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Assessing Regional Identity Strategies in Contemporary Saudi Architecture: A Survey-Based Study of Professional Architects

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Abstract. This study operationalizes regional architectural identity in contemporary Saudi architecture by identifying and ranking the strategies through which architects integrate environmental, cultural, and human-centered determinants into modern design practice. A structured Likert-scale survey was administered to 132 professional Saudi architects across private, governmental, and academic sectors. The instrument translated regional identity into eleven measurable strategy categories derived from literature-based construct mapping. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Relative Importance Index (RII), Pearson correlation, Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.886$), and inferential tests (ANOVA and t-tests). Results indicate that climatic responsiveness (RII = 0.85) and integration of local cultural values (RII = 0.84) are the highest-ranked determinants, followed by human-centered and user-responsive design strategies. Direct replication of traditional forms and supra-regional references ranked lowest. The study contributes a structured multidimensional model for assessing regional architectural identity, providing decision-support guidance for culturally grounded contemporary architectural practice.

Introduction

Architecture reflects culture by embodying a society's values, history, and traditions in its design and structure . It shapes and is shaped by national, community, and personal identities, serving as a tangible expression of these aspects. This viewpoint serves as both a preventative measure and a source of inspiration for the greatest architects to return to their origins. In traditional Arabian constructed environments, deeply ingrained understandings of cultural practices, basic necessities, and environmental conditions were used by local master builders and decision-makers to design urban fabrics and buildings instead of using precise geometrical correlations [1]. Local architecture and architectural heritage are valuable products with perfectly rational solutions and community satisfaction; they are dependent on one another and carry the local identity with its many distinctive variables, but the central element that unites them is belonging [2]. Human Identity is expressed through both architecture and art. Humanity has consistently demonstrated a commitment to its artistic heritage. Maintaining architectural identity through the US Standards for culture preservation involves clearly differentiating new modern techniques from the original structure and preserving character-defining features. Constructing an identity relies significantly on humans' capacity for reflexive self-awareness, which involves an individual's ability to reflect on and understand their own existence, behaviors, and their relation to their place in any place in world. This self-awareness is a fundamental aspect of identity formation, allowing people to interpret and integrate their experiences, cultural heritage, and personal values into a coherent sense of self. In our case, this reflexive self-awareness translates into the way communities design

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and build their environments to reflect their unique identities, cultural traditions, and social values. The neglect of identity and tradition in regional architecture can have far-reaching consequences on society, the economy, and the environment. Al-Naim [3] observed that a "lack of identity in contemporary architecture in Saudi Arabia" had become apparent by the late 20th century, raising questions about how to preserve continuity amid rapid change. Prioritizing generic designs over contextually sensitive ones can lead to unsustainable buildings and urban spaces that fail to meet the needs of local communities. Moscatelli [4] observes that the unchecked adoption of Western models in Riyadh "accelerated the traditional loss of identity" in architecture, and she argues that new development must integrate local cultural elements to avoid this outcome. This disconnect can result in the loss of cultural heritage and identity, impacting not only the physical appearance but also the social and psychological aspects of the built environment. In Saudi Arabia, preserving and valuing distinct regional architecture has been a significant challenge [5]. Protecting modern heritage buildings is essential for increasing public appreciation and understanding of modernist architecture and preserving valuable cultural resources [6]. However, by incorporating cultural and heritage elements into designs, architects can create spaces that resonate with residents, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity with the past [7]. As Abowardah [8] argues, socio-cultural sustainability achieved by blending traditional design elements with innovation not only reinforces national identity but also enhances community cohesion and well-being in Saudi architecture. This integration can enhance well-being, as environments rich in cultural elements promote positive emotions, social interactions, and a stronger sense of pride and identity. As Sirror [9] shows in the case of Al-Ula Village, vernacular design strategies were inherently sustainable and their preservation today can "strengthen social and cultural identity" while improving environmental comfort Maintaining a country's identity in a globalized world involves showcasing its traditional elements, identity and rich cultural history, both of which are reflected in its architecture [10]. Balancing modernity with the preservation of cultural heritage is essential for Saudi architects to create a built environment that is both modern and reflective of the country's unique identity. Mazzetto and Vanini's [11] findings support this by illustrating how sustainably reusing heritage sites can achieve modern functionality while preserving unique local identity a direct affirmation of the introduction's claim Architectural spaces are influenced by a multitude of factors, including material, environmental, functional, and cultural aspects. The qualities and accessibility of building materials, developments in building science and technology, and financial concerns that affect the viability and sustainability of construction projects are examples of material variables. These factors determine things like ventilation, insulation, and overall harmony with the landscape. Functional aspects integrate biological and technical concerns to improve comfort and usefulness by addressing the behavioral patterns and spatial requirements of the planned activities in the space. Architectural identity and space symbolism are shaped by a variety of variables, many of which are cultural in nature. These include aesthetic preferences, customs, values held by society, and inventions. A society's collective memory, beliefs, and identity are reflected in the functional structure and symbolic representation of architectural design, which are enhanced by historical and cultural settings [12]. Regrettably, a lot of architects have a tendency to ignore socio-cultural factors, placing more importance on new technology, building costs, and aesthetics [1].

