

Chapter 6

Authenticity And Users' Experience of 'Traditional' Places

* Manal Khalaf, Layla Karajica

Introduction

This research aims to investigate the importance of authenticity from the perspective of lay people through the case of contemporary 'traditional' cafes in Bahrain. It attempts to answer the question of authenticity and shed light on the positive side of imitations and themed places of traditional architecture as a means of documentation. It discusses these ideas through case studies of contemporary cafes in Bahrain that adapt traditional themes. Through field studies and interviews, it investigates how authentic 'traditional themed cafes' are perceived by their owners, working team and visitors. Based on the findings, the authors here argue that without undermining the importance of authenticity in original heritage sites, imitations and themed places of traditional architecture and interiors could be acknowledged as a means of documentation of cultural heritage that facilitates accessibility to heritage especially to those who are not familiar with the original places.

Authenticity and heritage conservation

The concept of 'authenticity' is rooted in the conservation field and therefore, in order to understand authenticity, it is important to understand it within its context of heritage conservation. The notion of heritage conservation has two major paradigms (Vinas, 2005). The first one, which is known as the classical conservation theory developed in Europe in the 19th century, represents the western view on conservation, focuses on material authenticity and considers the value of heritage objects and places to exist independently of people. This theory was translated in a number of international conservation documents. For example, the Venice Charter (1964) stresses maintaining original material, design and historic accuracy without mentioning non-material, intangible heritage or the value attributed to heritage by local communities (ICOMOS, 1964). Similarly, in practice, the World Heritage Convention (1972), until the 1990s relied heavily on the ideas of material integrity adopted from the Venice Charter (UNESCO, 1972).

The second paradigm, which is known as the contemporary conservation theory, developed gradually during the last two decades of the 20th century. This theory is considered as the people-centered approach where the notion of heritage is rooted in the value and meaning attributed to objects and places by people (Kwanda, 2010). Thus, according to this view, people are the creators of heritage, and they also select what should become heritage. The seeds of this theory started with recognizing cultural diversity, embracing the value of intangible heritage and the views of local societies. It suggests moving away from imposing the Euro-centric understanding of conservation and authenticity on the international community. For example, the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), implies that material integrity is one of several aspects of authenticity and recognizes that authenticity may lie in tradition, function, spirit, or social meanings and values, not just materials originality (ICOMOS, 1994). On the other hand, the Burra Charter (1979, latest revision 2013) shifted the focus of the assessment of cultural heritage to the notion of 'cultural significance', which includes tangible and intangible values, including community values, meanings and use (Australia ICOMOS, 2013). Accordingly, instead of material driven conservation, value-based conservation became increasingly important internationally. With the recognition of authenticity in terms of experience in the heritage

Corresponding Author: * Manal Khalaf

Department of Architecture and Interior Design, College of Engineering, University of Bahrain, Kingdom of Bahrain

E-mail: mjkhalf@uob.edu.bh

How to Cite This Chapter:

Khalaf, M., & Karajica, L. (2025). Authenticity and users' experience of 'traditional' places. In Rokhsaneh Rahbarianyazd & Hourakhsh Ahmad Nia (Eds.), *Resilient Heritage & Adaptive Urbanism* (pp. 45–53). Cinius Yayınları.

<https://doi.org/10.38027/N6ICCAUA2025EN0044>

field, the discourse is increasingly revolving around the idea of measuring and testing authenticity especially by national, governmental bodies or international institutions such as UNESCO or ICOMOS (Rakic 2007, 212; Jones 2009; Alivizatou 2012; Bendix 2008; Gentry 2013).

Concepts of authenticity and heritage are closely connected with identity as explained by Smith and Akagawa (2009, 7) stating that 'a key consequence of heritage is that it creates and recreates a sense of inclusion and exclusion'. Gentry (2013), for example, emphasize the 'importance of a sense of place' stressing that there is a 'desire to take authority back from so called 'experts' and return it to individual and community'. Chhabra, Healy, and Sills (2003) highlight that identity and culture are changing by their nature as people travel and migrate taking their culture with them. Therefore, as argued by Wood (2020), culture should be understood as a process of exchange, growing and developing over time and under different circumstances.

