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# The Gap of Cultural Identity in Open Spaces: Urban Renewal Frameworks in Bahrain

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**Keywords:** Cultural Landscapes, Urban Regeneration, Public Space Design, Cultural Heritage Preservation, Sustainable Urban Development

**Abstract.** Urban regeneration in Bahrain is facing a critical tension between preserving its cultural identity, and accommodate the rapid modernization, thus comes this paper, as it investigate how the integration of cultural landscape and open spaces can strengthen the urban renewal framework, the paper uses a qualitative analysis of planning documents and case studies, using the Architects Handbook of Professional Practice for it addresses urban planning and urban design as interdisciplinary practices that shape the form, character, and social function of cities. It also discusses the public realm design, streetscapes, land use, and community revitalization, which are central to the research title and scope, and it explores policies and tools (like form-based codes) used to guide urban regeneration and enhance cultural landscapes. In addition to the Council for Regulating the Practice of Engineering Professions (CRPEP) guidelines, for they are the regulatory authority in Bahrain, as a guideline base for comparison. The paper discusses the gap presented in linking the heritage-based design principles with contemporary engineering and regulatory practices and proposes a conceptual framework that integrates cultural, spatial, and regulatory dimensions to support place-based regeneration strategies.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Context and Background

The rapid urbanization that Bahrain has gone through in the past decades has reshaped its traditional cityscape, challenging the balance between modernization and cultural heritage. At one point in time, Bahrain was defined by its coastal settlement, the humble homes made from indigenous materials, the courtyard element in design, and the social dynamic of the society and its gathering areas. In contrast to its modern urban fabric that reflects the infrastructural expansion and economic diversification. Despite the national efforts toward sustainable development, many regeneration initiatives prioritize physical infrastructure over cultural identity and social cohesion.

This paper argues that the cultural landscape and public places design are critical tools for the revitalization of Bahrain's urban environment, hence the significance of this paper as it addresses the interdependence between cultural landscape, open public spaces, and the regulatory framework that shapes Bahrain's urban fabric and identity. By bridging the gap between heritage-based design principles and contemporary planning regulations. The paper brings forward the localized application of international standards of the Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice within the Bahrain regulatory environment, regulated by the Council for Regulating the Practice of Engineering Professions (CRPEP) as the regulatory authority in Bahrain. This dual framework shows how cultural identity can coexist with modern design and engineering standards, thereby advancing a context-sensitive approach in urban regeneration.

### 1.2 Problem statement

The current regeneration projects have revitalized selected urban areas, but many other projects have overlooked the cultural landscape aspect, value, and public real integration. This gap reveals

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the need to align heritage-based design principles and guidelines with the current modified engineering and regulatory framework.

### 1.3 Aim and Objective

**Aim:** To investigate how the integration of cultural landscape and open spaces can enhance and strengthen the urban regeneration framework.

**objective:**

- Examine the relationship between cultural identity, spatial planning, and regulatory practice in Bahrain.
- Analyze how The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice and CRPEP guidelines address design governance.
- To assess selected regeneration projects (in Bahrain) and identify opportunities for culturally grounded renewal.
- Propose a conceptual framework integrating cultural, spatial, and regulatory dimensions.

### 1.4 Research question

How can Bahrain's urban regeneration strategies integrate cultural landscapes and open spaces within existing regulatory and professional frameworks?

### 1.5 Significant

This paper contributes to the field of sustainable urbanism and bridges it with cultural identity from the present realities of governing regulations. Therefore, it comes with pertinent applications for Gulf cities undergoing rapid urbanization.

## 2. Theoretical and Conceptual Background

### 2.1 Urban Regeneration and Cultural Landscape Theory

Cultural landscape is defined by UNESCO as the link between human activity and the natural built environment, for it creates a space that resides in the memory and identity. In urban contexts, such landscapes represent the evolving dialogue between tradition and modernity, and Scholars such as Zukin (1995)(1) and Mumford (1961)(2) emphasized the role of public spaces as democratic and social environments where collective urban life unfolds.

Increasing attention has been brought to cultural landscapes for urban identity, memory, and continuity, which is why more regeneration efforts are focusing on urban transformation. For example, urban landscapes are essential spatial elements of urban memory and identity construction, where memory overlooks recreational areas and important views frequently constructed through collective memory by the city's residents (3). Historical-cultural landscapes consist of a triangulation of regional culture, collective memory, and urbanization, which proves that their existence is necessary for the projection of urban spatial values (4). However, urban transformation within historical areas complicates matters of spatial continuity, where disconnection from socio-economic improvements and conservation reality applications causes fragmentation, separation, dissolution, and disidentification (5). Culture and history have also been established as a link to urban regeneration processes, where a creative city orientation influences spatial, human, economic, and civic integration, creating an interrelated developmental system through sustainable regeneration efforts, which enhance place identity (6).

