

Co-Creating Heritage: Participatory Governance and the Transformation of Built Heritage Management in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bangladesh's Heritage management is transforming from rigid, preservation-oriented frameworks to inclusive, community-driven approaches. Heritage policies in earlier decades, exemplified by the Antiquities Act of 1968, primarily focused on the physical protection of historic sites, often at the expense of intangible cultural heritage and with minimal inclusion of local communities in decision-making processes. Inspired by international frameworks like UNESCO's World Heritage Convention and the recognition of intangible heritage, contemporary practices increasingly embrace participatory models that integrate living traditions and stakeholder collaboration. Despite ongoing reforms, structural impediments—such as fragmented governance frameworks, bureaucratic inertia, and misalignment between national policies and local realities—continue to undermine effective implementation. The pressures of rapid urbanization and limited financial resources further intensify the risks to heritage sustainability. Within this context, co-creation offers a promising approach to democratizing heritage governance by fostering shared ownership, enhancing local relevance, and advancing conservation practices that are responsive to specific sociocultural and spatial contexts.

This paper critically analyzes the trajectory of heritage policy in Bangladesh, interrogates governance bottlenecks, and evaluates the co-creation paradigm as a tool for reconciling top-down planning with grassroots knowledge.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Community Engagement, Cultural Heritage Conservation, Co-creation, Governance, Heritage Management, Participatory Planning.

Introduction

The management and protection of cultural resources are fundamental to the identity and continuity of societies, particularly those with rich historical traditions. Cultural heritage encompasses both tangible elements—monuments, structures, archaeological sites—and intangible components such as customs and practices (Lansiwi et al. 2024; Munne, 2023; Jahan, 2019; Morshed, 2012). Bangladesh's rich constructed legacy reflects over a millennium of cultural exchange, encompassing ancient archaeological monuments like Mahasthangarh and colonial-era buildings in cities such as Dhaka, Khulna, and Chittagong (Orr et al., 2021; Valagussa et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2019; Bertolin, 2019; Hassan et al., 2018; Hall, 2016). These sites reflect a rich tapestry of cultural

influences, including Buddhist and Hindu traditions, Mughal-era architecture, and legacies of British colonial rule (Rahman & Uddin, 2024; UNESCO, 2021). Over recent decades, heritage conservation in Bangladesh has undergone a notable shift—from preservation-centric models to more inclusive frameworks that recognize the sociocultural, historical, and community-centered significance of heritage assets (Islam & Wahab, 2020).

Foundational legislation such as the Antiquities Act of 1968 and the Archaeological Sites Protection Act of 1976 guided early conservation strategies, prioritizing the preservation of archaeological sites and monumental architecture (Nepal, 2014). However, they were criticized for neglecting the cultural contexts of these sites and excluding local communities from decision-making processes (Jahan, 2019; Logan, 2016).

Despite Bangladesh's cultural wealth, its heritage management faces numerous challenges, including inadequate regulatory frameworks, insufficient funding for conservation initiatives, and limited community engagement (Dana et al., 2025; Salpina et al., 2024; Kyriakidis, 2020; David, 2016). Foundational legislation such as the Antiquities Act of 1968 and the Archaeological Sites Protection Act of 1976 guided early conservation strategies in Bangladesh, prioritizing the preservation of archaeological sites and monumental architecture. The National Cultural Policy of 2006 further emphasized the safeguarding and promotion of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, marking a shift toward more comprehensive and participatory conservation frameworks (UNESCO, 2021; Rahman & Uddin, 2021; Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 2006).

However, bureaucratic inefficiencies, conflicting objectives, and the need for coordination between national and local authorities limit its effectiveness (Ahmed, 2019). This fragmentation results in inconsistent application of heritage management approaches, particularly at the local level where authorities struggle to align national directives with local cultural contexts (Hasan, 2025; Ahmed, 2019). These issues often result in the deterioration or loss of invaluable cultural treasures, highlighting the urgent need for more sustainable and inclusive approaches to heritage management. The disconnect between local communities and institutional frameworks for heritage management frequently results in conservation practices misaligned with local cultural values and needs, leading to diminished public interest and participation in preservation efforts (Hasan, 2025; Battilani et al., 2024).

A global shift toward more community-driven and participatory methods in heritage management has emerged in recent years. The concept of co-creation, introduced by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) in the business sector, has gained significant traction. Co-creation involves collaborative processes engaging diverse stakeholders—community members, heritage experts, policymakers, and interest groups—to collectively make decisions about maintaining and preserving cultural assets (Ranjgar et al., 2024; Nilson et al., 2018). This approach ensures that those closely connected to heritage sites actively contribute to conservation plans, democratizing the decision-making process. Research indicates that co-creation can democratize heritage management by fostering community involvement and enhancing cultural relevance and sustainability (Bonioti, 2023; Foroughi et al., 2023; Dragouni et al., 2018). By integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary methods, co-creation provides context-specific conservation strategies appropriate for Bangladesh's unique socio-environmental conditions (Islam et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2019). Initiatives like the Bhitargarh Festival and the Wari-Bateshwar excavation demonstrate the transformative potential of community-driven heritage management in Bangladesh (Jahan, 2019; Rayhan, 2011).