Despite extensive theoretical discourse on architectural regionalism and identity, there remains a critical methodological gap in the empirical operationalization of regional architectural identity, particularly within rapidly developing non-Western contexts such as Saudi Arabia. Existing studies often conceptualize identity normatively or philosophically, yet few translate it into measurable indicators that can be systematically evaluated across professional practice. Moreover, limited quantitative evidence exists regarding how architects prioritize competing identity strategies or whether such priorities vary across professional sectors. This study addresses this gap by operationalizing regional architectural identity as a multidimensional construct composed of

eleven measurable strategy categories and empirically evaluating their relative importance through a structured survey of professional Saudi architects. By transforming an abstract theoretical notion into a ranked and statistically validated framework, the study contributes a structured assessment model capable of informing architectural education, design decision-making, and policy formulation in culturally sensitive and rapidly globalizing environments.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How can regional architectural identity be operationalized into measurable strategy categories grounded in theoretical and contextual literature?

RQ2: What is the relative importance of the identified regional identity strategies according to professional Saudi architects?

RQ3: Are there statistically significant differences in the prioritization of regional identity strategies across professional sectors (academia vs. practice) and levels of experience?

Literature Review

To systematically derive the eleven regional identity strategy categories, a structured qualitative content analysis was conducted on selected theoretical and empirical studies addressing architectural identity, regionalism, and contextual design. Studies were included based on three criteria: (1) explicit discussion of architectural identity or regionalism, (2) identification of measurable or operational design determinants, and (3) relevance to environmental, cultural, or human-centered dimensions of architecture. Each study was coded for recurring identity-related determinants using open coding, followed by axial grouping into higher-order conceptual dimensions. Saturation was considered achieved when no new identity determinants emerged across the reviewed studies. The resulting coded determinants were consolidated into eleven distinct strategy categories, which were subsequently operationalized into survey items.

Research on architectural identity, regionalism, and sustainability has evolved across diverse cultural and climatic contexts; however, comprehensive frameworks integrating environmental, cultural, and human dimensions remain limited. Previous studies as revealed in **Table 1** shows two key trajectories: one focusing on theoretical and philosophical interpretations of architecture, and the other grounded in empirical, contextual, and practice-based applications. Collectively, these works illustrate a progressive convergence between environmental responsiveness, cultural identity, and human-centered design.

From a theoretical perspective, Hosseini et al. [13] and Malpas [14] positioned architecture as a dialogue between humans and their environment. Hosseini et al. developed a framework linking regional architectural principles to sustainability through qualitative and inductive reasoning, emphasizing responsiveness to climate and topography. Malpas explored the notion of place and spatial experience through a phenomenological lens, arguing that architecture fosters belonging and identity through the relationship between interior and exterior spaces. Yadav [15] advanced this discourse by defining ecological regionalism, asserting that sustainable architectural identity emerges from the integration of environmental, cultural, and regional determinants. Together, these theoretical studies establish that architecture's identity is rooted in its responsiveness to ecological and social contexts.

