



# Enhancing city authenticity through humanitarian architecture: A synergy of design and identity, case study, Al-Diriyah, Saudi Arabia

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Architecture acts as a facade to the world, in which one can understand the insides of the people, religion, culture, and much more about a city. Using humanitarian architecture as a guide for reconstructing, as well as the long-term impacts of the urban planning of a city in terms of sustainability and authenticity, this study answers the questions of how the City's character and identity can be maintained while providing quick assistance via humanitarian architecture. What are the challenges that prevent humanitarian architecture from enhancing cities' authenticity, and how can we overcome them? By examining Al-Diriyah project, this study aims to look into the complex relationship of humanitarian architecture with the branding and authenticity of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia from the perspective of residents and non-residents. **Method:** A blended qualitative and quantitative approach was applied as a comprehensive methodology to achieve the objectives. This study will help the application of humanitarian architecture for rebuilding countries in the East, highlighting authenticity and maintaining its cultural significance

**KEYWORDS:** Al-Diriyah; city authenticity; cultural heritage; humanitarian architecture; urban planning; Saudi Arabia

## 1. Introduction

The subtle balance between humanitarian architecture and the branding of urban authenticity is unfolding in Riyadh, a city at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. The city's rapid expansion, especially in the twenty-first century, saw an infusion of modernization efforts, posing difficulties to the preservation of its historical and cultural origins. Riyadh has been dealing with the combined challenges of keeping its cultural identity while also embracing the fast improvements associated with urban growth as it develops as a global city. The conflict between the need for rapid expansion and the need to preserve the city's uniqueness is a strong barrier. Locals, who are firmly ingrained in the rich fabric of Saudi culture, and non-locals, who offer varied ideas and experiences, all contribute to the city's unique layers of identity. Riyadh offers a unique canvas on which to investigate these processes.

Humanitarian architecture, on the other hand, with its twin position as a guide for rebuilding and an agent of sustainable urban planning, becomes an important participant in balancing development and authenticity. It functioned as a critical lens through which these

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processes are studied, acknowledging its position as a forceful force affecting the fundamental core of Riyadh's urban story rather than just as an economic response to problems. As we explore deeper into Riyadh's complexity, the constraints that prevent humanitarian architecture from boosting the city's authenticity emerge.

This study considers architecture to be more than just a physical construction; it is a living organism that acts as the face through which locals and visitors alike experience the city's interiors—its people, religion, and culture. The contrast of various points of view becomes a vital thread woven into the study's fabric, recognizing that the authenticity of a city is not just about its physical buildings but also about the tales and experiences it represents. Through deep investigation conducted, the complicated link between these essential aspects and determining the influence on the city's identity and look was unrevealed. A special emphasis is made on understanding both local and non-local views, providing a nuanced assessment of how humanitarian architecture impacts their opinions of Riyadh's authenticity.

This study seeks to examine how humanitarian architecture projects impact the character and look of cities, considering both residents and nonresidents' perspectives. It was aimed at identifying the difficulties and understanding how local perspectives might assist city authenticity while at the same time offering new ideas and answers to them. The awareness levels of residents and non-residents in humanitarian architecture, their views of architectural design's role in establishing city identity, and perspectives on the influence of architectural decisions on a city's authenticity, were also investigated.

This study proposes major insights into the significance of humanitarian architecture in molding both residents and nonresidents' views of Riyadh's authenticity. It provides architects, urban planners, policymakers, and the government with solutions that might assist them in dealing with the difficulties that arise when cities expand while maintaining their cultural relevance at the same time.

## 2. Literature Review

City branding is advocated as a more efficient technique of city marketing since it considers each city's unique traits and seeks to build a brand image congruent with its own culture, values, and history. Branding a city in this manner helps it to present itself in an honest and appealing light, attracting visitors, businesses, and top talent. According to Boyer (2011), one of the most essential key issues for both city identity and city branding is the city's image (Boyer, 2011).

As cities throughout the globe embrace branding as a strategy for fostering economic growth and attracting investment, a rising conflict has emerged between the need to build a strong and recognizable city brand and the need to retain a sense of authenticity and place identity (Nursanty et al., 2023). In many cases, critical issues arise when cities all over the world attempt to differentiate themselves to attract more business and money. Therefore, developing a unique and well-known "brand" for their city that attracts attention and encourages investment becomes necessary.

