



Repurposing the Past: Sarnies as the economic power of heritage in Bangkok

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adaptive reuse of heritage buildings is a key strategy for sustainable urban development, balancing historical preservation with modern economic viability. This study examines the transformation of Sarnies Bangkok, a 150-year-old former boat repair shop, into a thriving café and a model for urban regeneration in Bangkok's Old Town. **Methods:** A qualitative research approach was applied, incorporating architectural analysis, comparative case studies, and stakeholder interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic coding and comparative metrics to assess economic, social, and cultural impacts. **Finding:** Findings reveal that Sarnies Bangkok preserves architectural integrity while catalyzing heritage tourism, creating employment, and fostering community engagement. Minimal intervention and sustainable design maximize its economic and cultural benefits. **Conclusion:** This study concludes that adaptive reuse, as exemplified by Sarnies Bangkok, represents a replicable model for sustainable urban renewal. By integrating inclusive strategies, such projects can balance the risk of gentrification with the need for economic revitalization and cultural preservation, offering valuable insights for future urban development initiatives in rapidly modernizing cities. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** By situating the project within Bangkok's socio-economic and urban evolution, this research offers a replicable framework for balancing heritage conservation with modern urban demands, contributing to the broader discourse on sustainable urban regeneration. This research goes beyond isolated case studies by comparing adaptive reuse trends across Southeast Asia. It highlights the distinctive role of private-sector-led regeneration efforts, distinguishing it from government-driven conservation projects. Furthermore, it introduces a scalable model that integrates minimal intervention, sustainability, and community engagement, offering practical insights for policymakers, architects, and urban planners seeking sustainable solutions for heritage conservation in rapidly modernizing cities.

KEYWORDS: adaptation; heritage; Sarnies.

1. Introduction

Heritage conservation occupies a crucial role in urban development, serving as a bridge between the past and future of cities. As urbanization accelerates, historic buildings often face neglect or demolition, erasing cultural narratives embedded in their architecture. Integrating heritage conservation into urban planning ensures these spaces are preserved not as static relics but as active contributors to community life.

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Fig. 1. Sarnies Bangkok

Adaptive reuse has emerged as a pivotal strategy for balancing historical preservation with the demands of modern functionality. Globally, projects such as the High Line in New York City or the adaptive reuse of the Gasometers in Vienna demonstrate the transformative potential of historic sites to anchor urban regeneration efforts while celebrating cultural identities (Bullen & Love, 2011). More recent studies highlight the increasing relevance of adaptive reuse in addressing contemporary urban challenges, emphasizing its role in sustainable development, economic resilience, and community engagement (Armstrong et al., 2023). These examples illustrate how reimagining heritage buildings can offer socioeconomic benefits, environmental sustainability, and cultural continuity.

Heritage sites serve as cultural repositories that enhance the identity of urban spaces. Their regeneration through adaptive reuse not only preserves architectural integrity but also revitalizes neighborhoods, stimulating economic and social activities. This global phenomenon highlights the role of heritage as an integral component of urban resilience and development, offering lessons for rapidly modernizing cities such as Bangkok (Hamnett & Forbes, 2011).

Adaptive reuse ensures historical buildings maintain relevance in contemporary contexts, preserving both tangible and intangible aspects of heritage. This approach allows architects to honor the past while meeting the evolving needs of urban populations. By incorporating sustainability and innovation, adaptive reuse minimizes demolition waste, reduces the demand for new materials, and strengthens cultural connections to spaces, aligning with global conservation practices (Hamida et al., 2024; Plevvoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019).

2, Methods

This paper examines the transformation of Sarnies Bangkok, a 150-year-old boat repair shop situated in Bangkok's historic Old Town. It investigates how adaptive reuse has not only preserved the architectural and historical essence of the site but also catalyzed urban regeneration. The project's success underscores its replicable potential as a model for sustainable urban renewal.

Originally a derelict structure, Sarnies Bangkok has been rejuvenated into a thriving café. The restoration emphasizes minimal intervention, ensuring that much of the original architecture, including weathered bricks and wooden beams, remains intact. This balance of modern functionality with traditional aesthetics highlights the potential of adaptive reuse as a tool for urban conservation.