Complementary contextual and cultural studies emphasize how tradition and social values shape architectural expression. Ettehad et al. [12] examined cultural influences on Iran's architectural evolution, highlighting how responsiveness to natural light and environmental conditions preserves cultural meaning. Torabi and Brahman [16] identified spatial organization, materials, and context as key factors in defining architectural identity, stressing that modern reinterpretations must uphold cultural integrity. Similarly, Salman [17] explored vernacular architecture and sustainability in the Arab world, demonstrating how traditional Arab design

embodies ecological wisdom and social symbolism, advocating for vernacular adaptation to sustain cultural continuity.

Empirical studies in Saudi Arabia expand this understanding through regional application. Alnaim and Bay [5] analyzed the Salmaniah Architectural Style and King Salman Charter, linking cultural heritage, human needs, and modern design values, while Lucchi et al. [6] developed a documentation framework to preserve Riyadh's modern architectural identity. Both emphasize human-centered and culturally adaptive design. In a Western context, Akande [18] assessed retrofitting in England's heritage churches, balancing sustainability with historical integrity, illustrating how environmental performance can coexist with cultural preservation.

Table 1 Summary of similar previous studies.

No.	Study	Context	Methodological Approach	Identity Determinants Identified	Derived Strategy Category
1	Hosseini et al. (2023) [13]	Global	Qualitative content analysis; thematic framework	Climatic adaptation; topographic responsiveness	Respond to site natural and climatic conditions
2	Ettehad et al. (2014) [12]	Iran	Documentary and case study analysis	Environmental conditions; natural light; cultural context	Environmental responsiveness; cultural integration
3	Malpas (2012) [14]	Global	Phenomenological textual analysis	Spatial continuity; inside–outside relationship; sense of place	Environmental responsiveness; human-centered design
4	Alnaim & Bay (2023) [5]	Saudi Arabia	Surveys; interviews; case analysis	Local values; behavioral patterns; vernacular adaptation (direct/indirect); contemporary contextualization; regional references; human needs; building regulations	Cultural integration; direct traditional use; indirect traditional use; contemporary localization; supra-regional referencing; human-centered design; regulatory alignment
5	Lucchi et al. (2023) [6]	Saudi Arabia	Field surveys; documentation framework	Preservation of cultural patterns; quality of life; well-being	Cultural integration; human-centered design
6	Salman (2018) [17]	Arab World	Qualitative comparative analysis	Vernacular sustainability; social symbolism; place-based identity	Cultural integration; direct traditional use
7	Akande (2018) [18]	England	Interviews; benchmarking; performance evaluation	Sustainability; adaptive reuse; user functionality	Functional responsiveness; human-centered design
8	Torabi & Brahman (2013) [16]	Iran	Comparative descriptive analysis	Cultural continuity; temporal representation; reinterpretation of tradition	Indirect traditional use; contemporary localization
9	Yadav (2008) [15]	Global	Conceptual ecological regionalism analysis	Use of local materials; environmental harmony	Material localization; environmental responsiveness

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate and prioritize the parameters influencing architectural identity in Saudi Arabia. As illustrated in **Figure 1**, the methodological framework combines an in-depth literature review with a structured questionnaire survey, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the key strategies shaping regional architectural identity among Saudi architects.

The qualitative phase comprised an extensive review of theoretical and empirical studies related to regionalism, cultural identity, and contemporary Saudi architecture. This phase identified eleven primary architectural strategies encompassing aspects such as climatic responsiveness, cultural integration, vernacular adaptation, material use, building codes, and human-centered design. These categories formed the conceptual foundation for the survey design and the study's analytical framework.

The questionnaire was developed through a structured construct operationalization process derived from the literature review and qualitative content coding. Each of the eleven regional

identity strategy categories was translated into a single declarative statement measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Not Important at All; 5 = Very Important).

The study employed a non-probability convenience sampling strategy targeting professional Saudi architects across private practice, governmental organizations, and academic institutions. Participants were recruited through professional networks, institutional mailing lists, and direct distribution within architectural offices. The survey was administered both digitally (Google Forms) and in printed format to maximize accessibility. A total of 148 responses were received, of which 132 were complete and valid for analysis, resulting in an effective response rate of 89.2% after data screening.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed of the research purpose prior to participation, and completion of the questionnaire was considered informed consent. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were stored securely and analyzed in aggregated form solely for academic research purposes.