Research on Bahrain's urban regeneration, cultural landscapes, and public spaces serves as a vital tool for understanding how revitalizing urban environments can help preserve community identity. For example, the Pearling Trail in Muharraq is a renowned project where cultural preservation triggers regeneration and makes sense of place, spanning 3.5 km, creating an eco-museum that transformed the city into a renowned cultural attraction (7). In Manama, the old Kanoo neighborhood of Manama is another example, where rehabilitation projects regenerate old

urban cores and re-establish a fading city identity (8). Thus, where urban sustainability and cultural transformations are concerned, Bahrain feels more intensely linked to such phenomena because much development in the country was driven by oil, leading to poor sustainability efforts before recent developments in urban planning and public policies (9). Therefore, public open spaces, including heritage sites like Bab Al-Bahrain and the Pearling Trail, are inclusive transcultural spaces that join diverse populations but are still inherently linked to local heritage values. This established the point that preservation and multicultural integration can coexist as one (10).

### 2.2 Public Realm and Open Space Integration

Streetscapes, parks, and public plazas shape everyday interaction and cultural identity through their design, layout, and management (11–20), Ethnographic and observational studies in cities from London to Kuala Lumpur and New York show that seating arrangements and green or natural elements spur spontaneous encounters and encourage sustained use (11–14,16,18,20). Clear, legible layouts with visual connectivity and defined boundaries help users navigate these spaces and feel included, whereas designs that lack such clarity may restrict interaction (16). Papers describe public spaces as stages for cultural expression (12,13,19,20). Markets with porous edges, plazas featuring culturally significant symbols, and parks offering art installations or monuments serve as venues where collective memory, ethnic diversity, and identity are enacted (13,19,20). Management practices, including programming, maintenance, and regulation of access, further influence whether these settings foster inclusion or inadvertently limit it (12,13,20).

### 2.3 Professional and Regulatory Frameworks

In Bahrain, studies describe planning governance as a centralized and state-led framework. Khalaf (2016), Mouzughi et al. (2014), and al-Nabi (2014) note that strategic documents akin to Bahrain's CRPEP guidelines, along with visions of Vision 2030 and the Bahrain National Development Plan, structure governance through public–private partnerships and top-down regulation despite persistent bureaucratic hurdles (21–23).

By contrast, in the United States of America and other global contexts there are professional codes that plays the key role in shaping the ethical and practical code of conduct like the Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice which is a book that offers detailed specifics on professional practice that covers the American Institute of Architect (AIA) Code of Ethics, that covers topic like legal aspects, the management of projects, and interdisciplinary thematic agreements, therefore, setting up the principles of standards of the architectural practice governance (24).

Johnson and Gore (2016) examine how professional codes of architectural and planning organizations have developed and found themselves converging around social issues in the 1970s, but then diverging, with planning prioritizing democratic processes and involvement of citizens, and architecture prioritizing physical projects (25).

Al Jalahma (2025) also shows how Bahrain adapts international standards in governance and applies them to the local cultural settings and implements hybrid forms that integrate the best practices across the globe and Shariah-informed values (26). Al-Soufi and Ahmed (2012) demonstrate how Bahrain has a systematic way of governing the country with its National Enterprise Architecture Framework, which gives detailed guidelines and standards in which all government services are coordinated, which in turn supports the economic vision of the kingdom by using well-organized architectural governance (27).