Nestled within Bangkok's Old Town, the site is steeped in historical and cultural significance. Its proximity to the Chao Phraya River and Charoen Krung Road positions it at the crossroads of Bangkok's trade and cultural history. This strategic location amplifies its importance as a case study for urban regeneration efforts in heritage-rich contexts.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Bangkok old town

3.1.1 Architectural and cultural heritage of old town

Bangkok's Old Town, also known as Rattanakosin Island, forms the historical nucleus of the city, established in 1782 as the capital during the reign of King Rama I. This district reflects over two centuries of cultural, political, and economic evolution (Panin, 2020). Its intricate urban fabric includes iconic landmarks such as the Grand Palace and Wat Pho, along with traditional shop-houses that embody the vernacular architecture of the region.

The Old Town's architecture is characterized by a harmonious blend of Thai, Chinese, and Western influences. Traditional shop-houses along Charoen Krung Road, Bangkok's first paved street, showcase a utilitarian design that integrates residential, commercial, and communal spaces under a single roof. These buildings symbolize Bangkok's role as a hub of cultural exchange and urban innovation. However, decades of neglect, urban sprawl, and rising property values have posed significant threats to the preservation of these historic structures (Ayudhya, 2024).

3.1.2 Socio-economic role of Bangkok old town

Historically, Bangkok Old Town served as the city's economic and administrative epicenter, leveraging its proximity to the Chao Phraya River for trade and governance. The river, once described as the "lifeblood of Bangkok," enabled the Old Town to thrive as a marketplace for goods and cultural exchange. The construction of Charoen Krung Road during the mid-19th century under King Rama IV expanded the district's accessibility, cementing its role as a pivotal commercial artery (Peleggi, 2007).

In the modern era, while the Old Town remains a magnet for tourism due to its rich cultural heritage, its socio-economic dynamics have shifted. The district is now grappling with the dual pressures of modernization and preservation. Tourism, a critical economic driver, brings both opportunities and challenges. While it generates revenue and footfall, over-tourism and unregulated commercialization have led to displacement of local communities and erosion of authentic cultural practices (Siririsak, 2009).

3.1.3 Challenges of urban conservation in old town

Conservation efforts in Bangkok Old Town face a range of challenges, often stemming from the interplay between rapid urbanization and cultural preservation: (1) *Encroachment of Modern Infrastructure*: High-rise developments and modern amenities alter the skyline and disrupt the visual and spatial coherence of the historic district; (2) *Neglect and Decay*: Many heritage buildings suffer from abandonment or lack of maintenance due to shifts in economic activity and the prohibitive costs of restoration; (3) *Tourism Pressure*: Overcrowding and commercialization strain local infrastructure, degrade cultural spaces, and diminish the authenticity of the heritage experience; (4) *Balancing Modernization with*

Preservation: Reconciling the demands of contemporary urban life with the imperatives of heritage conservation remains a delicate task (Larkham, 2002).

3.1.4 The role of adaptive reuse in revitalizing old town

Adaptive reuse projects like Sarnies Bangkok represent a viable solution to these challenges. By repurposing underutilized heritage buildings for contemporary uses, adaptive reuse not only safeguards architectural integrity but also injects vitality into the surrounding community. Such projects demonstrate that heritage preservation can coexist with economic modernization, fostering a symbiotic relationship between past and present. In Bangkok Old Town, adaptive reuse strategies emphasize 1) minimal intervention to retain historical authenticity, 2) sustainability practices, such as using local materials and enhancing energy efficiency, 3) community engagement to ensure local stakeholders benefit from the transformation (Suvarnananda et al., 2024).

By successfully addressing the challenges of conservation, adaptive reuse projects can ensure that Bangkok Old Town remains a living, evolving space that celebrates its cultural and architectural legacy while meeting the demands of contemporary urban life.

3.2 Heritage adaptation to revitalize old town

3.2.1 Definition and purpose of heritage adaptation

Heritage adaptation, often synonymous with adaptive reuse, is a transformative approach to repurposing historic structures for modern uses while safeguarding their architectural and cultural essence. Unlike conventional preservation, which emphasizes static protection, heritage adaptation focuses on revitalization, ensuring that historic buildings remain relevant and functional within contemporary urban contexts. This process extends the life of heritage assets, fostering sustainable urban development and enriching cultural identity (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019).

In the context of Bangkok Old Town, heritage adaptation addresses pressing issues such as underutilized spaces, economic stagnation, and cultural erosion. By converting neglected buildings into vibrant spaces, adaptive reuse not only conserves architectural heritage but also reinvigorates local economies, attracts tourism, and strengthens community engagement.