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Statistical tests included descriptive analysis to summarize respondent profiles and mean importance scores; Pearson correlation to assess construct validity among the 11 strategy categories; and Cronbach's Alpha to determine the internal reliability of the questionnaire. Additionally, a one-way ANOVA and independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine the impact of professional experience and work background on respondents' perceptions. The Relative Importance Index (RII) and weighted mean were also calculated to rank the relative significance of each architectural strategy.

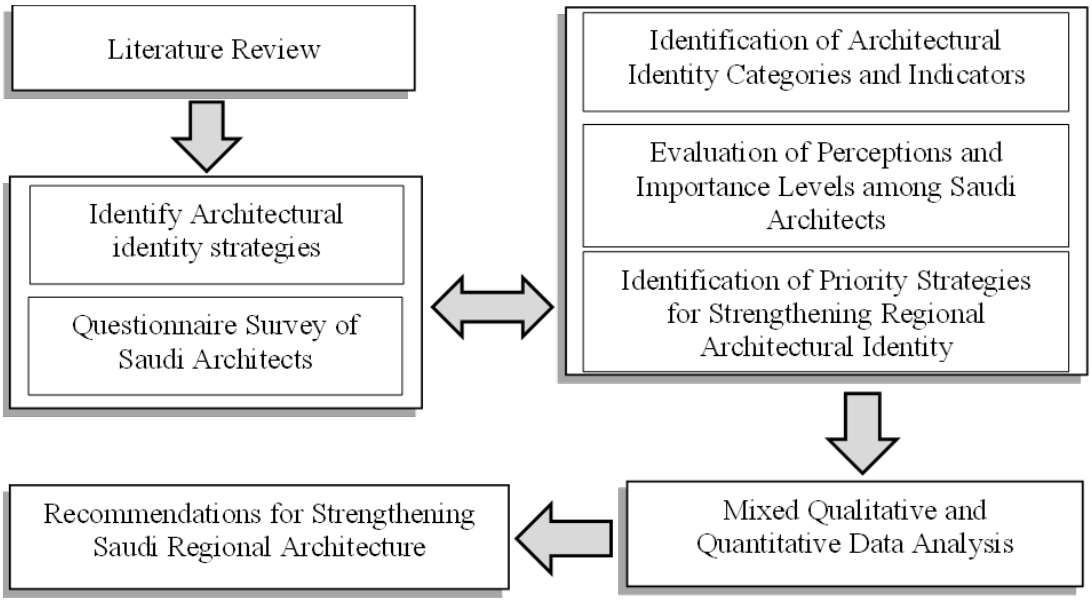


Figure 1 The Study's theoretical framework design

Results

As shown in **Table 2**, a total of 132 Saudi architects participated in the study. Regarding employment sector, 53.0% (n = 70) were practicing architects in private offices, 25.8% (n = 34) were employed in public or non-profit organizations, and 21.2% (n = 28) were engaged in academia. In terms of professional roles, most respondents identified as designers (69.7%, n = 92), followed by project managers (13.6%, n = 18), site architects (9.1%, n = 12), and consultants (7.6%, n = 10).

Table 3 shows Inter-item Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the degree of association among the eleven regional identity strategy categories. Correlations ranged from r = .36 to r = .79 ($p < .01$), indicating moderate to strong positive associations. These results suggest

conceptual coherence among the strategy categories while maintaining sufficient differentiation across dimensions.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of respondents' perceived importance levels across the 11 investigated architectural strategy categories. Overall, the results reveal a clear tendency toward prioritizing context-responsive and human-centered design strategies. Responding to site natural and climatic conditions received the strongest endorsement, with the highest proportion of "Very Important" responses (60.6%), followed closely by local culture and values of the region (56.1%). Similarly, strategies related to responding to user/client needs and incorporating human design aspects attracted high combined percentages of "Important" and "Very Important" ratings, indicating broad professional consensus on their relevance.

