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MORALITY BEFORE KNOWLEDGE

Experiencing place identity: A phenomenological study of visitor perception in old Jeddah

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ABSTRACT

Background: Jeddah (Al-Balad), a UNESCO World Heritage Site, embodies a rich tapestry of cultural and architectural heritage that shapes its unique place identity. **Methods:** This study explores the phenomenological experience of visitors to Old Jeddah, focusing on how sensory perceptions and spatial interactions contribute to their understanding of place identity. By employing a mixed-method approach combining in-depth interviews and on-site observations, this research uncovers the nuanced ways in which visitors engage with the physical and intangible heritage of Al-Balad. **Findings:** The findings reveal three primary dimensions of visitor experience that enhance place identity: spatial nostalgia, where historical architecture evokes memories and emotional ties; sensory layering, wherein the interplay of sights, sounds, and smells enriches the cultural narrative; and interactive belonging, where participatory activities, such as heritage tours or artisan workshops, foster a deeper sense of connection. A key novelty lies in demonstrating how these sensory and spatial dimensions collectively form a dynamic and evolving sense of place identity, distinguishing Old Jeddah from other heritage sites. **Conclusion:** This study contributes to heritage literature by bridging phenomenology and place identity theory, while providing actionable insights for policymakers and conservationists to design visitor-centered interventions that strengthen cultural preservation and engagement. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** By prioritizing authentic, multisensory experiences, this research highlights the potential of Old Jeddah to remain a living heritage site that resonates across generations.

KEYWORDS: old Jeddah; place identity; phenomenology; sensory experience; visitor perception.

1. Introduction

Old Jeddah (Al-Balad), a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a living testament to the rich cultural and architectural history of Saudi Arabia. Its cultural heritage significantly contributes to its place identity, blending historical architecture, traditional urban settings, and cultural practices that embody Arabian and Islamic influences. These elements not only distinguish Jeddah from other cities but also play a vital role in its branding and tourism strategies, aligning with the broader national goals of Saudi Vision 2030. However, while this heritage anchors the city's unique identity, it also faces challenges posed by globalization and modernization, requiring a careful balance between development and preservation.

Old Jeddah, also known as Al-Balad, is a historic district in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2014 (Alawi et al., 2018; Elfadaly et al., 2019). The area's history dates back to 250 BC, with significant development during both pre-Islamic and Islamic eras (Bagader, 2014). Al-Balad faces challenges in conservation and documentation, prompting the use of advanced technologies like Terrestrial Laser Scanning, Architectural Photogrammetry, and Building Information Modeling (Baik et al., 2013). The district's cultural and architectural heritage, including its coral houses, is threatened by unplanned development and environmental factors (Elfadaly et al., 2019). Efforts to revitalize the area include strategies to enhance tourism experiences (Alawi et al., 2018), revive the historical Hajj route (Abouhassan, 2021), and develop spatial databases and online information sources to promote tourism (Atef et al., 2021; Sahahiri et al., 2019).
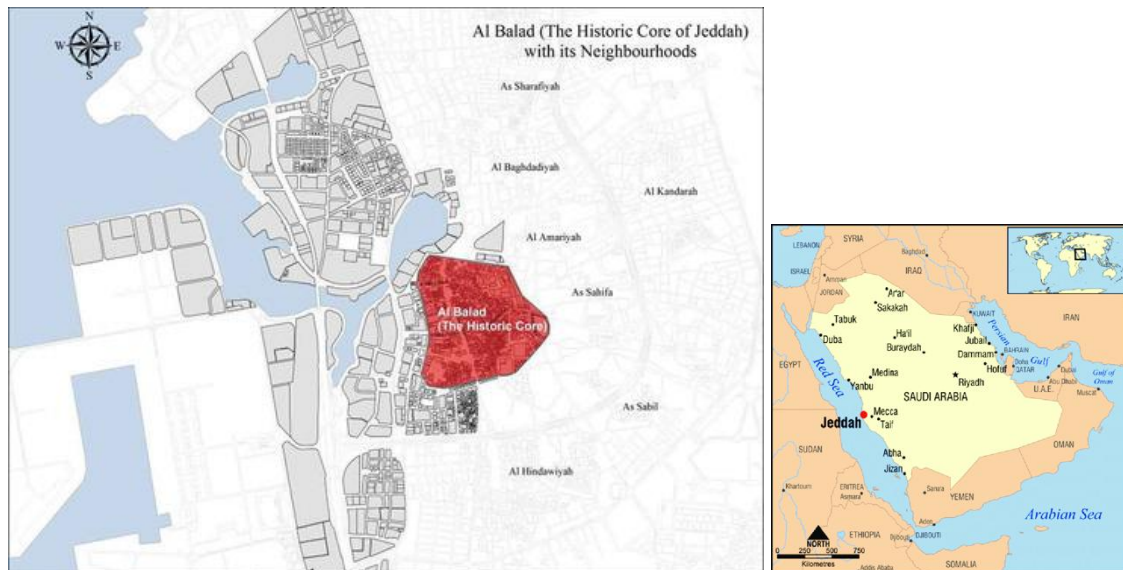