3.2.2 Key Strategies for heritage adaptation in Bangkok old town

Adaptive reuse in Bangkok Old Town employs innovative strategies to balance modernization with cultural preservation:

Minimal Intervention: Restoration projects prioritize retaining the historical fabric of buildings. At Sarnies Bangkok, for instance, original features such as brick walls and wooden beams were preserved to maintain authenticity. This approach aligns with international conservation principles, such as those outlined in the Burra Charter, which advocate for reversible changes and minimal alteration of original structures (Australia ICOMOS Incorporated, 2013).

Sustainability practices play a crucial role in heritage adaptation, ensuring that preservation efforts align with environmental responsibility. By incorporating reclaimed materials, natural ventilation systems, and energy-efficient designs, projects like Sarnies Bangkok minimize their ecological footprint while maintaining cultural heritage. This approach reflects global trends where green architecture enhances historic conservation efforts, as highlighted by Kalman & Létourneau (2020).

Another key aspect of heritage adaptation is the seamless integration of old and new elements. Successful projects maintain the integrity of historic structures while incorporating contemporary features to meet modern needs. At Sarnies Bangkok, modern

lighting and ergonomic furniture blend harmoniously with the original façade, creating a space that connects the past with the present.

Moreover, adaptive reuse fosters community-centered design, transforming heritage sites into inclusive spaces that serve both local residents and visitors. Sarnies Bangkok exemplifies this by becoming a vibrant hub for social interaction, demonstrating how historical sites can simultaneously preserve cultural narratives and support evolving social dynamics.

3.2.3 Examples of successful heritage adaptation

Bangkok Old Town is home to several adaptive reuse projects that illustrate the potential of heritage adaptation to drive urban regeneration:

Warehouse 30: A collection of WWII-era warehouses transformed into a mixed-use creative space with shops, art galleries, and restaurants, blending industrial heritage with modern cultural functions (*Warehouse 30*, n.d.).

Chang Chui Creative Park exemplifies the adaptability of industrial heritage through its transformation from an old airplane repair yard into a dynamic cultural hub. Featuring galleries, eateries, and event spaces, the site showcases how repurposed industrial spaces can foster creativity and community engagement (Expique, 2019).

Similarly, Sarnies Bangkok serves as a case study in balancing historical preservation with contemporary functionality. The 150-year-old boat repair shop has been revitalized into a vibrant café, demonstrating how adaptive reuse can breathe new life into heritage structures while maintaining their historical essence (Bangkok - Sarnies, n.d.). These projects underscore the effectiveness of adaptive reuse in preserving Bangkok's architectural heritage while stimulating economic growth and cultural engagement.

3.2.4 Economic and social benefits of heritage adaptation

Heritage adaptation generates multidimensional benefits, playing a vital role in sustainable urban development. One of its key contributions is economic growth, as adaptive reuse revitalizes neighborhoods by attracting businesses, increasing property values, and creating employment opportunities (Pileggi, 2024). Heritage-driven tourism, as seen in the case of Sarnies Bangkok, further strengthens local economies by drawing foot traffic to revitalized districts, stimulating commerce and investment.

In addition to economic benefits, heritage adaptation contributes to tourism development by transforming restored buildings into cultural attractions. These sites offer immersive experiences that connect visitors with local history and traditions. The influx of tourists generates revenue that supports both conservation efforts and broader community initiatives, ensuring the long-term viability of heritage preservation.

Furthermore, adaptive reuse fosters community engagement by instilling local pride and a sense of ownership. Neglected spaces are repurposed into active community hubs, enhancing social cohesion and participation (Kee, 2019). Projects like Sarnies Bangkok serve as platforms for cultural exchange, demonstrating how heritage sites can remain integral to contemporary community life while preserving their historical significance.

3.2.5 Challenges in Heritage Adaptation

While heritage adaptation offers significant benefits, it also presents several challenges that must be carefully managed. One major obstacle is financial constraints, as restoration and adaptation projects require substantial investment. To ensure viability, these efforts often depend on private-public partnerships or government incentives that provide the necessary funding and support.

Another challenge lies in balancing modernity and authenticity. Successfully integrating contemporary elements into historic structures without compromising their original character demands meticulous planning and specialized expertise. Architects and

developers must navigate the delicate interplay between preservation and innovation to maintain the integrity of heritage sites.

Additionally, adaptive reuse carries the risk of gentrification. As revitalized areas attract investment and rising property values, local communities may face displacement due to increasing living costs (DjebbourImane & Biara, 2020). This unintended consequence can undermine the social inclusivity of heritage projects, making it essential to implement policies that protect long-term residents.

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that includes inclusive planning, well-defined regulatory frameworks, and active community engagement. By ensuring that heritage adaptation initiatives consider the needs of all stakeholders, cities can maximize the cultural, economic, and social benefits of preserving their architectural heritage.