### 2.4 Conceptual Framework

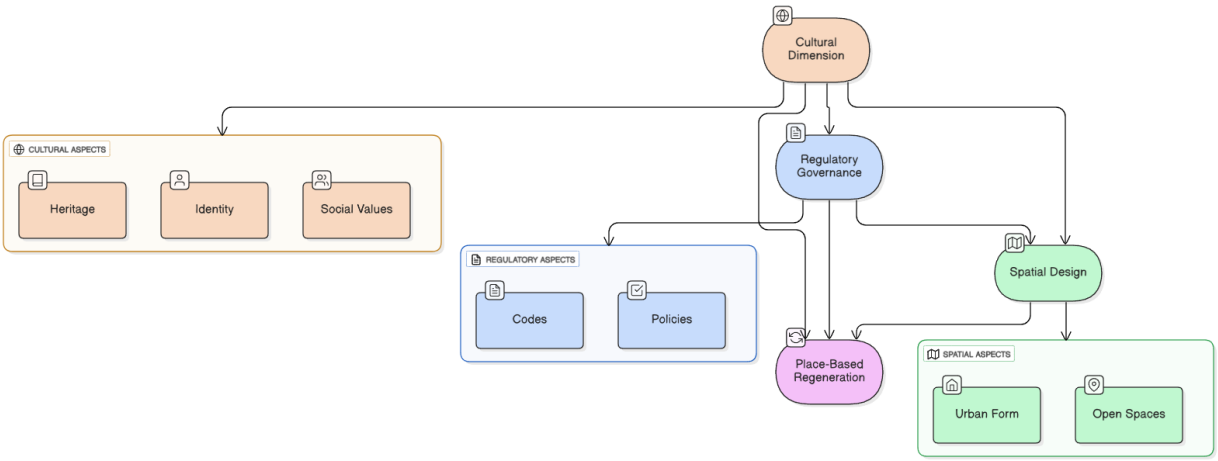



*Figure 1 Conceptual Framework: Integrating Cultural, Spatial, and Regulatory Dimensions, source: author*

This conceptual model positions place-based urban regeneration at the intersection of three interdependent dimensions. The first is the cultural dimension that represents the identity, traditions, and social meanings embedded in Bahrain's urban fabric. Second is the spatial design dimension that focuses on the physical aspect and morphological transformation embedded in the culture, and as an essential design element in public realm design, open space networks, and urban form. It translates cultural values into tangible design outcomes that shape how people interact with their surroundings. And finally, the Regulatory Governance Dimension that encompasses institutional frameworks, professional practice standards (e.g., *AIA Handbook of Professional Practice*), and local regulations (e.g., *CRPEP guidelines*).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

A qualitative, interpretive design was employed to understand how professional standards, policy frameworks, and spatial interventions intersect.

### 3.2 Data Collection

- **Documents:** Bahrain's national urban policies, CRPEP guidelines, and AIA Handbook
- **Case Studies:** Two Bahraini regeneration projects representing heritage-led and contemporary approaches.

### 3.3 Analytical Method

Thematic document analysis and comparative case evaluation were used to identify patterns in cultural, spatial, and regulatory integration

### 3.4 limitation

The study focused on Bahrain's urban context and does not include empirical stakeholder interviews, which are recommended for future research and analysis.

## 4. Case Studies and Analysis

### 4.1 Contextual Overview

This subsection situates the case studies within Bahrain's broader regeneration agenda and planning instruments.

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**Narrative**

Over the past two decades, Bahrain's urban interventions have focused on economic diversification, waterfront-driven investment, and heritage conservation (28,29). The regeneration policies are formulated and realized through municipal master plans, prominent private project construction, and sector-specific plans that support tourism, commerce, and urban amenities (7,8). Spatial planning instruments that are applied in practice include statutory land-use plans, master plans that include waterfront and downtown districts, and project-specific design codes (often developer-led) but regulated, approved, and governed by a professional body that is CRPEP.

While the theoretical strategic documents talk about heritage protection and placemaking, the implementation stage more directly responds to financial feasibility and modern-day development potentials, placing the historic city center and fine-grained crafted areas at odds with each other more than expected (28,30).

Table 1 shows the chronology of major regeneration initiatives that reflect a shift from state-led modernization to a public–private partnership-driven urbanism that puts emphasis on waterfronts and heritage districts.

*Table 1 chronology of urban development in Bahrain, source: Author*

| Characteristic | 1970s–1990s | 2000–2010 | 2010–Present |
|---|---|---|---|
| Focus | Foundational Urban Development | Waterfront-Led Regeneration and Economic Diversification | Cultural and Heritage-Based Urban Renewal |
| Key Plans | The First National Development Plans, Manama Structural Plan Establishment | Economic Vision of 2030 lunched in 2008 | integrating heritage conservation within regeneration policy, National Spatial Strategy 2030 |
| Development Model | Expansion and Modernization | Developer-Led Masterplans | Heritage Conservation |
| Key Projects | Initial Land Reclamation and infrastructure corridors | Amwaj Islands, Diyar Al Muharraq, Bahrain Bay | Old Muharraq, Manama Souq |
| Planning Approach | Zoning, Infrastructure Corridors | Form-Based Codes, Environmental Guidelines | Identity-Led Development |

Table 2 showcases the key planning instruments and responsible authorities in Bahrain.