Fig. 1. Map of Old City Jeddah
(Sahahiri et al., 2019)

Figure 1 above, depicts the historic core of Jeddah (Al-Balad) and its surrounding neighborhoods, highlighting its central location and proximity to the Red Sea, which has historically shaped its cultural and economic significance.

The architectural heritage of Old Jeddah stands out as one of its most defining features. Characterized by coral stone buildings and intricate wooden balconies (Roshan), the city's architecture reflects a harmonious blend of Hellenistic and Islamic town planning principles (Khan et al., 1982). These historical structures not only illustrate innovative adaptations to the Red Sea's coastal climate but also create a distinctive visual identity that ties the city to its historical roots. Preserving these buildings is crucial for maintaining the city's allure as a heritage tourism destination and sustaining its cultural significance (Ginting & Rahman, 2016).

Equally important is Old Jeddah's urban setting and cultural practices, which contribute to its vibrant social fabric. The traditional mohalla (neighborhood) fosters a strong sense of community and interaction, serving as a foundation for Jeddah's cultural identity (Khan et al., 1982). Meanwhile, intangible cultural elements, such as food heritage, act as dynamic expressions of cultural identity, bridging the past and present. These practices not only reflect Jeddah's history but also offer a way for residents and visitors to engage with its culture amidst ongoing modernization (Greco, 2022).

In today's globalized world, heritage plays an essential role in differentiating cities, and Old Jeddah's unique cultural and historical assets serve as a powerful tool for place branding. By integrating its heritage into tourism and investment strategies, Jeddah can establish itself as a distinctive and competitive destination (Păcescu & Thiery, 2015).

However, while such branding aligns with the goals of Saudi Vision 2030, it must avoid the risk of commodifying or homogenizing its cultural assets. Instead, heritage must be preserved and celebrated as a living, evolving part of the city's identity.

This study aims to explore these dynamics through a phenomenological approach, focusing on how visitors perceive and interact with Old Jeddah's tangible and intangible heritage. By analyzing their sensory and spatial experiences, the research seeks to deepen our understanding of how place identity is shaped and reinforced in this iconic urban landscape.

2. Methods

This section outlines the research design, data collection methods, analysis techniques, and study area details utilized to explore visitor perceptions of place identity in Old Jeddah. The methodology is grounded in a phenomenological framework, focusing on capturing the lived experiences of visitors.

2.1 Research design

A qualitative approach was adopted, underpinned by phenomenological methodology, to understand how visitors perceive and interact with the heritage and cultural fabric of Old Jeddah. Phenomenology emphasizes participants' subjective experiences and how these shape their understanding of the world (Moustakas, 1994). This approach was deemed suitable for examining the sensory and emotional dimensions of place identity.

2.2 Data collection methods

Two primary data collection methods were employed to ensure a holistic understanding of visitor perceptions: (1) in-depth Interviews, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 12 participants, including domestic and international visitors, local residents, and heritage guides. The questions focused on their sensory and emotional experiences in Old Jeddah, as well as their interpretations of its place identity. The flexibility of this method allowed participants to share rich, personal insights (Kvale, 2009); (2) on-site observations, observations were carried out in key landmarks of Old Jeddah, such as Al-Naseef House, the Roshan facades, and the bustling Souq Al-Alawi. The researcher documented interactions between visitors and the environment, focusing on sensory elements (e.g., sights, sounds, and smells) and participatory activities (e.g., workshops or guided tours). This method provided contextual grounding for the interview data (Angrosino, 2007).

2.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, following the six-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved familiarization with the data, coding, and developing themes that represented key dimensions of visitor experiences. This iterative approach ensured that the findings reflected both individual and shared perceptions of Old Jeddah's place identity.