In contrast, strategies associated with symbolic or referential approaches showed more polarized or neutral evaluations. The use of elements from the larger region (e.g., Gulf or Islamic world) recorded the highest combined share of neutral and lower-importance responses, suggesting limited perceived relevance. Direct use of traditional architectural elements also attracted a substantial neutral response, whereas indirect references were evaluated more favorably.

Table 2 Sample of Characteristic's

Variable	Options	N	%
Type of Work	Practicing Architect in Offices	**70**	53.00%
	Architect in other organization	**34**	25.80%
	Academic Field	**28**	21.20%
	Total	**132**	100%
Type of Title	Designer	**92**	69.70%
	Site Architect	**12**	9.10%
	Consultant	**10**	7.60%
	Project Manager	**18**	13.6%
	Total	**132**	100%
Experience	0-2 Years	**40**	30.30%
	3-5 Years	**8**	6.06%
	6-10 Years	**14**	10.60%
	11-15 Years	**24**	18.20%
	16+ Years	**46**	34.80%
	Total	**132**	100%

Table 3 *Inter-item Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Regional Identity Strategy Categories (N = 132)*

Correlation Analysis of categories	Respond to site natural and climatic conditions	Respond to local culture and values of the region	Use elements from traditional architecture of the Kingdom in a direct way	Use elements from contemporary Saudi architecture	Use of local materials	Use of local materials	Use relevant local building codes	Use elements of the larger region	Use relevant contemporary principles, forms, and materials	Incorporate human design aspects and factors	Focus on responding to user/client needs
Respond to site natural and climatic conditions	1										
Respond to local culture and values of the region	0.42	1									
Use elements from traditional architecture of the Kingdom in a direct way	0.47	0.41	1								
Use elements from traditional architecture of the Kingdom in an indirect way	0.4	0.36	0.41	1							
Use elements from contemporary Saudi architecture	0.52	0.42	0.45	0.57	1						
Use of local materials	0.46	0.41	0.42	0.44	0.53	1					
Use relevant local building codes	0.44	0.45	0.44	0.52	0.58	0.6	1				
Use elements of the larger region	0.55	0.48	0.54	0.48	0.62	0.56	0.61	1			
Use relevant contemporary principles, forms, and materials that reflects the spirit of the era	0.47	0.5	0.51	0.55	0.56	0.56	0.63	0.69	1		
Incorporate human design aspects and factors	0.56	0.54	0.54	0.6	0.66	0.64	0.67	0.72	0.73	1	
Focus on responding to user/client needs	0.55	0.54	0.57	0.59	0.69	0.61	0.71	0.7	0.73	0.79	1

