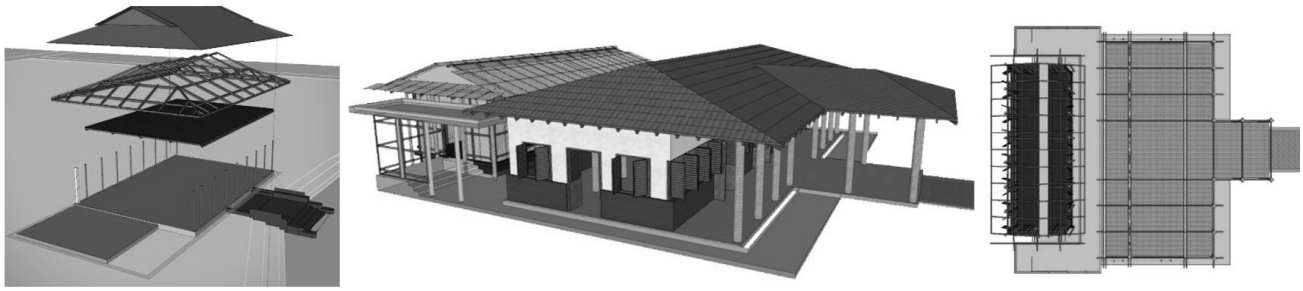


Figure 5. EXAMPLE OF PERIPHERAL SLAB FOR CIRCULATION AND VISITOR EXPERIENCE, AROUND AND THROUGH HERITAGE BUILDING

Buffer Zones and Landscape Edges: One critical buffer along the pond's edge, will be treated as a soft landscaped zone— perhaps with grass, reeds, and appropriate planting— to maintain a visual and environmental cushion in front of the house. This green fringe around the pond not only preserves the original picturesque quality but also acts as a natural barrier discouraging too close an approach to the house façade. These absorb rain runoff, provide shade, and keep the microclimate cooler for outdoor music events. Here, the pond's edge might even be developed into a small interpretation garden.

"Invisible" Foundations and Ramps: New foundations for any added structures will be of an "invisible" type that does not disturb archaeological layers of the site. This corresponds to the principle of reversibility— foundations can be removed with negligible trace. Any contemporary structures will use modern materials in a transparent or deferential design to keep focus on the heritage building leaving the 150-year-old structure as it was.

The master plan incorporates principles of cultural placemaking and sustainability returning the site to its historical role as a cultural node. The result is a master plan protecting the sanctity of Hason Raja's residence and inviting people to engage with the folk music heritage in a meaningful way.

Proposed Adaptive Reuse Design

The Hason Raja's residence is not just a physical restoration but a living museum that safeguards intangible cultural heritage—specifically the rich legacy of Bengali folk music and mystic traditions. Museums today are called on to preserve both "the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity," (International Council of Museums, 2023). using their spaces and resources to keep traditions and living expressions alive.

The design stratifies the experience into sensory layers that mirror the layers of memory and meaning associated with the site. This approach draws on museum design strategies, blending media to create emotional resonance like in the Fado Museum (Lisbon). (Castelo-Branco & Sánchez-Fuarros, 2023). Similarly, the concept uses multisensory cues—the echo of a folksong, the play of shadow and sun, or a quiet enclosure— to trigger cultural memory. Thus, architecture becomes a storytelling medium, guiding visitors through an unfolding narrative of Bengali folk heritage. This reflects a spatial narrative, where spaces are sequenced to "evoke emotions, communicate ideas, and immerse us in narrative journeys." (Siddiqui, 2023).

The program introduces several key experiential elements, addressing a facet of intangible heritage preservation.

Song Archive & Listening Pods: Listening pods allow visitors to sit and listen to curated recordings in solitude. UNESCO calls for transmission of intangible heritage to the next generation. The archive room's ambience should be like a library: filtered light, comfortable seating, and visual displays of lyrics, encouraging visitors to delve into songs' meanings. Providing a dedicated song archive and recording/listening facility, the design ensures that Hason Raja's compositions are preserved as living and accessible rather than just as static exhibits.