In this chapter, particularly traditional places are discussed and thus it was found essential to understand how traditional places are perceived in academic literature. Generally, most scholars highlight the tangible and intangible aspects of traditional places. For example, Ashworth and Graham (2005), stress this stating that "traditional places hold cultural significance, both tangible and intangible, passed down through generations, reflecting a community's identity". Likewise, Fairclough (2008) defines traditional places by connecting them to their cultural heritage that is transmitted over generations in a way that links those places to local identity and memory. This means that in addition to their physical aspects, traditional places embody cultural interpretations and practices that contribute to a community's sense of identity, belonging and endurance (Fairclough, 2008). Similarly, Tilley (2006), emphasizes that traditional places have material and immaterial aspects as those places hold both physical environments (e.g., buildings, landscapes, etc.) and intangible attributes (e.g. knowledge, rituals, etc.) that give them cultural meanings and values.

While the importance of authenticity of the tangible aspect is well established in literature, there are voices which argue that the fakeness of identical reconstructions and imitations can also allow users to experience a sense of authenticity (Piazzoni, 2020). In fact, scholars of heritage have increasingly emphasized that material authenticity is not as significant to lay people as the meanings they attribute to traditional places and landscapes (Knudsen and Waade 2010; Holtorf 2013; Rickly-Boyd 2013). According to such views, the notion of "fakeness" contests classical views of authenticity in heritage by suggesting that the value of imitations is rooted in their ability to evoke a sense of authenticity through people interaction and experiences. However, those voices remain few in comparison to the huge body of literature that adopts traditional conservation theories that reject imitations and consider them as 'fakes'. In fact, traditional conservation theories consider 'fakes' to deceive the public, stressing that any additions to historic buildings should be identifiable to avoid falsifying history (Jokilehto, 2013; Khalaf, 2018).

With the above conception of conservation, authenticity, traditional places, themed-places and fakes, many questions could be raised, such as: Should traditional places be authentic? Could ideas of 'real' and 'fake' be relative? Could fake places or imitations of traditional places still be considered 'traditional'? Could fake 'traditional' places produce authentic experiences? And could imitations of traditional places be a way to sustain interest in heritage?

The research Design: objectives, methodology and methods

This research studied the phenomenon of 'traditional' cafés in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Traditional cafés or what is known locally in the Kingdom of Bahrain as 'gahwas' were an essential part in the Bahraini culture. They used to be social places where men gathered any time of the day to discuss different matters over a cup of tea. Food was also served in those traditional cafés in a style of 'all day' menu. News, events and daily gossips were exchanged and discussed in those cafés. Also, commercial deals were sometimes closed there. Thus, in today's terms, traditional cafés served as public social places, cafes, restaurants, places where one could spend his leisure time and more.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable revival of the phenomenon of traditional cafés in Bahrain. Although, the contemporary 'traditional cafés' do not follow functionally the old model of 'gahwas', most of them attempt to resemble or at least relate to the 'old days' either through their interiors, furniture, menu, or even their names. The main aim of the research was to understand the language used to convey the idea of 'being traditional' by the owners of those cafés, and to evaluate how is it perceived by the users on the other end.

The research used case studies of authentic traditional café, and themed cafes that adapt traditional themes, whether in their name, architecture, interior, menu or other aspects. The choice of the case studies considered the history and authenticity of the cafés as well as the architectural expression. In this chapter, we are presenting two case studies with different settings; one authentic traditional café within a traditional setting, and another completely new café/restaurant within a shopping mall that adopts traditional theme and interior. The methods used for data collection in this research were field studies for documentation and interviews.

For each case study, the team investigated the following:

1. Location and site analysis – using maps and aerial photos. Site analysis was conducted to study the surroundings of the café (zoning, building's types, roads and traffic, heights, architectural language, etc.)
2. Documentation of the place and its history - This involved:
 - a. Collecting information about the history of the café and the building (historical records,

- newspaper, internet, oral history, etc. – as appropriate)
 - b. Exterior and interior photos showing different parts of the café
 - c. Collecting or producing measured drawings of the place
 - d. Detailed interior drawings
3. Pattern of use (opening hours and the busy and quite times throughout the day, age and gender of users, etc.) – through observation and interviews with workers
 4. Evidence collected from studying the menu and its development over time (e.g. how traditional or contemporary are the dishes offered? Are they all Bahraini dishes? Are they served all day or focus on certain meals? How do they relate to the idea of 'being traditional'? What changes have been done over time etc.)
 5. Owner/workers' views: Is the café considered traditional from the view of the owner/workers? And if it is, then what makes it so in their opinion?
 6. Users' views (around 20 responses): Is the café considered traditional from the view of the users? And if it is, then what makes it so in their opinion? What attracts people most to the café (food, atmosphere, memories of the past, being different, other reasons)?