On the other hand, the intention to preserve the authentic, one-of-a-kind vibe of the city, which distinguishes it from others also important. This creates tension between developing a strong and well-known city brand and not losing the true and unique individuality that defines the place at the same time. However, this challenge can be overcome through the architectural approach particularly humanitarian architecture which highlights the importance of recognizing the voice of the people. As argued by Alavi and Tanaka (2023), a comprehensive study of modern and historical architectural elements achieves a balance in maintaining new and old identities which allows the community to value their significance (Alavi & Tanaka, 2023). Participation of the community is essential in preserving the identity and character of the place through urban projects which might lead to city branding marketing (Wee Kah Man, 2023). In addition, preserving the historical features of the built environment that are embedded deeply in the culture should become the mission of architects in this case (Amirshaghghi & Nasekhian, 2021).

Furthermore, from the residents' point of view, Hakala (2021) argues that listening to residents and providing chances for participation requires place branders paying close attention to, comprehending, and responding to residents' remarks, requests, suggestions, and criticism. City branding reads as and is vital in this battle for recognition (Hakala, 2021). Cities and communities' brand systems are more complicated since these brands often have opposite values as a reflection of their function in society (e.g., city to visit, city to live in, city of commerce). This might result in a flexible brand (Egbert, n.d.). Waeraas, (2008) states that when this is recognized, it can lead to the development of a "unique collection of characteristics that can be used in the branding process" (Wæraas, 2008).

Saudi Arabia has adopted a comprehensive planning system since it is the best framework for regulating growth towards defined and integrated goals. This development plan seeks to strike a balance between economic advancement and the preservation of great ideals and achievements. The creation of plans was carried out using a scientific technique that ensures the effective use of national resources (Vision, 2023). It was achieved through the establishment of massive urban heritage projects that promote traditional values and identity (Mazzetto & Vanini, 2023).

While Saudi Arabia recognizes the concept of comprehensive planning, the efficiency of these plans in maintaining a balance between economic growth and the preservation of national principles remains a sensitive and disputed issue. The city features and character changes due to massive urban development put the local and traditional identity in danger (A. Abdelrahman & Alghamdi, 2022). There is a threat of losing local values and identity through its development process which adopts foreign approaches (Moscatelli, 2023). Implementation, adaptation, and a true commitment to protecting cultural heritage are critical factors to consider when assessing the influence of planning frameworks in the Kingdom. In addition, more inclusive participation in branding Saudi Arabia is needed to boost sustainability and strengthen its identity at the same time (Klingmann, 2022).

### 2.1 Case study

Al-Diriyah Historic District, located on the outskirts of Riyadh, is a living witness to Saudi Arabia's cultural and historical past. Established in the 15th century, it was awarded a UNESCO World Heritage site in recognition of its exceptional universal importance. The contrast of Al-Diriyah's rich historical value with Riyadh's changing urban landscape creates an intriguing case study that dives into the complex link between humanitarian architecture, authenticity, and city branding. Al-Diriyah historic quarter serves as an illustration of the changing story of Riyadh's urban development. It incorporates centuries of cultural legacy, symbolizing Saudi Arabia's traditions and serving as a source of pride for local people. This historical enclave reflects more than just architectural monuments; it captures the soul of a nation and its people's perseverance (Bay et al., 2022).

Al Diriyah, like many other Saudi cities, is in the blistering desert. It also known as the symbolic birthplace of the nation hosted the first Saudi capital and served as an inspiration to many of the Kingdom's leaders throughout its history (K. Abdelrahman et al., 2023). This is significant because there are few practical frameworks and recommendations for city planners, marketers, and lawmakers who want economic growth goals with the preservation of authenticity and place identity. This offers advice on how to negotiate this tension in the context of urban growth. It helps develop a better understanding of the complex relationship between city branding and authenticity by giving practical suggestions for developing effective city branding initiatives that interact with diverse audiences while preserving local culture and identity (Nursanty et al., 2023). Kavaratzis (2004) also stated that Cities, as implied by this remark, are complex and distinct settings that need a specialized approach. Cities, unlike products or services, have a variety of identities, cultural legacies, and historical legacies that make them difficult to market (Kavaratzis, 2004).



Figure 1. Bujairi terrace and the royal side of old historical Al-Diryah  
Source: Authors

Residents have a strong connection to the past because of Al-Diryah's winding lanes, ancient mud-brick houses, and historical sites. For them, the district is more than just a

physical location; it is also a repository of memories and customs, as well as a living witness to their cultural identity. Nonresidents are often lured to Al-Diriyah as a cultural pilgrimage, a trip into the heart of Saudi Arabia's birth, by the fascination of history and tradition. These viewpoints are substantially influenced by Al-Diriyah's preservation endeavors. It fosters a sense of cultural continuity, pride, and identity among the residents. Non-locals, on the other hand, are given a glimpse into Saudi Arabia's profound historical origins, developing mutual understanding and respect.