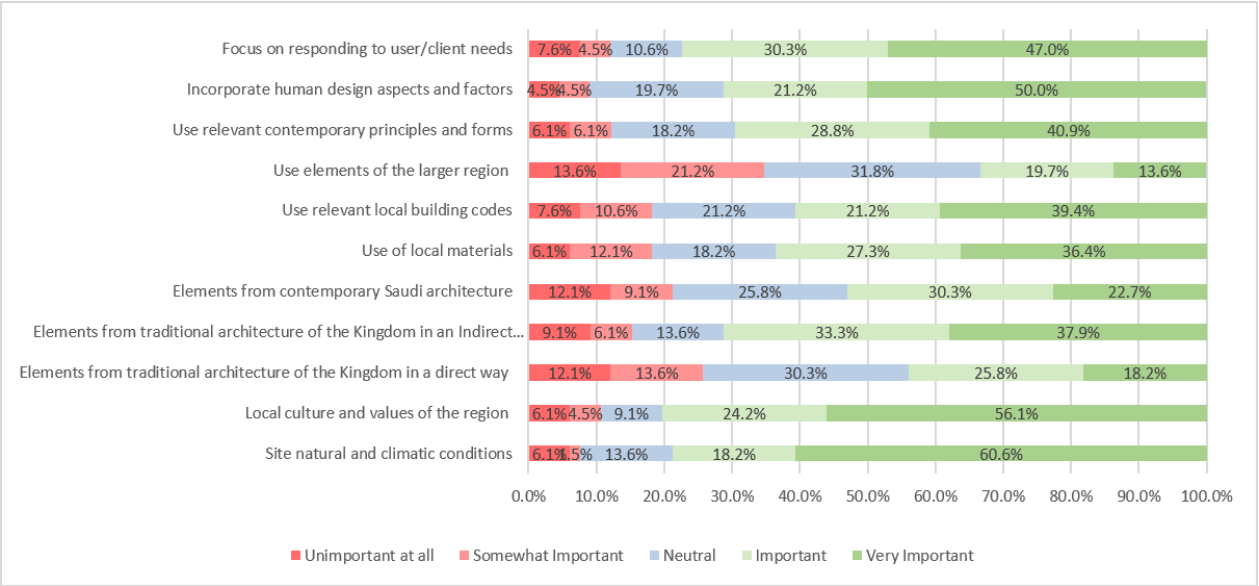


Figure 2 Percentages of users' importance with the 11 investigated categories

Table 4 shows that the highest ranked category was responding to site natural and climatic conditions, which achieved a weighted mean of 4.26, a Relative Importance Index (RII) of 0.85, and a first-place rank, indicating strong agreement among respondents on its critical role in architectural practice. This was followed closely by responding to local culture and values of the region (M = 4.20, RII = 0.84), and incorporating human design aspects and factors (M = 4.08, RII = 0.82), both of which reflect the significance placed on human-centered and context-aware design. The focus on responding to user/client needs (M = 4.05, RII = 0.81) and the use of relevant contemporary principles and materials (M = 3.92, RII = 0.78) also ranked highly. Conversely,

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lower levels of perceived importance were associated with strategies such as using elements from traditional architecture in a direct way (M = 3.24, RII = 0.65), contemporary Saudi architecture (M = 3.42, RII = 0.68), and especially using elements of the larger region (e.g., Gulf or Islamic world) (M = 2.99, RII = 0.60), which was ranked last. These rankings suggest that while respondents strongly value environmental and cultural responsiveness, there is relatively less emphasis placed on broader regional references or overt historic replication.

Table 4 Weighted means of architects importance level and RII of the 11 investigated categories.

	Weighted Mean	Std. Deviation	RII	Rank
Respond to site natural and climatic conditions	4.258	1.137	0.85	1
Respond to local culture and values of the region	4.197	1.162	0.84	2
Use elements from traditional architecture of the Kingdom in a direct way	3.242	1.249	0.65	10
Use elements from traditional architecture of the Kingdom in an indirect way	3.848	1.251	0.77	6
Use elements from contemporary Saudi architecture	3.424	1.273	0.68	9
Use of local materials	3.758	1.236	0.75	7
Use relevant local building codes	3.742	1.288	0.75	8
Use elements of the larger region	2.985	1.229	0.60	11
Use relevant contemporary principles, forms, and materials that reflect the spirit of the era	3.924	1.176	0.78	5
Incorporate human design aspects and factors	4.076	1.137	0.82	3
Focus on responding to user/client needs	4.045	1.203	0.81	4

Table 5 presents the results of independent-samples t-tests comparing architects in other organizations and those in academia regarding perceived importance of architectural identity strategies. Academics consistently reported higher mean scores across most categories, with statistically significant differences in overall importance ($p = .007$), responding to local culture and values ($p < .001$), indirect use of traditional architecture ($p = .037$), contemporary Saudi architecture ($p = .014$), use of local materials ($p = .044$), local building codes ($p = .019$), and contemporary principles reflecting the spirit of the era ($p = .008$). No significant differences were observed for site and climate responsiveness, direct traditional references, larger regional elements, human design aspects, or user/client needs. Overall, the findings indicate that academic architects place greater emphasis on culturally and conceptually driven identity strategies than practitioners in other organizations.

Table 5 Results of the independent sample t-test to examine the difference between architects in other organization and architects in academic field respondents regarding their level of importance.