Courtyard Amphitheater: Courtyards can be reimagined as modest amphitheaters for live performances, community gatherings, and practices. The design preserves the house's courtyard and adds terraced seating on the existing plinth, creating a small outdoor stage without altering the original footprint. This allows the museum to host folk music performances under the open sky, in the very homestead of the poet. For instance, the National Folk Museum (Lok Virsa) in Islamabad pairs indoor exhibits with an outdoor folk amphitheater, creating a "lively" space where music and dance bring the museum to life. (Reflect and Respond: Understanding Lived History Through the Lok Virsa Heritage Museum, 2024). Courtyard Amphitheatre will let visitors experience the collective and participatory side of Bengali folk culture.

Hason Reflective Spaces: These spaces have to be intentionally sparse and dim, with minimal exhibits; perhaps a single poignant verse of Hason Raja or a subtle sound installation. The concept is akin to the serenity of Hason philosophy, where people engage in silent contemplation and realization of the deeper meaning of life. The sequential contrast from music performance to silence is a deliberate narrative device, underscoring the multiple layers of memory embodied in the site.

Interpretation Wall: The site contains a Mughal wall. The wall is partially damaged and reparable at some points and conservable at some sections. It can act as a dynamic canvas for storytelling— featuring curated photographs and bilingual lyrics of Hason Raja’s songs, historical context about Bengali folk music, and audiovisual snippets. One section could display the genealogy of Bengali folk music. Another section might be a lyric wall— where verses of famous songs are printed alongside English translations and can be heard via touch-activated speakers.



Figure 6. CURRENT CONDITION OF MUGHAL GATE AND ENTRANCE THROUGH IT TO INNER COURT

Spatial Strategy

The spatial strategy is governed by principles of minimal intervention, reversibility, and respect for the original architecture of Hason Raja’s home. Historical elements of the building are preserved or restored in situ.

Preserving the Plinth and Layout: The original plinth of the house can be retained. This plinth is the base of the courtyard and building, with both practical and heritage importance. Culturally, the plinth defines the footprint and spatial organization of the traditional site; preserving it means the “grounding memory” of the place remains intact.

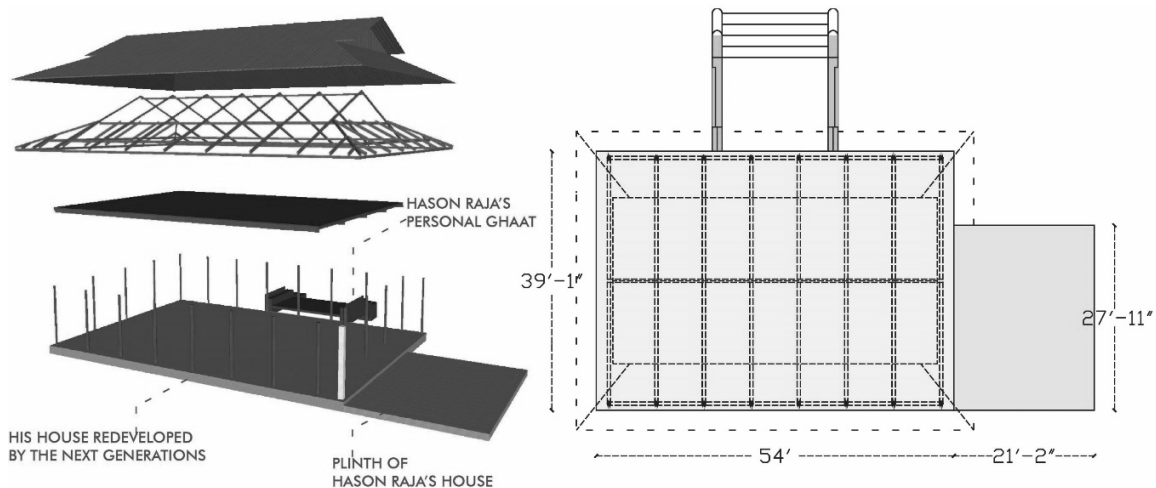


Figure 7. DOCUMENTATION OF PLINTH OF HASON RAJA'S HOUSE

Reversible Exhibition Insertion: The benefit of reversibility is twofold: it protects the authenticity of the heritage structure, and it leaves room for future reinterpretation. A classic example of this strategy is the adaptation of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, where “lightweight, removable structures were installed to update facilities without altering the historic design.” These interventions are to be “integrated into the architecture...without compromising the building’s original aesthetics.” (Architectours, 2025).