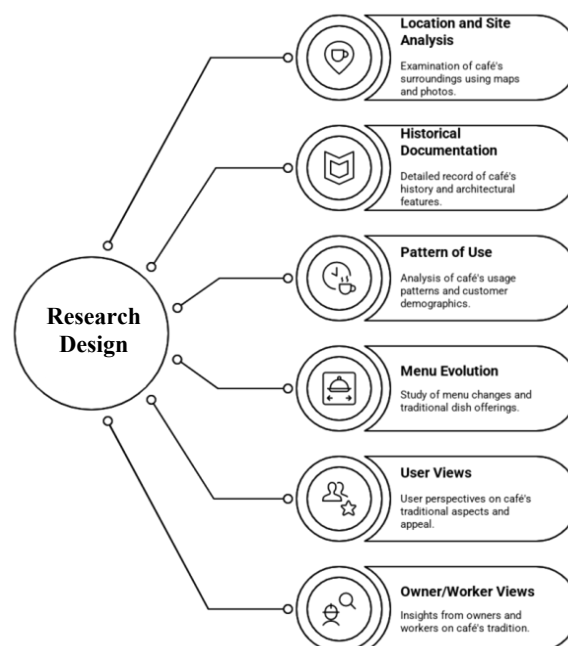


Figure 1: Research Design

Case Study 1: Haji Café – An Authentic Traditional Café

Located in the heart of Bahrain's capital city, Manama, Haji Cafe is one of the oldest traditional cafes, established in 1950 by Haji Ghulam Hussain. Its location near Bab Al-Bahrain, and proximity to one of the largest traditional souqs (markets) in the Kingdom, makes it a popular spot. Initially a modest space with a single door and three tables, the cafe quickly gained popularity among locals. Over the years, it evolved into one of the favourites 'qahwas' (cafés) for locals.



Figure 2: Historic photos and records of Haji Café.

For over seventy years, this cafe has been hidden in a narrow alley in the heart of Manama's traditional district. Its outdoor setting is featuring traditional tables and benches, serving as a visual testimony to its long-standing presence and offers a glimpse into the past. The alley and the cafe's exterior walls are decorated with a collection of vintage photographs and newspaper articles, each telling its own story and acting as a historical witness to the cafe's rich history. The area is usually very busy with locals and tourists alike, drawn to the vibrant market atmosphere. Surrounded by numerous offices, apartments, and hotels, Haji Cafe has become a popular destination for both residents and visitors. Such experience fosters both nostalgia and connection, allowing customers to enjoy the interplay of tradition, culture, and modern life.

The place with its setting, ambience, traditional interiors, furniture, and typical traditional cuisine attracts locals, residents and tourists of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. In a today's global world, with social media being the leading and most popular tool, Haji Cafe's name became well known internationally. Because of the online reviews, many from around the world took the chance to visit it, which increased the popularity of the place and made Haji Cafe wins many awards.



Figure 3: Traditional Exterior of Haji Café.

The traditional simple interior design is especially seen in the treatment of the ceiling using old Bahraini houses as a design reference. The original wooden ceiling, made from palm trunks called 'danchel' is kept, and wall recesses are used decoratively. Additionally, the traditional 'bluish tone' tables and wooden benches are covered with fabric featuring typical patterns inspired by Bahraini heritage. Similar to the exterior, the walls display the old photographs that evoke memories from the past, creating the nostalgic atmosphere for visitors. Traditional Bahraini interiors are a blend of function, craftsmanship, and cultural symbolism. Wood is central to the design, with palm wood and reed being common materials for furniture and structural elements. Although, there are several traditional elements in the interior, the place reflects the simplicity of traditional Bahraini architecture without excessive use of decorative elements.



Figure 4: Traditional interior and food of Haji Café.

As previously mentioned, the original Haji Cafe was established in 1950 by Haji Ghulam Hussain. Over time, the place has been operated as a family business: first by his son and currently by two of his grandsons. Zuhair Haji explains: "Our father transformed the cafe from the traditional place to an iconic establishment in Bahrain; both locals and tourist gather here." He adds: "Haji Cafe is a home for everyone. Fresh traditional Bahraini food is prepared under the family supervision. The old generations are still gathering in the cafe and this is what keeps the tradition and history alive. The idea is to attract the young generations as well and teach them about our traditions".