2.4 Study area and participants

The study was conducted in Old Jeddah (Al-Balad), a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its distinctive architecture and cultural heritage. The selection of participants was purposive, ensuring diversity in terms of age, nationality, and familiarity with the site. Visitors were selected from locations within Al-Balad, such as major historical landmarks, traditional markets, and cultural events, ensuring a wide range of perspectives.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 *Theme 1: Echoes of the past: spatial nostalgia and emotional connections in Old Jeddah*

This theme explores how visitors experience a sense of spatial nostalgia in Old Jeddah, where architectural and urban elements evoke deep emotional connections. Participants consistently reflected on how the physical environment such as coral stone facades, intricate Roshan windows, and narrow alleys triggered feelings of belonging and a yearning for simpler, traditional ways of life.

A thematic analysis revealed that spatial nostalgia is a key driver of visitor perceptions. The data were grouped into three primary sub-themes, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Sub-themes of spatial nostalgia in Old Jeddah.

Sub-Theme	Description	Supporting Quotes
1. Architectural Heritage	Historical features such as Roshan windows and coral stone buildings create a sense of timelessness.	*"Walking through these streets, I felt like I was stepping into a different era. The Roshan designs are stunning."*
2. Urban Layout and Scale	The narrow alleys and human-scale design evoke intimacy and foster an emotional connection.	*"The narrow streets are charming; they remind me of old stories from my grandparents."*
3. Sense of Continuity	Visitors perceive Old Jeddah as a living heritage, connecting the past with the present.	*"It feels like history is alive here—you can see people still living and working as they did centuries ago."*

Table 1 summarizes the three key sub-themes identified under the overarching theme of spatial nostalgia. These sub-themes Architectural Heritage, Urban Layout and Scale, and Sense of Continuity represent the major dimensions through which visitors experience emotional and nostalgic connections to Old Jeddah (Bagader, 2014; Ghazzeh, 2020).

Architectural Heritage is central to visitors' perceptions, as the unique Roshan windows and coral stone buildings stand out as defining elements of Old Jeddah's identity (Ghazzeh, 2020; Badawy & Shehata, 2018). These features were frequently described as "timeless" and "iconic," evoking a sense of awe and a direct link to the region's historical past. Urban Layout and Scale reflects how the design of Old Jeddah's narrow alleys and human-scale spaces fosters a sense of intimacy and accessibility (Sampieri & Bagader, 2024). Visitors often remarked that the walkable nature of these streets not only encouraged exploration but also made them feel personally connected to the space.

Fig. 2. Daily life and heritage spaces in Old Jeddah: a living cultural hub (VisitSaudia, n.d.).

Fig. 2 above, illustrate the vibrant atmosphere of Old Jeddah, where historical architecture coexists with the dynamic daily activities of artisans, merchants, and residents. The coral stone buildings with intricately designed Roshan windows and the bustling streets filled with market stalls and social interactions exemplify the seamless integration of heritage and contemporary life.

Sense of Continuity captures the dynamic, living nature of the heritage site (Ghazzeh, 2020). Visitors expressed appreciation for how Old Jeddah remains a vibrant cultural hub, with active artisans, residents, and merchants seamlessly blending historical authenticity with modern life (Badawy & Shehata, 2018). This ongoing activity reinforces the perception that Old Jeddah is not a static relic of the past but rather a space where heritage continues to thrive. The interplay of historic preservation and daily functionality ensures that Old Jeddah remains relevant and meaningful, serving not only as a testament to its rich history but also as a living environment that sustains cultural identity for future generations.
By engaging with the community and participating in traditional practices, visitors and residents alike contribute to the ongoing story of Old Jeddah, transforming it into a shared space of cultural belonging and continuity.

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These findings highlight how Old Jeddah's physical environment and cultural practices collectively contribute to its place identity by invoking deep emotional connections rooted in its history and lived experiences. The supporting quotes in the table illustrate visitors' firsthand reflections, providing qualitative evidence of the strong nostalgic ties to the site.

3.1.1 Explanation of analysis

Architectural Heritage emerged as a dominant element contributing to spatial nostalgia. The intricate Roshan windows, unique to Old Jeddah, were repeatedly mentioned by participants for their aesthetic and functional value. Visitors were particularly drawn to the interplay between light and shadow created by these windows, which they described as "magical" and "distinctive." These sentiments align with studies on vernacular architecture, which emphasize its ability to evoke emotional responses and preserve cultural identity (Tuan, 1977; Lowenthal, 1985).