These architectural wonders represent years of workmanship and serve as silent witnesses to the historical events that occurred inside the district's boundaries. The importance of safeguarding cultural assets within urban environments is shown in this case study. It demonstrates the powerful influence that striking a balance between progress and cultural authenticity can have on a city's identity. By prioritizing cultural heritage preservation as an advantage rather than a detriment, Al-Diriyah becomes a beacon for cities in the east, demonstrating the lasting significance of history, tradition, and the narratives that form a city's spirit.

Whereas when it comes to design it is humanitarian architects who collaborate with communities on site-specific projects that require answers to problems large and small. From the perspective of humanitarian architecture, the preservation and restoration activities inside the Al-Diriyah Historic District have greatly contributed to boosting Riyadh's city branding and identity. The incorporation of humanitarian themes into conservation initiatives has been critical in balancing urban growth with cultural preservation.

Humanitarian design emphasizes inclusion and community interaction, and this notion has been central to Al-Diriyah's preservation efforts. Local communities' participation in decision-making processes, restoration initiatives, and cultural events generates a sense of shared ownership. Riyadh's city branding is evolving into a story of a community-centric urban environment that cherishes the voices and contributions of its citizens because of these collaborative efforts. Al-Diriyah becomes a living witness to the strength of communal relationships, adding to the authenticity of the city. The restoration initiatives at Al-Diriyah include guided tours, seminars, and interactive exhibits that teach both locals and visitors about the district's historical tales. This dedication to education strengthens Riyadh's city image as a destination that appreciates cultural interchange and where history preservation is a shared experience for a worldwide audience, not just locals. Riyadh is positioned as a city open to conversation and mutual understanding.

Through the viewpoint of humanitarian architecture, the Al-Diriyah Historic District has become a cornerstone in improving Riyadh's city branding and character. The area presents a narrative of a city that respects its roots, connects with its people, and welcomes the globe by combining cultural preservation with concepts of human dignity, inclusion, and sustainability. Riyadh's brand is transformed into a symbol of cultural richness as Al-Diriyah is restored, beautifully integrating history and progress in a way that resonates internationally.

### 3. Methods

This study utilized a methodical comprehensive strategy that blends qualitative and quantitative research approaches. The surveys to gather quantitative data were distributed to Riyadh city residents aged 18 and above, as well as nonresidents living in the suburbs. These groups were chosen to represent a wide spectrum of viewpoints on urban growth and architectural changes. The target respondents were mainly selected from a diverse group of people reached through the link of the survey being sent out on multiple online platforms.

Questions that enabled the respondents to describe and identify their views on the current situation such as who are the primary participants in the architectural design and

city planning processes? who gains or suffers because of changes in city authenticity? what are the most important architectural aspects and design concepts that determine the authenticity of a city? when did changes in city authenticity begin, and what prompted these changes? were collected.

It is crucial to understand people's point of view of the location and how city branding and authenticity might not be important for non-residents. Questions related to this condition such as why is it essential to maintain city authenticity? how does their location influence their cultural character and design choices? were also collected for this study.

#### 4 Results and Discussion

The data analysis revealed several significant results. Most respondents, 96.2%, stated that they have seen changes in their city's architecture during the last decade. Surprisingly, just a small percentage of respondents, 3.8%, claimed to have seen no changes in their city's architecture. This minor percentage brings the issue of what variables influence this initial impression. When asked about the challenges that prevent humanitarian architecture from enhancing the authenticity of cities, 41.5% stated that rapid development was the cause. Despite rapid development, individuals were still able to recognize changes in the city's authenticity.

Furthermore, 67.9% of respondents have stated that considering cultural and environmental factors in the design of architectural projects is extremely important. This reflects a common recognition among participants that the distinctive characteristics of local culture and unique natural qualities should be vital factors in any architectural project. Respondents appear to support a strategy that respects and incorporates these cultural components into architectural projects, generating a constructed environment that connects with the local culture while also preserving the local historical significance. Simultaneously, the focus given to environmental factors implies a greater understanding of the ecological background. Climate, geography, and sustainability factors may be included, showing a desire for architectural designs that harmonize with the natural environment and contribute to ecological balance.

The majority of respondents support an in-depth and adaptive approach to architectural design. It implies a desire for structures and urban places that not only fulfill functional objectives but also contribute positively to the cultural and environmental fabric.

Table 1. Survey open-ended question

Question	Do you have any additional thoughts, suggestions, or comments regarding the relationship between architectural design, city branding, and authenticity in Saudi Arabia?
1	Balance the modern and the historic architecture to not lose the authenticity of Saudi
2	Our culture is very important in architecture
3	It is interesting how history affects architects
4	Architectural design should involve everyone, architects, and non-architects since it is the people living there who will appreciate it most

Table 1 illustrates the open-ended question in which residents and nonresidents expressed the importance of history and culture when it comes to enhancing cities' authenticity and how big of a role it plays. Respondents emphasized the importance of striking a balance between modern architectural developments and preserving cultural

significance. This reflects an overall aim toward encouraging urban growth while maintaining the distinctive character that historical and cultural elements bring to a city.