3.3 Historical context

3.3.1 Bangkok's old town and economic evolution

Bangkok's Old Town, established in the late 18th century under King Rama I, has long served as the cultural, political, and economic heart of the city. Strategically located along the Chao Phraya River, it became a vital hub for trade, governance, and cultural exchange. The river's extensive network of canals facilitated commerce and transportation, cementing the Old Town's significance as the epicenter of Thailand's riverine economy.

During the reign of King Rama IV in the mid-19th century, the construction of Charoen Krung Road marked a turning point in Bangkok's urbanization. As the city's first paved road, it connected the Old Town to emerging commercial districts, boosting accessibility and trade. This era of modernization saw the integration of Western architectural styles and infrastructure, a trend that continued into King Rama V's reign, further shaping Bangkok's urban landscape.

However, as economic activities shifted toward newer commercial districts in the mid-20th century, Bangkok's Old Town faced gradual economic stagnation. Many heritage buildings fell into disuse or neglect, overshadowed by rapid urban expansion in other parts of the city. This shift created a dichotomy where the Old Town remained a historical and cultural treasure trove but struggled to maintain its socio-economic relevance.

3.3.2 Charoen krung road and chao phraya river as trade and transport lifelines

Charoen Krung Road and the Chao Phraya River have been integral to the Old Town's evolution. The river, often called the "River of Kings," facilitated international trade, connecting Bangkok to regional and global markets. Its banks became bustling marketplaces, fostering the growth of communities reliant on riverine commerce.

Charoen Krung Road, constructed in 1861, signaled Bangkok's transition toward modern urban planning. It linked rural markets with urban centers, allowing goods, people, and ideas to flow more freely (Lim, n.d.). This combination of water-based and land-based connectivity established the Old Town as a melting pot of cultures, evident in its architectural diversity and vibrant marketplaces.

3.3.3 Era of king rama v: Modernization and its impact on urban infrastructure

King Rama V's reign (1868–1910) ushered in a wave of modernization influenced by Western ideals. Infrastructure projects such as bridges, roads, and canals improved connectivity but also altered the urban fabric of Bangkok. While these developments enhanced trade and mobility, they inadvertently marginalized older districts like the Old Town. Economic activities gravitated toward new commercial hubs, leaving behind a legacy of architectural marvels but also underutilized and decaying structures.

3.3.4 Original function of the site

The building that houses Sarnies Bangkok originally served as a boat repair shop, reflecting Bangkok's reliance on riverine trade. Constructed during a time when the Chao Phraya River was central to the city's economy, the shop played a critical role in maintaining the vessels that transported goods and passengers. Its architecture, characterized by robust brick walls and timber beams, was designed to endure the humid tropical climate and the demands of its industrial function.

3.3.5 Abandonment due to economic shifts and urban changes

By the mid-20th century, advancements in transportation, including the rise of motor vehicles and the decline of river-based trade, rendered many riverside facilities obsolete. The boat repair shop, once a bustling hub of activity, fell into disrepair as economic priorities shifted. The abandonment of such sites became emblematic of the challenges faced by Bangkok's Old Town, where heritage buildings struggled to find new purposes in a rapidly modernizing city.

The adaptive reuse of the site into Sarnies Bangkok marked a turning point in its history. By repurposing the derelict boat repair shop into a thriving café, the project exemplifies how heritage buildings can be revitalized to meet contemporary needs while honoring their historical significance.

3.4 Adaptive reuse of sarnies Bangkok

3.4.1 Minimal intervention to preserve authenticity

The adaptive reuse of Sarnies Bangkok adhered to the principle of minimal intervention, prioritizing the preservation of its original architectural elements. This approach reflects international conservation guidelines, such as those set by the Burra Charter, which advocate for retaining the historical integrity of heritage buildings. Features such as weathered brick walls, timber beams, and iron supports were meticulously preserved, showcasing the building's industrial past as a boat repair shop.



Fig. 2. Timber Beams and iron supports

The renovation maintained the building's original structure, including its wooden beams and aged walls, preserving its historical essence. To ensure safety, additional steel structures were integrated to support the existing framework, enhancing stability without compromising the building's character. The wooden ceilings are also filled to prevent cement and powder dust falling further (Room, 2020). Elements like the narrow, steep wooden staircase and vintage wooden shelves were retained, maintaining the building's historical ambiance. The design preserves the building's aged appearance, showcasing its historical significance.