Case Study 2: Ghancha Café – A Traditional-Themed Café

Ghancha Cafe is located in Al Aali Shopping Mall, in the heart of Seef District; a popular and dynamic area known for its shopping centers and commercial hubs. This location and proximity to other commercial establishments makes Ghancha Café easily accessible for both locals and tourists.

Generally, Seef area experiences moderate to heavy traffic, especially during evenings and weekends. This is due to the shopping malls and dining establishments within the area. Parking spaces are available in Al Aali Mall near the café which facilitates its accessibility. In terms of surroundings, most buildings within the immediate vicinity range are between 4-20 stories. Shopping malls are low-rise complexes compared to the residential and office towers surrounding them.

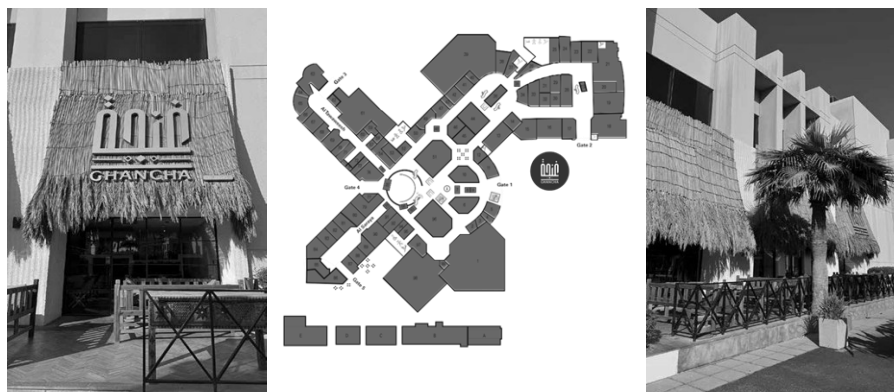


Figure 5: Location and exterior of Ghancha Café.

The architectural language of the area combines contemporary and modern architecture; characterized by glass facades and clean lines. Al Aali Mall, where Ghancha café is located, was opened in 1996. The architecture design of the mall gracefully combines the traditional style with contemporary architecture. In fact, Al Aali Mall features a section known as 'The Souq' where the whole section with its shops, cafes and restaurants are designed with traditional themed interiors and traditional architectural elements to enhance the atmosphere in this section. Gancha café, which was opened in 2023, is not located within The Souq area of Al Aali Mall. However, it was designed with a traditional Bahraini theme, making it a contrasting, but also attractive spot for both locals and tourists seeking such experience.

In terms of exterior façade treatment, natural palm leaves are used to shade the entrance and other opening on the façade creating visual identity of culture and traditional roots. Also, beige textured walls are used in the exterior façade to replicate (to a certain extent) the textured walls of traditional Bahraini houses. Similarly, wooden benches and tables with traditional patterned cushions are used for outdoor seating to support the traditional theme and enhance comfort, while palm trees and greenery are adding a touch of vibrancy and shade.

The interior and color palette of the café is characterized by earthy tones, natural textures, and traditional materials like woven fabrics and wood. Also, palm leaves are used for ceiling decoration which together with the textured walls emphasize the use of natural materials. The dining space of the café combines traditional Bahraini aesthetics with functional design to create a warm atmosphere. Similarly, the central counter area, combines Bahraini woodwork with modern design to facilitate functionality. For furniture, a mix of traditional and modern pieces are used, such as chairs with stitched details and wooden tables. Additionally, rustic shelves that act as a background for the seating area are presented with displays of Bahraini heritage items like traditional tea sets and cookware. Decorative elements also include woven baskets, pottery, and other heritage-inspired items. Generally, attention to details is noticeable in the engraved table patterns and handcrafted items. To complement the theme, waiters are also dressed in traditional Bahraini customs.



Figure 6: Traditional themed interior and food of Ghanca Café.

In addition to the exterior and interior traditional theme, Gancha café is presented as ‘traditional Bahraini café’ on their Instagram account. The café opens 7 days a week, from 7:00 am-10:00 pm (11:00 pm on weekends). The menu of Gancha cafe contains both local traditional and contemporary dishes. Traditional Bahraini dishes reflect the local character, while international dishes and drinks are also offered to suit different tastes, giving the cafe a modern touch. In fact, the modern touch is reflected in the menu design that is aimed at the modern audience and even in the presentation of traditional dishes making the restaurant a distinctive combination of traditional and contemporary cultures. Although the café is relatively new, the traditional theme is emphasized through the attention given to the design, interior details and menu.