Material Strategy

The material palette has to be deliberately kept sustainable and locally appropriate to honour traditional building practices and to ensure a low environmental footprint, aligning with heritage restoration norms.

Clay and Lime: The original walls of the house are made of brick and lime mortar, typical of 19th-century Bengal. Reusing these materials continues a lineage of craft. Besides this regulates humidity and temperature inside with locally sourced plaster that echoes traditional construction methods. Clay and lime-based materials tie the new interventions back to the original fabric, ensuring visual harmony.

Timber: Wood has been historically used in the house's structural system. This can be salvaged from original teak or jackfruit wood elements and restored. This allows the structure to be light and reversible. It also subtly infuses the design with the aesthetics of folk culture.

Reuse of Existing Materials: The conservation process reuses materials from the site itself, embracing the adaptive reuse ethos down to the material level. This recycling approach not only minimizes waste but also keeps the historic materials in continuous use, further layering the memory within the site.

In summary, the material strategy reinforces both authenticity and sustainability.

Experiential Layers - Movement through Space

The spatial experience will symbolically mirror Hason Raja's own journey through music and spirituality, unfolding in a sequential experiential journey. The spatial choreography has to be, therefore, calibrated as a narrative experience, from the moment one enters the premises to the point of exit. It has to be biographical and thematic, tracing the arc from Hason Raja's worldly life steeped in folk culture to his later ascetic, philosophical phase, and situate his legacy in the broader stream of Bengali musical heritage.

The journey begins at the open courtyard facing the Surma River, where visitors will get their first impressions. It is for live performances and open spaces dedicated to local musicians. This space is the prologue, establishing the connection between the tangible heritage and the intangible context of Hason Raja.

Upon entering the site, visitors shall encounter the most extroverted layer: the vibrancy of folk performance. If a live demonstration or an audio-visual projection is ongoing, this is where one shall experience the collective joy of music. The circular seating, the presence of instruments on display, and perhaps ambient recordings of distant folk songs at low volume shall resonate Hason Raja's cultural impact. The visitor's senses can be engaged openly, they can look up at the sky, feel the breeze, and hear echoes. This situates them in the same environment the poet would have experienced.

The visitor might browse a digital catalogue of Hason's songs at a listening station, read about the meaning of his lyrics on the interpretation wall, or view artifacts. The experience shifts from the extroverted to a contemplative but informational mode. In the design narrative, this layer corresponds to memories of Hason Raja's works as a documented legacy. It also reflects the broader cultural memory of Bengal; one section of the exhibit connects Hason to predecessors like Lalou Shah and successors like Shah Abdul Karim, situating him in a continuum. As visitors meander through these exhibit spaces, they construct an intellectual and emotional memory palace of Bengali folk music. The layering is also temporal; one space might emphasize the historic layer, while another highlights the present layer. By the end of this layer, the visitor has accumulated a wealth of impressions, sounds, and facts—effectively immersing them in the collective memory of the culture.

After absorbing the richness of the music and its context, now the design deliberately strips away stimuli, encouraging introspection. The transition might be orchestrated by a gradual narrowing of space, almost like entering a sanctum. A subtle sound installation—for instance, a low hum or the sound of a river—creates a meditative soundscape. The visitor is invited to sit, and contemplate. This layer symbolizes Hason Raja's own spiritual awakening as he wrote, “Lokey bole bole re ghor-barī bhālā nāy āmār...” – “People say my home is not splendid; what home can I build in this empty world?” expressing the ephemerality of material life. It is akin to the experience of standing in a humble hut or majhar (mausoleum) where silence speaks louder than words. In museum design terms, this is the emotional core, a quiet, reflective space. As visitors sit in silence, the layers of sound and information they gathered start to settle into memory. Many might recall a melody they heard earlier or reflect on the lyrics' meaning in their own life. By physically slowing down and internalizing, they partake in the intangible heritage in its most introspective form: spiritual contemplation.