The urban layout and scale of Old Jeddah were equally significant. Participants highlighted how the narrow, pedestrian-friendly streets encouraged exploration and created a sense of intimacy. These spatial features fostered a personal connection, with many stating that they felt "safe" and "welcomed" in these spaces. Such human-scale environments are integral to cultivating spatial attachment and nostalgia.

Lastly, the sense of continuity was emphasized as visitors observed how Old Jeddah continues to serve as a hub for cultural and social activities. The presence of artisans, market vendors, and residents engaged in daily life reinforced the perception that Old Jeddah is not just a historical artifact but a living, breathing heritage site. This aligns with Smith's (2006) concept of heritage as a "process" rather than a "product," where the past is continuously reinterpreted through present-day practices (Smith, 2006).

3.1.2 Discussion and implications

The findings suggest that spatial nostalgia in Old Jeddah is a multilayered phenomenon shaped by the interplay of tangible and intangible elements. The architecture, urban layout, and ongoing cultural practices collectively create an environment that fosters deep emotional connections among visitors. This understanding offers practical implications for heritage management: (a) conservation strategies should prioritize preserving Old Jeddah's architectural authenticity while ensuring the integration of modern amenities to support daily life; (b) urban planners can leverage the emotional value of human-scale spaces by designing new urban developments that reflect similar principles of intimacy and connectivity; (c) visitor experience programs can emphasize the narratives of continuity, showcasing how Old Jeddah bridges the past and present through lived experiences; (d) these findings highlight the critical role of spatial and emotional dimensions in reinforcing

the place identity of heritage sites like Old Jeddah, ensuring their relevance across generations.

3.2 Theme 2: Layers of experience: sensory immersion in Old Jeddah

Recent research explores the multisensory aspects of heritage tourism experiences. Studies emphasize the importance of engaging all five senses to enhance visitor immersion and appreciation of cultural sites (Abd Rahman et al., 2016; Jelinčić, 2020). Sensory cues can evoke emotions, create memorable experiences, and deepen connections to heritage (Bender et al., 2023; Dogan & Kan, 2020). Some heritage sites are now offering immersive sensory tours, encouraging visitors to interact with the environment through touch, smell, and taste (Kern-Stähler, 2023). This approach can lead to a more authentic experience and stronger sense of place (Campelo, 2018). Video games and virtual experiences are also being explored as potential ways to provide authentic heritage experiences (Mochocki, 2021). Research suggests that immersion through affective experiences can enhance historical understanding, particularly among young visitors (Trenter et al., 2021). Overall, these studies highlight the potential for sensory engagement to transform heritage tourism and deepen visitors' connections to the past.

This theme examines how visitors' sensory experiences through sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste create a deep, immersive connection to Old Jeddah. Participants highlighted how the unique sensory elements of the site enrich their perception of its identity, forming what can be described as "sensory layers" that collectively shape their understanding of the place.

The analysis of visitor experiences during summer nights in Al-Balad reveals a multifaceted engagement with the site's sensory and cultural dimensions. Visitors highlighted how the vibrant nighttime atmosphere, cultural events, and sensory stimuli uniquely transform Old Jeddah into a living heritage site that resonates with both locals and tourists. Key sensory and participatory elements, such as the interplay of lights, sounds, smells, and social activities, create an immersive experience that enhances the perception of place identity, see Fig. 3 bellow.

Fig. 3. The Nighttime charm of Al-Balad: Illuminated heritage and vibrant social spaces (VisitSaudia, n.d.)

Fig. 3 above highlight the night-time vibrancy of Al-Balad, where illuminated heritage buildings and lively social spaces transform the historic site into a dynamic cultural hub. The interplay of light and shadow emphasizes the architectural beauty of coral stone facades and Roshan windows, creating a visually immersive experience. Simultaneously, the presence of bustling markets, street performers, and community gatherings brings an auditory and social richness to the space, further enhancing its appeal.

As illustrated in Figure 4 below, these sensory dimensions—Visual (Sight), Auditory (Sound), Olfactory (Smell), and Tactile (Touch)—interact to provide visitors with a multisensory engagement that strengthens their emotional connection to the site. These sensory layers not only heighten the aesthetic and cultural appeal of Old Jeddah but also play a crucial role in defining its place identity. Through this immersive experience, visitors

perceive Al-Balad not as a relic of the past but as a living heritage site, seamlessly blending its historical significance with modern social dynamics.