	Mean for Architects in other organizations (N=34)	Mean for Architects in Academic Field (N=28)	Sig. (2-Tailed)
Overall Importance	3.44	4.01	0.007
Respond to site natural and climatic conditions	4.00	4.50	0.090
Respond to local culture and values of the region	3.65	4.71	0.000
Use elements from traditional architecture of the Kingdom in a direct way	2.82	3.21	0.180
Use elements from traditional architecture of the Kingdom in an indirect way	3.52	4.14	0.037
Use elements from contemporary Saudi architecture	3.11	3.78	0.014
Use of local materials	3.47	4.07	0.044
Use relevant local building codes	3.29	4.00	0.019
Use elements of the larger region	2.76	3.07	0.302
Use relevant contemporary principles, forms, and materials that reflect the spirit of the era	3.64	4.42	0.008
Incorporate human design aspects and factors	3.82	4.21	0.160
Focus on responding to user/client needs	3.82	4.00	0.563

Conclusion

The ranking analysis demonstrates a clearly structured hierarchy within the multidimensional framework of regional architectural identity. Environmental responsiveness emerged as the highest-ranked determinant (RII = 0.85, Rank 1), indicating that architects overwhelmingly prioritize climatic and site-specific adaptation as the primary foundation of identity formation. The high weighted mean and strong concentration of "Very Important" responses suggest a broad professional consensus that contextual ecological integration constitutes the most fundamental expression of regional identity. Rather than perceiving identity as a stylistic or symbolic construct, respondents associate it first with environmental performance, site sensitivity, and climate-responsive design strategies.

Closely following environmental responsiveness, cultural integration ranked second (RII = 0.84, Rank 2). Respondents emphasized the importance of aligning architectural design with local values, traditions, and socio-cultural patterns. Notably, statistically significant differences were observed between academic architects and practitioners ($p < .001$), with academics assigning greater importance to cultural responsiveness. This divergence suggests that theoretical exposure and research engagement may strengthen emphasis on cultural continuity as a central identity determinant. Importantly, the prioritization of cultural integration reflects a perception of identity as socio-cultural embeddedness rather than superficial visual replication. Identity, in this context, is interpreted as alignment with behavioral norms, spatial practices, and contextual symbolism rather than ornamental referencing.

A secondary priority cluster emerged around human-centered and functional responsiveness (RII = 0.82–0.81, Ranks 3–4). The categories "incorporate human design aspects and factors" and

"focus on responding to user/client needs" both received high mean values, indicating that experiential quality and usability are strongly associated with regional identity. The inter-item correlation matrix further supports this interpretation, revealing strong positive associations (r up to .79) between user-oriented strategies and other identity dimensions. These findings suggest that architects conceptualize identity not only as contextual or cultural alignment but also as a relational and experiential construct shaped by human comfort, spatial adaptability, and user satisfaction.

Contemporary contextualization ranked fifth (RII = 0.78), with respondents favoring the use of relevant contemporary principles, forms, and materials that reflect the spirit of the era. This result indicates that regional identity is not perceived as static or historically fixed but rather as dynamically negotiated within present-day architectural expression. The preference for contextual modernization over direct historical replication underscores a forward-looking interpretation of identity, wherein architectural authenticity is achieved through adaptation to contemporary conditions rather than preservationist literalism.

A notable contrast emerged between indirect and direct vernacular adaptation. Indirect reinterpretation of traditional architectural elements (RII = 0.77) ranked significantly higher than direct replication (RII = 0.65, Rank 10). This pattern suggests a professional preference for adaptive continuity—reinterpreting traditional principles within modern frameworks—rather than formal historicism or literal stylistic imitation. The comparatively lower ranking of direct traditional replication indicates that overt reproduction of heritage forms is not widely regarded as an effective strategy for reinforcing contemporary regional identity.

Material and regulatory localization (RII = 0.75, Ranks 7–8) occupied a mid-tier position within the hierarchy. The use of local materials and adherence to relevant local building codes were recognized as important but not dominant identity drivers. These findings suggest that such strategies are perceived as supportive or enabling mechanisms that reinforce contextual authenticity, rather than primary generators of identity meaning.

Finally, supra-regional referencing (RII = 0.60, Rank 11) received the lowest importance rating. The limited prioritization of broader Gulf or Islamic regional elements indicates that architects distinguish between localized identity formation and generalized regional symbolism. This suggests that contemporary Saudi architects conceptualize identity as rooted in specific environmental and cultural conditions rather than transnational stylistic markers or pan-regional aesthetic references.

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