Bahrain’s regeneration model operates through a hybrid governance structure, combining state oversight with private-sector execution, for example, Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs) is used in major project like Bahrain bay and Diyar Al-Muharraq, while Developer-led Masterplans hire international consultants that little to no incorporation of local heritage or community narratives, thus the professional review and oversight is led by CRPEP to ensure technical compliance and design accountability, while the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities (BACA) reviews heritage-sensitive proposals, particularly in Muharraq and Manama’s historic sites. Because of the lack of coordination between agencies such as heritage, environmental, and planning bodies that operate under distinct mandates, a gap is created between strategic vision and on-ground implementation, creating an integration challenge to address (refer to Figure 2).

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*Table 2 Planning Instruments and Actors in Bahrain's Urban Regeneration*

| Instrument | Purpose | Lead Agency/Actor | Relevance to Cultural Landscape |
|---|---|---|---|
| National Spatial Strategy 2030 (NSS 2030) | Sets spatial hierarchy, land-use structure, and sustainability objectives for national development. | Ministry of Municipalities & Agriculture Affairs (MMAA) / Urban Planning & Development Authority (UPDA) | Provides national policy framework linking growth centers with heritage conservation zones. |
| Municipal Masterplans (e.g., Manama, Muharraq) | Regulates zoning, density, and public realm at city level. | Municipal Councils under the Ministry of Municipal Affairs | Identifies heritage districts, open-space systems, and mixed-use regeneration areas. |
| Economic Vision 2030 | Strategic framework for diversification, innovation, and urban quality of life. | Bahrain Economic Development Board (EDB) | Positions heritage and tourism as assets for economic competitiveness. |
| CRPEP Professional Guidelines | Regulates professional practice, design approval, and engineering standards. | Council for Regulating the Practice of Engineering Professions (CRPEP) | Ensures compliance and professional accountability in heritage and urban design projects. |
| Developer-Led Project Masterplans (e.g., Bahrain Bay, Diyar Al Muharraq) | Establishes land-use and form-based codes for large-scale developments. | Private developers (e.g., Bahrain Bay Dev. Co.) with government oversight | Influences spatial form and identity expression in reclaimed or new urban areas. |
| UNESCO Heritage Management Plan (Pearling Trail) | Integrates conservation, adaptive reuse, and tourism planning. | Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities (BACA) | Central to safeguarding cultural landscape and community identity. |




*Figure 2 Governance Model of Regeneration in Bahrain*

### 4.2 Case Study 1, Heritage-Based Regeneration (Muharraq)

The Muharraq regeneration project is a heritage-based intervention focused on the historic fabric, traditional streets, and intangible culture. The design strategies are focused on the conservation of the built heritage, adaptive reuse of vernacular houses, and the maintenance of the urban grain, which is defined by the narrow alleys, typologies of the courtyards, and the human-friendliness of its facade. Interventions focus on the authenticity of the materials, preservation of historic plot lines, and the introduction of selective, visually discrete contemporary services. Community engagement (cultural festivities, fairs, and workshops) created social value for conservation

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interventions for public space reactivation. This means the conserved spaces maintain character at a human scale for walkability and informal economic purposes/cultural events.

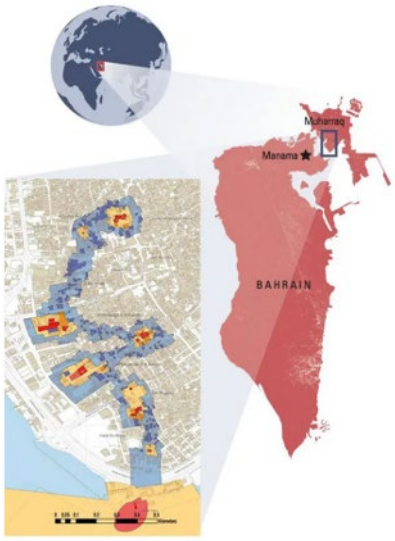



*Figure 3 the pearling path project 2024, source: Bahrain Ministry of Culture and Information*

In Bahrain, the historic city of Muharraq stands as the nation's most significant site of heritage-based urban regeneration. As the island's political and cultural heart for over 200 years, it embodies the urban morphologies of typical Gulf towns with small alleyways (*sikkas*), interiorized courtyards, coral stone façades, and a dense relationship between social function and the built environment. Unfortunately, in recent decades, spatial and cultural integrity has been compromised by a lack of upkeep due to development, demographic shifts, and land-use pressures.