The analysis identified four sensory dimensions that significantly contribute to visitors' engagement with Old Jeddah, as illustrated in Fig. 4.
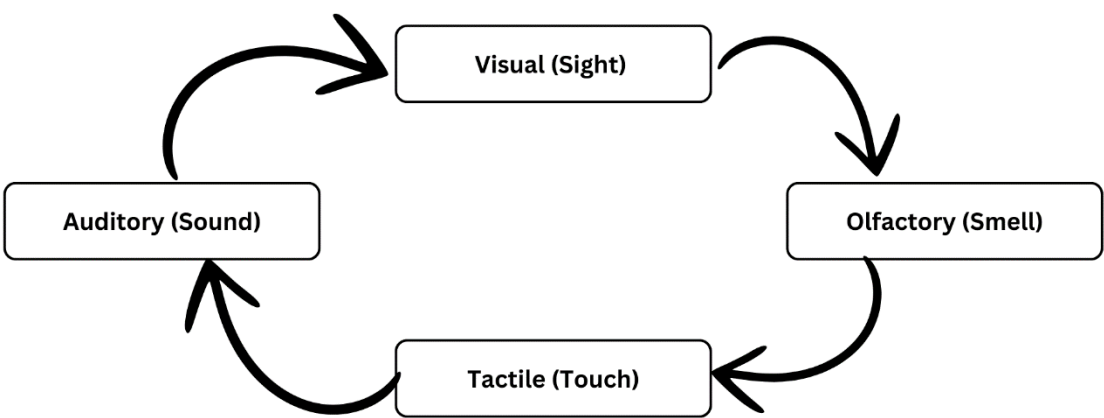

Fig. 4. Sensory layers contributing to place identity in Old Jeddah

Fig. 4 above, illustrates the four sensory dimensions—Visual (Sight), Auditory (Sound), Olfactory (Smell), and Tactile (Touch) that collectively shape visitors' engagement with the heritage site of Old Jeddah. These sensory layers operate interactively, creating a multisensory experience that deepens the connection between visitors and the place, ultimately reinforcing its place identity: (a) visual (sight) – the intricate Roshan windows, coral stone facades, and narrow streets of old Jeddah capture visitors' attention, creating a visually distinct and memorable environment –; (b) auditory (sound) – the soundscape of old Jeddah, characterized by the adhan (call to prayer), bustling markets, and casual conversations, adds an auditory layer of cultural immersion –; (c) olfactory (smell) – aromas of spices, incense, and traditional foods evoke cultural memory, transporting visitors into the past while grounding them in the present –; (d) tactile (touch) – the physical textures of coral stone walls, wooden doors, and handcrafted artifacts invite visitors to engage with the materiality of the site, fostering a sense of direct interaction with its history.

Table 2. Sensory layers shaping visitor perceptions of place identity in old Jeddah

Sub-Theme	Description	Supporting Quotes
Visual (Sight)	The vibrant colors of coral stone buildings, Roshan designs, and narrow streets create a unique visual identity.	*"The textures and colors of the Roshan windows are like artwork; they make the place unforgettable."*
Auditory (Sound)	Sounds of prayer calls, market chatter, and street life create a dynamic auditory experience.	*"The sound of the Adhan echoing through these old streets adds a spiritual layer to the atmosphere."*
Olfactory (Smell)	Aromas of spices, incense, and traditional foods evoke cultural memories and enhance the sense of place.	*"The smell of the spices in the market and the incense in the mosques feels like a journey through time."*
Tactile (Touch)	The physical textures of coral stone walls and traditional handcrafted goods deepen the tactile experience.	*"I loved touching the walls; it's like feeling history with your own hands."*

The cyclical nature of the diagram reflects how these sensory dimensions are interconnected, with each layer amplifying and enriching the others. For example, the vibrant visuals of the architecture may evoke curiosity to touch the materials, while the aromas of the market or the sound of the Adhan contribute to the emotional atmosphere, forming a holistic sensory experience. This multisensory engagement not only enhances

visitors' appreciation of Old Jeddah but also strengthens their emotional attachment, making the site a living, memorable, and culturally significant space. The thematic analysis revealed the following sub-themes, each corresponding to one of the sensory dimensions, see Table 2.

3.2.1   Explanation of findings

The visual aspects of Old Jeddah—ranging from the vibrant textures of coral stone to the intricate details of Roshan windows—were frequently described as integral to visitors' sense of awe and place attachment. These unique visual elements served as symbols of cultural heritage, reinforcing the distinctiveness of the site. Consistent with Tuan's (1977) theory of visual place-making, these elements are vital in helping visitors orient themselves and build emotional bonds with the space.