One insightful response emphasized the inclusive character of architectural decision-making, arguing that it should not be limited to architects and the government. According to this point of view, residents have an important part in defining the design of their built environment. It argued that residents' engagement is essential since they are the ones who directly encounter and connect with the built environment daily. They believe that involving residents in decision-making is not only practical but also has a deeper meaning. Residents with a personal investment in the community are perceived to have a unique awareness of the local characteristics, preferences, and practical demands. This perspective proposes that architectural decision-making should become more collaborative and community-centered. It highlights the idea that city residents are best positioned to appreciate the unique characteristics that distinguish their neighborhoods. By integrating residents, architects, urban planners, policymakers, and government obtain crucial information that might not be obvious from a professional or official perspective.

This collaborative approach not only increases people's sense of ownership and pride but also helps to create places that reflect the community's character and objectives. It is consistent with the idea that the best-designed cities are the outcome of a collaborative effort in which different voices collaborate to construct urban settings that are both functional and culturally significant. The agreement of all participants, with 100% agreement, that humanitarian architecture may play a critical role in preserving or strengthening a city's identity demonstrates a resounding vote of confidence in the potential influence of humanitarian projects. This strong agreement reflects respondents' common confidence in the transforming impact of humanitarian-driven architectural interventions.

The general recognition of humanitarian architecture's role in preserving or increasing authenticity demonstrates a thorough awareness of the symbiotic link between urban growth and cultural preservation. Participants appear to recognize that humanitarian architecture may function as a proactive force in changing cities in ways that honor their history, traditions, and specific character, rather than just responding to disasters. This finding has significant implications for the larger discussion on urban development, emphasizing the significance of including humanitarian concerns in architectural practices. It implies that everyone, regardless of their backgrounds or opinions, sees a connection between humanitarian values and the preservation of a city's character. Recognizing this synergy has the potential to inspire future urban planning strategies that strive to balance the demands of progress with the necessity of preserving cities' unique identities and cultural heritage.

This study's findings shed light on the complex relationship between humanitarian architecture, urban authenticity, and the issues faced by fast urbanization in Saudi Arabian cities. The agreement among respondents where 100% of them on the ability of humanitarian architecture to preserve or enhance a city's authenticity demonstrates a shared understanding of the essential part that architecture can play in developing cities that are compatible with cultural identity. The participants appear to argue for a plan that not just recognizes but actively embraces these cultural elements, creating a physical environment that not only resonates with the local culture but also acts as a protector of the region's historical value.

## 5. Conclusions

This study explores the complicated relationships of humanitarian architecture, urban authenticity, and the issues brought by rapid urbanization, with a particular emphasis on Al-Diriyah, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The thorough investigation, which used both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, investigated how humanitarian architecture actions

affect the character and look of cities, considering both residents' and non-residents' viewpoints.

Furthermore, the study revealed a significant focus on the relevance of cultural and environmental aspects in architectural design, with 67.9% of participants believing that these aspects are extremely essential. This acknowledgment reflects a shared goal for architectural projects that integrate smoothly with local cultural and ecological surroundings, generating a constructed environment that connects with local culture while encouraging sustainability.

As a case study, the Al-Diriyah Historic District evolved as a living witness to the positive influence of humanitarian architecture on city branding and identity. The district's preservation and restoration processes not only helped to strengthen Riyadh's city branding, but also helped to develop a sense of cultural continuity, pride, and identity among residents. The inclusive and community-centric humanitarian design approach apparent in Al-Diriyah's restoration activities has turned Riyadh's city image into a symbol of cultural richness and openness to discourse.

The value of this research extends beyond Riyadh's borders, giving essential insights for architects, urban planners, policymakers, and governments navigating the complex issues of urban development. The overwhelming support for humanitarian architecture as an effective method for cultural preservation fuels a convincing agreement for a fundamental change in urban planning techniques. This shift calls for a careful balance between the imperatives of progress and the requirements of preserving the various identities found in these growing urban settings.

To summarize, this study calls for a collaborative and culturally sensitive approach to architectural design and urban development, recognizing the need to maintain a city's authenticity in the face of growing urbanization difficulties, criticizing the top-down approach of architectural decision-making, and advocating for a more democratic and collaborative process. It recognizes that residents' lived experiences contain a wealth of knowledge that is essential in building urban places that are not only functional but also connect with the community's cultural fabric. This perspective's collaborative and focused community views lead to the building of cities that authentically represent the needs, goals, and identities of the people who live in them.

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