Findings and Discussions

This section summarizes the case studies data collected from the field visits and the findings of the interviews and surveys conducted for this research. Table 1 below compares the findings of the two case studies:

Table 1: Summary of the case studies findings.

	Haji Café	Ghancha café/restaurant
Location	Bab Al-Bahrain area, in the heart of Manama City, a very busy and popular area of the capital city.	Al Aali Shopping Mall; a popular and dynamic area known for its shopping centers and commercial hubs.
History/ Authenticity	Opened in 1950.	Opened in 2023.
Exterior Façade	Exterior features are traditional furniture along with wooden shutters, carved wooden doors	Exterior features are natural palm leaves, beige textured walls wooden benches and tables

	and exposed beams. The narrow road (zarnooq) is shaded by traditional fabric.	with traditional patterned cushions, palm trees and greenery adding vibrancy and shade.
Interior	Ceiling features wooden construction using palm trunks known as 'danchel,' along with palm wood and reed, walls are decorated with old photographs, while arches and recesses serve as decorative wall treatments, tables in 'bluish tone' and wooden benches are enhanced with fabric showcasing traditional Bahraini patterns.	Café interior is characterized by earthy tones, natural textures, traditional materials, woven fabrics and wood, palm leaves for ceiling decoration. Bahraini woodwork is combined with modern design for the counter, traditional and modern furniture, stitched details, wooden tables, and display of traditional items. Also, staff are dressed in traditional Bahraini customs.
Operation hours	7 days a week, from 5:30 am - 09:00 pm (three timings specified for serving breakfast, lunch and dinner).	7 days a week, from 7:00 am - 10:00 pm (11:00 pm on weekends).
Menu	Mainly based on traditional cuisine, featuring typical dishes and drinks that are commonly cooked and served in Bahraini homes. Over time, some non-Bahraini dishes have been added to the menu for years and are now considered local by many.	The menu contains both local traditional and contemporary dishes, modern touch reflected in the menu design and presentation of traditional and more contemporary dishes.
Owner's/workers' view	• Popularity and simplicity: Simplicity is represented in all aspects of the café: - The Menu which includes traditional dishes and some others that were added over time to suit modern demands - The way the food is served (traditional plates used to serve food as each plate has a different color) • History and memory of the place • The traditional and historic architectural and decorative elements • Highlight the old times and identity of old Bahrain	• Architectural and interior design: The café's interior and exterior incorporate traditional Bahraini architectural features, such as the use of natural materials like palm fronds and earthy tones, which reflect the country's cultural heritage • Menu: emphasizes traditional Bahraini dishes and beverages, aiming to provide an authentic local dining experience • Cultural atmosphere: The atmosphere is enhanced by traditional music and décor, creating an environment that draws references to Bahrain's 1960s and 70s
Users view	Most users recognize the place as a traditional Bahraini café based on the following reasons: • The fact that it is located within the traditional fabric of Manama • Evoking memories of humble and simple life of old Bahrainis • Simplicity of the traditional exterior and interior features • Overall atmosphere • Affordable traditional food	Most users recognize the place as a traditional Bahraini café based on the following reasons: • The name reference (Ghancha is a traditional plate) • Cultural Connection and overall design with traditional references (decorative accessories, traditional patterns, staff uniform) • Food serving traditional dishes with a modern twist • Memories triggered by the atmosphere and details where some are drawn to the nostalgia of the past

From the interviews with the owners and workers of both case studies, both cafes are viewed as traditional cafes by their owners and worker, however for different reasons. In Haji café, owners and staff perceive the place as traditional because of its history and memory, popularity and simplicity, especially in terms of food and presentation. Although mentioned, less emphasis was placed on architecture and interior features. On the contrary, in the case of Ghancha café, architecture and interior features were mentioned first, supported by the menu offerings and general cultural atmosphere like accessories and music.

Regarding users' view, the qualitative analysis of the conducted interviews revealed again, that regardless of the historic gap between Haji café; the authentic traditional café and Ghancha café, the newly established traditional-themed café, both establishments are perceived as traditional by their visitors. In the case of haji café, emphasis was placed on the historic context and the reflection of the old days' simple life, traditional food with affordable prices. In the case of Ghancha café, users' emphasis was placed on the name, design, decorative elements and food.