As a response, the Pearling Path Project began in 2012 (7). This nine-year project transformed a 3.5 km area into a living eco-museum with thriving business and cultural communities. The path consists of seventeen buildings located in the city of Muharraq, three offshore oyster beds, a portion of the coastline, and the Qal'at Bu Mahir fort at the southernmost tip of Muharraq Island, where boats departed for the oyster beds. (refer to Figure 4). The structures are a collection of merchant mansions, shops, storehouses, and a mosque. It is the only surviving intact manifestation of the cultural tradition of pearling and the associated wealth which prevailed in the Gulf economy (2nd century to the 1930s), when cultured pearls began in Japan (31), elevating Muharraq into a popular local attraction hosting cultural festivals and events

The project's success stemmed from expanding beyond UNESCO preservation requirements, focusing on sustainability and continuous use, and improving cultural access (7). Muharraq stands as one of the most important traditional cities in the Arabian Gulf and represents a remaining living model of traditional Gulf urbanization (32). The regeneration demonstrates how cultural heritage tourism can effectively revitalize historic urban centers (33,34)

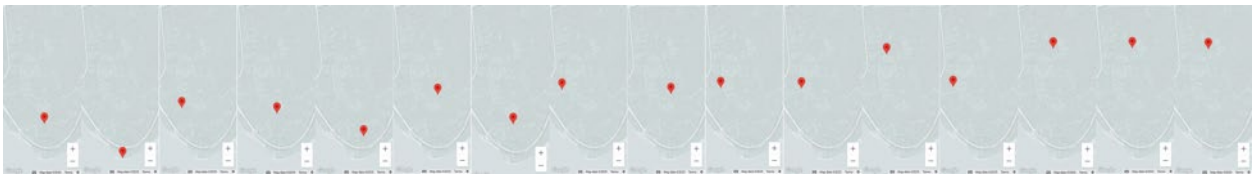


*Figure 4 The Pearling Path (16 structures and the oyster's bed and shore), source: https://pearlingpath.bh*

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**Theoretical frameworks illustrated**

The Cultural landscape theory follows the UNESCO-style, as it considers heritage as an evolving human–environment system. It incorporates Adaptive reuse and placemaking as it conserves the urban fabric while enabling new cultural uses that evolve every year.



*Figure 5 Shaikh Ebrahim bin Mohammed Center. Source: Shaikh Ebrahim bin Mohammed Center for Culture and Research*



*Figure 6 pearl-shaped lamp post. source: Pearlingpath.bh*



*Figure 5 Muharraq night. source: Bahrain news agency*

An example would be the Shaikh Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa house (refer to Figure 5), for it was rebuilt and converted into a Culture and Research Center. This project also utilized spherical white streetlamps, which were added to symbolize pearls and assist with wayfinding (refer to Figure 6). And in 2021 the Muharraq nights event took place during the nation celebration in December of that year then in 2023 it evolves into a night festive that the citizens and residents wait for every year since then (refer to Figure 7). as it stood still as a reminder of who we are, where we come from, and what our ancestors did to build this nation and how we as the future generation will continue their path. And the walk through the memory lane uses narrative-led regeneration by employing storytelling (pearling history) to create meaning and wayfinding.

These frameworks deliver a replicable model for small-scale, culturally anchored renewal. And as nothing is perfect, there are limitations to this project, as there might be a piecemeal regulatory alignment, and risk of tourism-led commodification, and occasional clashes between contemporary architectural insertions and the human-scaled heritage fabric.

### 4.3 Case Study 2, Contemporary Urban Renewal (Bahrain Bay)

Bahrain Bay, located in Manama, Bahrain (refer to Figure 8), is a flagship example of state-supported, private-sector-led urban renewal that reflects Bahrain's broader economic diversification agenda.