The auditory environment, characterized by the rhythmic sounds of the Adhan (call to prayer), bustling marketplaces, and ambient street noise, was highlighted by participants as adding depth to their experience. These sounds not only reflect the daily life of Old Jeddah but also create a sonic identity that visitors associate with the place. Studies such as Blesser and Salter (2007) on acoustic ecology support the idea that soundscapes are crucial for shaping spatial perceptions and cultural immersion.

Smell emerged as a powerful trigger for nostalgia and cultural memory. The aroma of spices in Souq Al-Alawi and the scent of incense burning in mosques transported visitors into the cultural and historical fabric of Old Jeddah. As Herz (2004) noted, olfactory stimuli are uniquely tied to emotional memories, making smell a significant contributor to the construction of place identity.

The tactile experience was often tied to participants' interaction with physical surfaces, such as the coral stone walls, wooden doors, and traditional crafts sold in markets. This connection to the materiality of place provides visitors with a tangible link to the history and craftsmanship of Old Jeddah. Scholars like Ingold (2013) emphasize that touch deepens our sensory engagement with a place, transforming it from a visual concept into an embodied experience.

3.2.2 Discussion and implications

The findings demonstrate how sensory immersion in Old Jeddah contributes to a multidimensional understanding of place identity. The sensory layers—visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile are not isolated but interwoven, creating a holistic and immersive experience for visitors. This research expands on existing theories of place identity by incorporating sensory analysis, demonstrating that sensory engagement is a critical yet underexplored dimension in heritage studies.

Preservation efforts should prioritize maintaining sensory authenticity, such as retaining the original materials of Roshan windows and preserving the soundscapes of the area. Heritage sites can leverage sensory triggers to enhance emotional connections. For example, guided tours can include sensory elements like touch-and-feel artifacts or storytelling to engage all senses. Programs can incorporate olfactory and auditory cues, such as spice exhibitions or live traditional music, to help visitors immerse themselves in the local culture. By understanding how sensory layers influence perceptions, heritage managers can ensure Old Jeddah remains a vibrant and engaging destination that resonates with visitors' memories and emotions.

3.3 Theme 3: Living heritage: interactive belonging in Old Jeddah

The concept of living heritage emphasizes the dynamic relationship between tangible and intangible cultural elements, focusing on community participation and place-making. Interactive technologies, such as tangible user interfaces, can bridge the gap between fragmented physical collections and intangible cultural knowledge (Muntean et al., 2015).

These technologies support the social production of heritage and create infrastructures for cultural production (Giaccardi & Palen, 2008). Heritage is not static but continually emergent, influenced by performance, space, and cultural identity (Crouch, 2016). Place-centered interaction design can enhance visitors' experiences in heritage sites by supporting active participation and meaningful connections (Ciolfi, 2012). Community assertions of heritage often focus on the sense of belonging arising from the mutual construction of community and place, reinforced through social practices and local narratives (Harrington, 2004). This approach to heritage emphasizes the living relationship between tangible and intangible forms, always situated in place (Smith, 2006).

This theme focuses on how visitors perceive Old Jeddah as a living heritage site through participatory activities and social interactions. Visitors frequently emphasized that their sense of connection to Old Jeddah was strengthened by engaging in traditional practices, interacting with artisans, or participating in cultural events. These interactive experiences fostered a sense of belonging, bridging the gap between visitors and the local community.

Fig. 5. Social and cultural engagement in old Jeddah: A blend of tradition and community (VisitSaudia, n.d.)

The images in Fig. 5 capture the essence of interactive belonging in Old Jeddah, showcasing cultural and communal activities that strengthen visitors' connection to the site. The first image highlights a serene public gathering space surrounded by heritage-inspired architecture, where families and groups engage in social interactions and leisure activities. The second image focuses on the communal aspect of traditional dining, symbolizing the cultural value of sharing meals and fostering relationships in Old Jeddah's rich cultural fabric. Together, these scenes reflect how the site is not just a historical relic but a living, dynamic space for social and cultural exchange.