Fig. 2. Oil-stained brick walls



Fig. 3. Narrow, steep, wooden staircase

The conservation strategy focused on stabilizing the existing structure while making reversible interventions where necessary. This approach ensures that future generations can reinterpret or restore the building without compromising its historical essence. By maintaining its patina of age, the project creates an authentic narrative that connects visitors to the site's historical context.

3.4.2 Integration of modern and traditional elements



Figure 5: Ground floor of Sarnies Bangkok

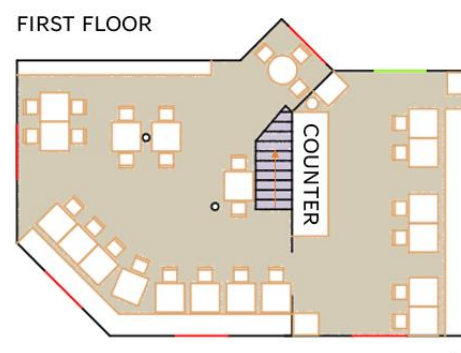


Figure 6: First floor of Sarnies Bangkok

The project seamlessly combines modern functionality with traditional aesthetics, ensuring that the space remains relevant for contemporary use. Modern additions, such as industrial-style lighting, minimalist furniture, and updated utilities, were carefully designed

to complement the original structure rather than overpower it. These interventions highlight how adaptive reuse can strike a balance between preserving heritage and meeting current functional requirements (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019).

For instance, the café's interior layout capitalizes on open spaces, emphasizing natural light and ventilation, which were intrinsic to the building's original design. Contemporary features, such as a terrazzo-finished bar counter, were added to meet current functional needs while respecting the building's heritage. The juxtaposition of old and new elements creates a dialogue between history and modernity, making Sarnies Bangkok a compelling case study in adaptive reuse. Comparative analysis with similar projects, such as the transformation of colonial shop-houses in Singapore, reveals that Sarnies Bangkok employs a more restrained approach, maintaining a higher percentage of original materials.

3.5 Sustainable practices

3.5.1 Use of local materials and natural ventilation

Sustainability was a cornerstone of the project, evident in the use of reclaimed materials and energy-efficient design strategies. Original materials, such as bricks and wooden planks, were salvaged and repurposed during the renovation. This practice not only reduced waste but also maintained the building's historical authenticity.

Natural ventilation was integrated into the design, reducing the reliance on air conditioning and aligning with principles of green architecture. The high ceilings and strategically placed openings enhance airflow, providing a comfortable indoor environment while minimizing energy consumption.

3.5.2 Environmental Considerations in Renovation

The adaptive reuse of Sarnies Bangkok avoided the environmental impact associated with demolition and new construction. By repurposing an existing structure, the project conserved resources and reduced the carbon footprint typically associated with urban development. This aligns with global sustainability goals, such as those outlined in UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape approach, which emphasizes the integration of environmental and cultural sustainability in urban planning (UNESCO, 2013).

3.6 Government participation

3.6.1 Heritage conservation laws and incentives

Government support played a pivotal role in the success of the Sarnies Bangkok project. Policies and incentives promoting heritage conservation encouraged private developers to invest in restoring historical sites. For example, tax incentives for heritage projects and streamlined approval processes for conservation-focused developments provided financial and logistical support for the project (Prompayuk & Chairattananon, 2016).

Heritage conservation regulations, including zoning laws specific to Bangkok Old Town, ensured that the restoration adhered to established guidelines for preserving architectural and cultural integrity (Rugkhapan, 2015). These frameworks helped align the project with broader urban conservation objectives.

3.6.2 Support through heritage tourism initiatives

The Thai government has actively promoted heritage tourism as a means of revitalizing historic districts like Bangkok Old Town. Initiatives such as cultural festivals and walking tours have increased footfall in the area, enhancing the economic viability of adaptive reuse projects (Shoowong, 2024). Sarnies Bangkok benefited from these efforts, positioning itself as both a cultural landmark and a popular destination for tourists and locals alike.

3.7 Community engagement and social impact

3.7.1 Fostering a sense of belonging

Sarnies Bangkok has become more than just a café—it has evolved into a social hub that connects residents and visitors. By repurposing a neglected building into a vibrant space, the project has fostered local pride and a sense of ownership within the community. The site's transformation exemplifies how adaptive reuse can create spaces that resonate with cultural identity while serving modern social functions.

3.7.2 Preservation of Cultural Identity

The retention of historical features, such as the building's original façade and structural framework, ensures that the site remains a testament to Bangkok's architectural heritage. This preservation contributes to the broader narrative of the city's cultural evolution, linking the past with the present. The success of Sarnies Bangkok underscores the importance of maintaining cultural landmarks as living entities within the urban fabric.