**Figure 6 location of Bahrain bay in the map of Bahrain 2025. source: screenshot of google maps**

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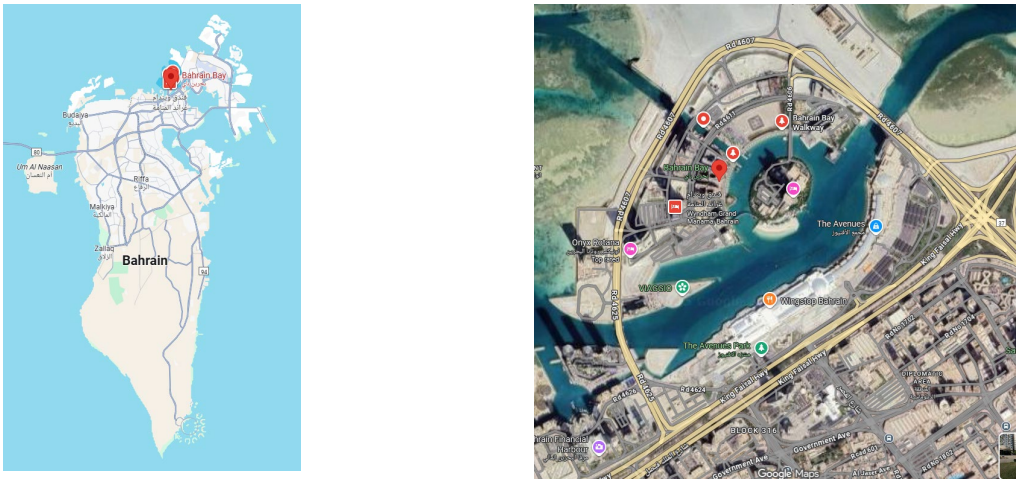



*Figure 7 location of Bahrain bay in the map of Bahrain 2025. source: screenshot of google maps*

The project was initiated in the early 2000s as a public–private partnership between the Government of Bahrain and Bahrain Bay Development Company. It occupies reclaimed land in the north of Manama's Diplomatic Area. Bahrain Bay integrates residential, commercial, and leisure functions anchored by global architectural icons such as the Four Seasons Hotel, the Arcapita Bank headquarters, and the United Tower (refer to Figure 9).




*Figure 8 Bahrain bay master plan. source: www.som.com*

The masterplan, developed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), employs a form-based design code to ensure visual coherence, regulated density, and high-end urban character.

**Theoretical frameworks illustrated**

The approach combines public–private partnerships with symbolic architecture to signal modernity and competitiveness, and it employs several key transformation principles that include:

Utilizing outdoor spaces, creating diverse building typologies, developing organic circulation routes, and integrating spatial layouts that support social interactions (refer to figure 10)



*Figure 9 different views around Bahrain bay. source: www.som.com*

**How blending inherited (local) design elements affects dwellers' experience of place**

The comparative results are relative; however, Muharraq is more placemaking for authenticity and identity of place than Bahrain Bay, for a successful integration of inherited and personally experienced urban form. Muharraq is a culturally influenced/rehabilitation-redevelopment project, while Bahrain Bay is a master planned development that tries to plop-dot its inherited traits via the contemporary (if not mostly contemporary). Additionally, Muharraq relies upon heritage-based revitalization, authentically made restoration efforts, and replication of patterns of life (how things used to be done), like spatial organization (hierarchical streets), courtyards, and materiality that relies upon a certain sense of place and identity through continuity and belonging.

Muharraq's heritage-led regeneration relates to authenticity as the spatial configuration, courtyards, and materiality represent where people came from and make them who they are to foster a sense of existence and place attachment pride, through continued acknowledgment of what once was. It's walkable and interconnected, and the memory-based place attachment allows one to appreciate where one once was and where they've come to be to create an essence of nostalgia, as things come together in a linear manner.

Conversely, Bahrain Bay employs only some locally inspired motifs, like the geometric lines and soft-edge waterfront promenades, but incorporates a commercialized, modern international masterplan. While the tributary to Bahraini culture can be perceived, it's more symbolically respected than lived, as aesthetic quality trumps social, cultural, and historically driven depth.
As such, the two exist together in proximity yet in separate realities. Without the true impact of integration and its positivity, placelessness runs the risk. Thus, sustainable regeneration in Bahrain relies on an integration of culturally landscape-driven design governance to ensure that there is a balance between modernized intentions and lived cultural appreciation.

## Conclusion

This research ultimately determines that sustainable urban redevelopment of Bahrain must integrate aspects like spatial, cultural, and regulatory dimensions to bring modernization and identity together. A heritage approach based on cultural landscape theory possesses an authentic sense of place and community revitalization, while a contemporary approach represents a shallow symbolic structure of local character, thus eventually rendering placelessness. Thus, embedding inherited design principles into planning and governance frameworks, specifically CRPEP guidelines and form-based codes, can create a balanced model where economic growth coexists with lived cultural meaning and enduring urban identity.

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