Exiting into the daylight of the outside world, the hope is that visitors carry with them a deepened appreciation of Hason Raja's musical and spiritual legacy, having literally walked through it layer by layer. In effect, the museum experience is a microcosm of cultural transmission: it transforms passive spectators into active participants who have sung along, listened deeply, and pondered quietly, much as one would do in the actual practice of folk traditions.

International and Regional Examples: Fado Museum (Portugal) has an itinerary to guide you from the origins of Fado to contemporary interpretations, combining audiovisual stations and artifacts. (Castelo-Branco & Sánchez-Fuarros, 2023). The Paço do Frevo in Brazil integrates exhibition spaces with studios and dance halls, allowing visitors to both observe and participate, thereby bridging memory and living practice. (Lupo, 2021). This study generates a conservation strategy through which a museum is not a one-dimensional display of relics but a multi-layered environment where learning, experience, performance, and contemplation are all part of the journey.

Discussion

The conservation design and strategy of adaptive reuse focus on several critical aspects, including philosophical alignment of the house with Hason Raja's mystic philosophy. The tension between authenticity and change and the emotional attachment is expressed with its regional impact and future possibilities for engaging folk artists and young practitioners. Thus, adaptive reuse preserves both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the site.

Philosophical Alignment: Hason Raja's work reflects a deep philosophical connection to the divine and a quest for spiritual liberation. His songs focus on transcendence, love, and the oneness of existence. This insight must be embodied in the design of his residence-museum as a stage where visitors can experience not only Hason Raja's physical legacy but also his spiritual journey.

The design seeks layers of spaces that narrate his journey from worldly pleasures to spiritual enlightenment, aligning with his philosophical principles of interiority and mystical union that connect the philosophy of his music to the visitors.

Tension of Authenticity: The place itself holds cultural and spiritual significance, as with Hason Raja's residence. Now the question arises: how much change is too much? Here not only the physical fabric but also the spiritual and emotional attachment that people feel toward it add to its authenticity.

According to the conservation principles of ICOMOS and UNESCO, heritage preservation must maintain the integrity of the original form while also enabling it to serve new purposes. Here the aim is to preserve its historical features and original layout while introducing new elements that enhance its function as a cultural centre and museum.

User Perception: The success of the adaptive reuse project lies in the emotional attachment that visitors feel toward Hason Raja's house and their perception of Hason Raja's philosophy through this experiential journey. Interviews with local musicians, visitors, and community members show that Hason Raja's residence holds profound cultural significance. One musician interviewed stated, "Even though the house is falling apart, it still feels as if Hason is here, singing his songs." Such sentiments underscore the emotional resonance that the house holds for the local community as a living Bengali folk music heritage.

Regional Impact: While national figures such as Rabindranath Tagore receive substantial attention in heritage discussions, regional figures like Hason Raja often lack the same recognition. This shall hence serve as a template for similar projects focused on local cultural icons whose contributions to music, philosophy, and spiritual life have shaped regional identity.

Future Possibilities: Engaging local folk artists and young practitioners, the space will keep the museum alive, rather than a static archive. The programs include musical workshops, festivals, poetry recitations, and temporary residence for enthusiasts or artists. These initiatives integrate living traditions into the space, making the place a cultural incubator where the legacy of Hason Raja is both honoured and actively practiced.

Conclusion

The adaptive reuse of Hason Raja's residence is an important contribution to the preservation of intangible Bengali folk music heritage. It transforms the house into a dynamic space for cultural practice and spiritual reflection, offering an innovative approach to memory preservation that respects both the historical significance of the site and the living traditions embodied in it.

Besides, this acts as a stage for continued practice of his music and mysticism, highlighting the potential of architecture to encompass cultural memory. It allows heritage to be an experience through active engagement with the traditions that gives the static a meaning of life.

The project blends mysticism, music, and architecture, honouring both local traditions and modern needs. Thus, it acts as a model for preserving intangible cultural heritage through architectural storytelling. Here, adaptive reuse goes beyond merely preserving the physical fabric to honouring and extending the legacy of the cultural figures associated with it. The success of this project will depend strictly on how the community and future generations engage in the active conservation and performance of Hason Raja's legacy, ensuring that his contributions to Bengali culture continue to thrive and evolve.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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