3.8 Economic and social impact

3.8.1 Attraction of Diverse Audiences

The adaptive reuse of Sarnies Bangkok exemplifies how repurposed heritage sites can draw a mix of local and international audiences. For locals, the café provides a sense of nostalgia and pride by maintaining the building's original character. For tourists, it offers a cultural experience that bridges Bangkok's history and contemporary urban life. This dual appeal enhances the cultural landscape of Old Town, making it a vibrant and inclusive space.

Studies on heritage tourism suggest that culturally rich environments foster longer visitor stays and higher spending, directly benefiting the local economy (UNESCO, 2013). Sarnies Bangkok capitalizes on this by blending its historical allure with high-quality service and aesthetics, encouraging repeat visits and word-of-mouth promotion.

Research on Bangkok's specialty coffee scene highlights the café's role in supporting local economic activity. Sarnies Bangkok is frequently mentioned as a key contributor to Bangkok's vibrant café culture, attracting both residents and tourists due to its photogenic atmosphere and premium offerings (Maspul, 2024). More broadly, studies indicate that gastronomic tourism—including specialty cafés—significantly contributes to Thailand's economy, accounting for an estimated 1% to 2% of the country's GDP (Piboonrungraj et al., 2023). These findings suggest that heritage-based commercial establishments like Sarnies Bangkok play an essential role in promoting economic activity and urban revitalization.

3.8.2 Role in revitalizing the local economy

Heritage projects such as Sarnies Bangkok stimulate the local economy beyond their immediate scope. The increased attention to Bangkok Old Town, driven by adaptive reuse initiatives, has benefited surrounding businesses, from street vendors to artisanal shops. Additionally, Sarnies Bangkok has created direct employment opportunities and contributed to the broader supply chain by sourcing ingredients and materials locally.

For example, similar outcomes were observed in Penang, Malaysia, where the adaptive reuse of heritage shop-houses spurred a wave of economic revitalization, attracting investment and boosting tourism (Khoo & Woo, 2024). The success of Sarnies Bangkok mirrors these trends, demonstrating how the intersection of heritage and commerce can catalyze sustainable growth.

3.8.3 Cultural ownership and participation

The transformation of Sarnies Bangkok has given the local community a renewed sense of ownership over the space. By restoring rather than replacing the original structure, the project has respected the cultural and emotional attachments of long-time residents to the area. This approach counters the common perception of heritage conservation as elitist or exclusionary, ensuring that local stakeholders are integral to the narrative of revitalization.

Global research highlights the importance of participatory approaches in heritage conservation. Projects that involve local communities in the planning and execution phases tend to enjoy greater public support and sustainability (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019). Although Sarnies Bangkok is a privately driven initiative, its preservation of the site's historical essence fosters an inclusive atmosphere, encouraging community engagement and pride.

3.8.4 A Hub for social interactions

Adaptive reuse projects often create “third spaces”—environments that exist between home and work where people gather, socialize, and engage. Sarnies Bangkok has successfully redefined the former boat repair shop as a third space for Old Town residents and visitors. Its design, which retains elements of the original structure, serves as a conversation starter, bridging generational and cultural gaps.

This outcome aligns with examples like the High Line in New York, where the adaptive reuse of an industrial railway into a park transformed it into a community-centric space (Gattupalli, 2024). Sarnies Bangkok similarly demonstrates that adaptive reuse can foster social cohesion by reactivating underutilized spaces.

3.8.5 Guardianship of cultural narratives

Sarnies Bangkok contributes to the preservation of Bangkok Old Town's cultural identity by safeguarding and celebrating its history. The building, which once played a vital role in Bangkok's riverine economy, now serves as a touchstone for the community, reminding visitors of the city's industrial past. By embedding this historical narrative into the café's branding and storytelling, the project reinforces a sense of place that enriches the visitor experience.

Heritage sites often serve as visual and emotional markers of urban memory, linking past generations to the present (Bareither, 2021). Sarnies Bangkok exemplifies this by integrating its history into its contemporary use, ensuring that the building's story continues to resonate.

3.8.6 Symbol of urban resilience

The adaptive reuse of Sarnies Bangkok reflects Bangkok Old Town's resilience in the face of urban pressures. It demonstrates how historical structures, once abandoned and considered obsolete, can find new relevance in modern contexts. This narrative is echoed in other global examples, such as the Tate Modern in London, which transformed a disused power station into an iconic cultural institution (Nittve, 2016). Sarnies Bangkok similarly proves that urban regeneration does not necessitate erasing the past but rather embracing it as a foundation for innovation.