Table 3. The concept of interactive belonging

Sub-Theme	Description	Supporting Quotes
Cultural Participation	Visitors' engagement in cultural events and traditional practices enhances their sense of belonging.	*"Joining the workshop to learn about Roshan crafting made me feel connected to the people and the place."*
Artisan Interactions	Interactions with local artisans and vendors strengthen cultural exchange and immersion.	*"Speaking with the craftsman who made my souvenir gave me a story to take home."*
Social Connectivity	Observing or engaging with local residents in their daily routines fosters a shared identity.	*"Seeing children play in the streets and families gather reminded me of the simple joys of my own childhood."*

The analysis of interactive belonging, summarized in Table 3, identifies three key dimensions—Cultural Participation, Artisan Interactions, and Social Connectivity—that define how visitors and residents engage with Old Jeddah. The images complement these findings by illustrating how participatory activities, such as cultural events and shared culinary experiences, allow visitors to connect with the people and traditions of the site.

These interactions deepen the sense of belonging, making Old Jeddah a meaningful and relevant space for both locals and tourists.

Such activities emphasize the idea that heritage sites thrive when they serve as living spaces, where history, culture, and community coexist in harmony, creating a bridge between the past and present. This dynamic relationship fosters a shared identity among all who visit or reside in the area, reinforcing Old Jeddah's status as a vibrant cultural hub.

3.3.1 Explanation of findings

Visitors frequently highlighted their enjoyment of workshops and cultural events, such as learning Roshan window crafting, participating in storytelling sessions, or watching traditional dance performances. These hands-on activities allowed visitors to connect with Old Jeddah's cultural history in a way that felt personal and meaningful. Studies, such as Smith's (2006) work on heritage as a process, emphasize the importance of participatory practices in creating dynamic heritage experiences.

Personal interactions with local artisans and market vendors played a significant role in shaping visitors' perceptions. Visitors valued not just purchasing items but hearing the stories behind them, such as how traditional crafts are made. These exchanges foster a sense of authenticity and cultural continuity, aligning with research that highlights the role of cultural intermediaries in heritage engagement (Richards, 2002).

Many visitors noted that simply observing or briefly interacting with local residents in Old Jeddah deepened their emotional connection to the space. Seeing families gather, children play, or elderly locals share stories created a shared sense of identity that transcended cultural differences. Such moments illustrate the role of everyday life in reinforcing a site's living heritage, as noted by Ashworth and Tunbridge (1996).

Table 4. Interactive Belonging in Old Jeddah

Aspect	Examples of Engagement	Emotional Impact
Cultural Participation	Workshops (e.g., Roshan design, calligraphy), storytelling events	Feeling connected to traditions, gaining hands-on experiences
Artisan Interactions	Talking with craftspeople, learning about the history of products	Appreciation for authenticity, personalizing the heritage experience
Social Connectivity	Observing daily routines, engaging in casual conversations	Nostalgia, a sense of belonging and shared humanity

3.3.2 Discussion and implications

The findings underline the importance of participatory and social dimensions in shaping the interactive belonging of heritage sites. While the physical structures of Old Jeddah provide a backdrop, it is the human interactions and cultural practices that animate the space, transforming it into a living heritage site. This research highlights living heritage as a dynamic process that fosters belonging through cultural participation and social connectivity. Unlike static heritage models, this interactive perspective emphasizes heritage as an ongoing, evolving relationship between people and place.

Heritage managers should incorporate more participatory activities, such as artisan workshops or cultural festivals, to engage visitors actively. Policies should encourage the participation of local artisans and residents in tourism efforts, ensuring the site remains an authentic, living space. Visitor programs should include opportunities to learn about the daily lives of residents, fostering a deeper understanding of Old Jeddah's cultural continuity. By embracing interactive belonging, heritage managers can ensure Old Jeddah remains both relevant and resonant for visitors, preserving its place identity as a vibrant, living heritage site.

3.4 Theme 4: Continuity through change: Adapting heritage in the modern era

This theme explores how visitors perceive the balance between preserving Old Jeddah's historic identity and adapting it to meet contemporary needs. While visitors appreciated the authenticity of Old Jeddah's heritage, many acknowledged the importance of modern interventions to ensure the site's accessibility, functionality, and relevance for future generations. The tension between preservation and modernization emerged as a central concern, reflecting visitors' mixed reactions to the integration of modern infrastructure within the historical urban fabric, see Table 5 bellow.

Table 5. The key sub-themes were identified under this theme.