Accordingly, it is noticeable that regardless of the gap in historic and material authenticity between the two cafes, both seem to produce authentic experiences in different ways according to their users that fulfill their expectation of traditional places.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the research concludes that the conception of authenticity differs between heritage experts and lay people. While the dominant understanding of authenticity within the academic and professional field emphasises the physical aspect of authenticity, lay people place more emphasis on the spatial, emotional and intangible experiences.

This chapter tries to shed light on the positive side of architectural imitations and to view them as more empathetic and thoughtful attempts to appreciate traditional architecture by lay people. When it comes to users/visitors, imitations could be viewed as a means for sustaining interest in cultural heritage, especially for young and future generations who do not necessarily have references of the past. On the other hand, in terms of experiences, as presented in this chapter, imitations of traditional places/ traditional-themed places seem to produce authentic experiences according to their users. Finally, imitations of traditional architecture and interiors could be acknowledged as a means of documentation that makes heritage more accessible.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge the valuable contributions of the Architecture students of Vernacular Architecture course, Department of Architecture and Interior Design, University of Bahrain (Academic year 2024/2025) who participated in this research. Their efforts and engagement were instrumental to the development of this study.

Conflict of Interests

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

References

- Alivizatou, M. A. (2012). Debating Heritage Authenticity: Kastom and Development at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. *Journal of Heritage Studies* 18 (2): 124–43.
- Australia ICOMOS, (2013). *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance*. [online] Burwood: Australia ICOMOS Inc.
- Bendix, R. (2008). Heritage between Economy and Politics: An Assessment from the Perspective of Cultural Anthropology. In *Intangible Heritage*, edited by L. J. Smith and N. Akagawa, 253–64. London: Routledge.
- Chhabra, D., R. Healy, and E. Sills. (2003). Staged Authenticity and Heritage Tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research* 30 (3): 702–19
- Fairclough, G. (2008). *Cultural Landscapes: The Value of the Past*. ICOMOS.
- Gentry, K. (2013). History, Heritage and Localism. *Policy Studies* 34 (5–6): 508–22.
- Holtorf, C. (2013). 'On Pastness: A Reconsideration of Materiality in Archaeological Object Authenticity.' *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 2: 427–43.
- ICOMOS, (1964). *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter)*. [online] Venice: ICOMOS.
- ICOMOS, (1994). *The Nara Document on Authenticity*. [online]
- Jones, R. (2011). Authenticity, the media and heritage tourism: Robin Hood and Brother Cadfael as midlands tourist magnets .In *Culture, Heritage and Representation*, edited by E. Waterton and S. Watson, 145–154. Ashgate.
- Jokilehto, J. (2013). *Reconstruction in the World Heritage Context*. European Association for Architectural Education. Rome.
- Khalaf, R. (2018). 'World Heritage Policy on Reconstruction: From Exceptional Case to Conservation Treatment.' *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 25, no. 7: 871–85
- Knudsen, B. T., and A. M. Waade. (2010). 'Performative Authenticity in Tourism and Spatial Experience: Rethinking the Relations between Travel, Place and Emotion.' In *Re-Investing Authenticity, Tourism, Place and Emotions*, edited by B. T. Knudsen and A. M. Waade, 1–22. Bristol, UK: Channel View Publication.
- Kwanda, T. (2010). Tradition of conservation: redefining authenticity in Javanese architectural conservation. ICOMOS.
- Piazzoni, F. (2020). What's wrong with fakes? Heritage reconstructions, authenticity, and democracy in post-disaster recoveries. *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 27(2), pp.239-258
- Rakic, T. (2007). World Heritage: Issues and Debates. *Tourism Preliminary Communication* 55 (2): 209–19.
- Rickly-Boyd, J. (2013). 'Existential Authenticity: Place Matters.' *Tourism Geographies* 15, no. 4: 680–86.
- Smith, L. J., and N. Akagawa. (2009). *Intangible Heritage*. Oxon: Routledge.

- Tilley, C. (2006). *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*. Berg.
- UNESCO, (1972). *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. [online] Paris: UNESCO.
- Vinas, S. (2005). *Contemporary theory of conservation*. Amsterdam: Elsevier-Butter Worth-Heinemann.
- Wood, B. (2020). A review of the concept of authenticity in heritage, with particular reference to historic houses. *Collections*, 16(1), pp.8-33.