The symbolic transformation of Sarnies Bangkok—where decay was replaced by vibrancy—embodies the potential of heritage conservation to inspire both economic and cultural renewal. It underscores how cities can adapt to modern challenges without sacrificing their historical and cultural roots.

Table 1. Key features of adaptive reuse at Sarnies Bangkok

Aspect	Details
Original Function	Boat repair shop, reflecting Bangkok's reliance on riverine trade.
Adaptive Reuse Purpose	Transformed into a café serving as a social hub and tourist destination.
Conservation Strategy	Minimal intervention to retain architectural authenticity.
Sustainable Practices	Use of reclaimed materials, natural ventilation, and energy-efficient design.
Design Integration	Modern elements (lighting, seating) complementing historic features (brick walls, timber beams).
Economic Impact	Increased footfall, job creation, and revitalization of the local economy.
Cultural Impact	Preservation of heritage, fostering community pride, and creating a bridge between past and present.

3.9 Sarnies Bangkok as a model for urban regeneration

3.9.1 Balancing heritage and modernity

Sarnies Bangkok exemplifies the delicate balance between preserving historical authenticity and meeting contemporary urban needs. Its transformation from a derelict boat repair shop into a vibrant café highlights how adaptive reuse can breathe new life into heritage sites without compromising their architectural or cultural integrity.

3.9.2 Preservation of architectural integrity

The project adhered to international conservation standards, emphasizing minimal intervention and reversible changes. By retaining original features such as exposed brick walls, wooden beams, and the building’s façade, the site maintains its historical essence. This practice aligns with principles outlined by the Burra Charter, which emphasize respecting a site’s cultural significance through careful preservation (Australia ICOMOS Incorporated, 2013).

The inclusion of modern elements, such as industrial lighting and ergonomic furniture, was executed in a way that complements the original structure rather than overpowering it. This approach mirrors successful global examples like Singapore’s shop-house restorations, where modern amenities were seamlessly integrated to maintain functionality while preserving heritage(Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019).

A comparative analysis of case studies from Bangkok, Singapore, and Penang indicates that Sarnies Bangkok is among the most successful examples of heritage adaptation, particularly in its ability to retain 90% of its original structure while integrating contemporary design.

3.9.3 Sustainability as a core principle

Sarnies Bangkok also serves as a model for environmentally sustainable practices in urban regeneration. By repurposing existing materials, including reclaimed wood and bricks, the project significantly reduced the environmental impact of the renovation. Additionally, the use of natural ventilation systems aligns with global best practices for energy-efficient design in heritage buildings (Lidelöw et al., 2019).

This focus on sustainability reinforces the importance of adaptive reuse in mitigating the environmental costs of urban development. Unlike new construction, which often involves significant resource extraction and energy consumption, adaptive reuse leverages existing assets, contributing to the broader goals of sustainable urban planning.

Studies on energy efficiency retrofits in Thailand suggest that adaptive reuse projects can reduce overall energy consumption by approximately 15–20%, with improvements in

HVAC systems alone accounting for 10–15% savings (Seeley & Dhakal, 2021). In a notable case, a retrofitted academic building in Bangkok achieved a 55.44% reduction in annual energy use through envelope upgrades, efficient lighting, and optimized air conditioning systems, demonstrating the significant potential of energy-conscious renovation (Chiradeja et al., 2023).

Similar projects, such as the Energy Complex (EnCo) in Bangkok, which incorporates high-efficiency cooling, insulated glazing, and smart energy management, highlight the potential for energy savings in commercial spaces. Likewise, the renovation of the historic Bamrung Nukulkiy Printing House demonstrates how adaptive reuse can preserve cultural heritage while enhancing energy efficiency. The transformation of a deteriorating outdoor amphitheater in Nakhon Pathom into a solar-powered café by Nitaprow Architects further underscores the viability of sustainable retrofitting in diverse architectural contexts.

While specific data for Sarnies Bangkok is unavailable, the trend observed in these projects suggests that its adaptive reuse approach likely results in substantial energy savings compared to newly constructed commercial spaces in the same area. These findings underscore the environmental benefits of adaptive reuse in reducing operational carbon footprints and enhancing urban sustainability.