Sub-Theme	Description	Supporting Quotes
Preservation of Authenticity	Visitors value efforts to maintain Old Jeddah's historical architecture and cultural atmosphere.	*"The Roshan windows and coral stone buildings must be preserved—they are what make this place unique."*
Modern Accessibility	Improvements such as lighting, pathways, and signage enhance visitor convenience and safety.	*"The modern walkways make it easier to explore, but they haven't taken away the charm of the old streets."*
Cultural Hybridization	Modern uses of historical spaces (e.g., cafes, art galleries) allow the site to remain culturally relevant.	*"I enjoyed having coffee in a historic building—it felt like a perfect mix of the past and the present."*

3.4.1 Explanation of findings

Visitors emphasized the importance of maintaining Old Jeddah's architectural integrity. Many expressed concerns that excessive modernization might erode the site's unique identity. Specific features like Roshan windows, coral stone facades, and the traditional urban layout were seen as symbols of the city's historical continuity. This aligns with heritage theories (Lowenthal, 1985), which stress the significance of authenticity in fostering emotional and historical connections to a site.

Practical upgrades, such as improved lighting, signage, and walkable pathways, were widely appreciated by visitors, particularly those with mobility challenges. While these changes introduced modern elements to the space, visitors generally agreed that they did not detract from the site's character. Such interventions demonstrate how modernization can coexist with preservation when executed thoughtfully (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1996).

The adaptive reuse of historical spaces as modern cafes, art galleries, and cultural hubs emerged as a positive trend in visitors' responses. These hybrid spaces allowed for contemporary expressions of heritage, making Old Jeddah more appealing to younger audiences while maintaining its historical essence. This reflects UNESCO's (2014) vision of heritage as a dynamic process that evolves with societal needs.

Table 6. Perceived benefits and concerns of modernization in Old Jeddah

Aspect	Benefits	Concerns
Physical Upgrades	Enhanced safety, accessibility, and visitor convenience	Risk of losing the historic atmosphere
Adaptive Reuse	Revitalization of old buildings as cultural hubs and businesses	Commercialization may overshadow cultural significance
Technology Integration	Use of technology (e.g., digital guides) for enhanced visitor engagement	Potential overuse of technology could reduce the authenticity of the experience

3.4.2 Discussion and implications

The findings highlight the complex interplay between maintaining the historical authenticity of Old Jeddah and adapting it to meet modern needs. Visitors recognized the

value of striking a balance where modernization serves as a tool to enhance accessibility and engagement while safeguarding the site's cultural and architectural essence. This research contributes to heritage studies by introducing the concept of "cultural hybridization" as a means of ensuring heritage sites remain relevant in a rapidly changing world. It underscores the importance of viewing heritage as a dynamic, evolving process rather than a static entity.

Heritage Management Policies: Policymakers should adopt context-sensitive modernization strategies that respect the historical character of Old Jeddah while introducing necessary upgrades. Community Involvement: Engaging local stakeholders in discussions on modernization can ensure interventions align with the community's values and needs. Adaptive Reuse Practices: Encouraging businesses and cultural organizations to creatively repurpose historic spaces can breathe new life into Old Jeddah without compromising its authenticity. By carefully managing the intersection of continuity and change, Old Jeddah can serve as a model for other heritage sites navigating similar challenges in a globalized world.

4. Conclusions

This study explored the phenomenological experiences of visitors in Old Jeddah, focusing on how sensory and spatial interactions contribute to the construction of place identity. The findings highlight three key dimensions Architectural Heritage, Urban Layout and Scale, and Sense of Continuity as fundamental elements shaping visitors' perceptions and emotional connections to the site. These dimensions collectively underscore the concept of spatial nostalgia, where the interplay of history, culture, and lived experience creates a deep sense of attachment to the place.

The novelty of this research lies in its integration of phenomenological analysis with place identity theory to reveal the multisensory and participatory dynamics of heritage sites. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on static architectural conservation, this research emphasizes the active and evolving relationship between visitors and the physical, cultural, and emotional landscape of Old Jeddah. By doing so, it introduces a new framework that bridges tangible and intangible heritage dimensions, framing heritage not merely as a static relic of the past but as a living, dynamic space where the past and present coexist.

Moreover, the findings suggest that heritage sites like Old Jeddah can sustain their relevance across generations by fostering authentic and immersive experiences rooted in cultural practices and human-scale design. These insights offer practical recommendations for heritage policymakers to design visitor-centered interventions that prioritize sensory and participatory experiences, ensuring that such sites remain vibrant and meaningful in an increasingly globalized world.

This research sets the foundation for future studies to explore comparative analyses of other heritage sites, focusing on how spatial nostalgia and multisensory engagement contribute to sustainable heritage management and evolving place identities.

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