3.9.4 Cultural Identity as a Cornerstone

The transformation of Sarnies Bangkok demonstrates that heritage conservation can coexist with urban modernization. By preserving the site's historical character and embedding its narrative into the café's branding and design, the project reinforces a sense of place. Visitors to the café encounter a physical manifestation of Bangkok's riverine history, fostering a deeper appreciation of the city's cultural roots.

This approach reflects global conservation strategies that prioritize the storytelling potential of heritage sites. For example, the Tate Modern in London integrates its industrial history into its current role as a cultural institution, offering visitors a connection to the building's past even as they engage with its modern purpose (Bullen & Love, 2011). Similarly, Sarnies Bangkok serves as a reminder of Bangkok's industrial heritage while providing a contemporary urban experience.

3.9.5 Economic and social functionality

The café's success as a commercial establishment underscores the economic viability of adaptive reuse. By transforming a neglected space into a thriving business, the project demonstrates the potential of heritage sites to contribute to local economies while preserving their historical significance.

Additionally, Sarnies Bangkok's role as a social hub fosters community engagement and inclusivity. Its integration into the daily lives of residents ensures that heritage buildings remain active components of urban life, rather than static monuments. This aligns with findings that adaptive reuse projects often enhance social cohesion by creating spaces that encourage interaction and cultural exchange (Korff, 2004).

3.9.6 Replicable model for adaptive reuse

The success of Sarnies Bangkok offers valuable insights for cities grappling with the challenges of rapid urbanization. Key lessons include:

Emphasis on Authenticity: Minimal intervention and the retention of original features are critical for preserving the historical essence of heritage buildings.

Integration of Sustainability: Incorporating environmentally friendly practices, such as using reclaimed materials and energy-efficient designs, ensures that heritage conservation aligns with global sustainability goals.

Community Engagement: Involving local stakeholders in adaptive reuse projects fosters a sense of ownership and ensures that the benefits of urban regeneration are equitably distributed.

Cultural Storytelling: Embedding the narrative of a site's history into its modern use enhances its appeal as a destination, creating a deeper connection between visitors and the heritage space.

3.9.7 Balancing development and preservation

Sarnies Bangkok underscores the importance of balancing development with preservation in rapidly modernizing cities like Bangkok. The project demonstrates that heritage buildings can be transformed into economically viable assets without compromising their cultural value. This lesson is particularly relevant in cities where urban expansion often comes at the cost of historical preservation.

3.9.8 Global implications

The adaptive reuse of Sarnies Bangkok has broader implications for heritage conservation globally. As cities face increasing pressures to accommodate growing populations and economic demands, the principles demonstrated by this project offer a pathway for sustainable urban development. By integrating heritage conservation into urban planning frameworks, cities can preserve their cultural identities while fostering economic growth and social cohesion (Labadi & Logan, 2015).

4. Conclusions

The adaptive reuse of heritage buildings, as exemplified by Sarnies Bangkok, underscores the transformative potential of integrating cultural preservation with modern urban demands. This study reveals that adaptive reuse not only safeguards the architectural and historical essence of heritage sites but also serves as a catalyst for economic, social, and environmental revitalization. By maintaining the original character of the 150-year-old boat repair shop while adapting it to contemporary functionality, Sarnies Bangkok highlights the importance of minimal intervention and sustainable practices in heritage conservation.

The findings demonstrate that adaptive reuse can harmonize competing interests of heritage preservation and urban growth. Sarnies Bangkok's success lies in its ability to foster cultural pride and community engagement, transforming a neglected structure into a vibrant social hub that resonates with both locals and visitors. The project also proves that heritage buildings can contribute to economic growth by generating local employment, attracting tourism, and inspiring similar regeneration efforts.

For policymakers, this case study highlights the necessity of streamlined regulatory support and financial incentives to encourage adaptive reuse projects. Urban planners can draw insights from Sarnies Bangkok to integrate heritage conservation into sustainable urban development frameworks. Business owners and investors can leverage the economic viability of heritage sites, recognizing their potential to attract a diverse customer base and generate long-term financial returns.

This case study advances the discourse on sustainable urban development by emphasizing the critical role of heritage conservation in enhancing urban identity. It contributes to the growing body of evidence that adaptive reuse offers a replicable strategy for cities grappling with the dual pressures of modernization and cultural preservation. By leveraging the historical and cultural value of heritage sites, adaptive reuse projects like Sarnies Bangkok ensure that the past remains a living, dynamic part of the urban future.

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Author Contribution

The author, M.M.T, was responsible for all aspects of this study, including conceptualization, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, writing – original draft preparation, review & editing, visualization, and project administration. No external contributors were involved in the research, analysis, or writing process.

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No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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