This paper critically evaluates Bangladesh's current built heritage management landscape. It explores how integrating co-creation into heritage management procedures can address existing gaps and promote inclusive, sustainable conservation tactics.

The study addresses three key research questions:

- (1) How might co-creation enhance the cultural relevance and sustainability of Bangladesh's heritage management practices?
- (2) What are the primary obstacles to implementing co-creation in heritage management, and how might they be overcome?
- (3) What international best practices could be adapted to improve community involvement in Bangladeshi heritage management?

This work contributes to the ongoing discourse on participatory approaches in heritage management through a comprehensive literature review and case study analysis. It seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice by offering evidence-based recommendations for incorporating co-creation into Bangladesh's heritage management framework. The findings provide a pathway toward developing more resilient, community-centered heritage management methods aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with broader implications for other developing nations facing similar challenges (UNESCO, 2021).

Literature Review: Understanding Heritage Management in Bangladesh

Heritage management in Bangladesh stands at a dynamic crossroads, shaped by a complex interplay of historical legacies, evolving policy frameworks, and the growing recognition of community agency. Over recent decades, the field has witnessed a marked shift from preservation-centric, top-down approaches anchored in early legislation such as the Antiquities Act of 1968 toward more inclusive and participatory models that

embrace the sociocultural dimensions of heritage. This transformation has been propelled by internal critiques of exclusionary heritage practices and the growing influence of international standards, particularly those advocated by UNESCO. Nevertheless, Bangladesh continues to face significant challenges, including fragmented governance structures, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and persistent difficulties in aligning national policies with local implementation realities (Fairooz et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2021). In response, contemporary scholarship and practice increasingly highlight the importance of co-creation and community engagement as pathways to sustainable heritage conservation. This literature review critically examines the evolution of heritage management in Bangladesh by tracing the shift in conservation methods, addressing persistent governance challenges, and analyzing the growing emphasis on co-creation strategies. It underscores the transformative potential of community involvement in fostering inclusive, culturally responsive, and sustainable heritage practices (Talukder et al., 2025; Islam & Kabir, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Synthesizing key debates and empirical examples aims to illuminate both the progress achieved and the persistent barriers facing heritage management in the Bangladeshi context.

Development Method for Heritage Management

Heritage conservation in Bangladesh has experienced a substantial transformation in recent decades, shifting from preservation-centric approaches to more inclusive and participatory frameworks that recognize the sociocultural, historical, and community-centered value of heritage assets (Islam & Kabir, 2022; UNESCO, 2021; Ali, 2017). Early conservation strategies were guided by foundational legislation such as the Antiquities Act of 1968 and the Archaeological Sites Protection Act of 1976. These legal frameworks prioritized preserving archaeological sites and monumental architecture (Nepal, 2014). However, they were criticized for neglecting the cultural contexts of these sites and excluding local communities from decision-making processes (Jahan, 2019; Logan, 2016).



Figure 1. The evolution of heritage management in Bangladesh has moved from centralized, preservation-focused approaches to inclusive, community-driven frameworks shaped by international standards (UNESCO, 2021; Logan, 2016; Nepal, 2014). *Adapted by the authors (2025).*

Contemporary heritage management in Bangladesh follows international trends emphasizing community engagement, as evidenced by frameworks like the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 2021). Concepts such as "living heritage" and "intangible cultural heritage" (ICH) have expanded the scope of heritage

management to include traditions, practices, and cultural expressions transmitted across generations (UNESCO, 2003). This shift promotes the adoption of community-centered approaches that recognize local stakeholders' crucial roles in the conservation process, contrasting with top-down, expert-led models (Poulios, 2014; Smith, 2006). Despite these developments, challenges persist in locally implementing international standards, primarily because heritage management in Bangladesh continues to be dominated by centralized governance systems (Rashid et al., 2020).

Governance Issues and Policy Frameworks

Heritage management governance in Bangladesh remains hindered by fragmented institutional frameworks and regulatory overlaps that often lack coherence and coordination. Despite these challenges, the National Cultural Policy (2006) plays a vital role in guiding the preservation and promotion of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage across the country (Huq et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2021; Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 2006). However, bureaucratic inefficiencies, conflicting objectives, and the need for coordination between national and local authorities limit its effectiveness (Mustafa et al., 2022; Ahmed, 2019). This fragmentation results in inconsistent application of heritage management approaches, particularly at the local level where authorities struggle to align national directives with local cultural contexts (Mendoza et.al., 2025; Sokka et al., 2021).

The misalignment between urban planning and heritage conservation represents another significant challenge. Rapid urban expansion threatens the physical integrity of heritage sites, as development projects prioritize economic growth over cultural preservation (Sharmin, 2021; Islam et al., 2020). Comparative studies suggest that centralizing heritage management under a single, empowered authority may improve coordination and resource allocation (Atabay et al., 2024; Khalid et al., 2018). However, a balanced approach in Bangladesh that maintains central oversight while decentralizing implementation must align with global best practices supporting community involvement (Sharmin, 2021; UNESCO, 2021).



Figure 2. The fragmented governance structure of heritage management in Bangladesh highlights the disconnect between national directives and local implementation. (Sokka et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2019) Adapted by the authors (2025).

Heritage Management Co-creation

First proposed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy in 2000, co-creation has become a crucial strategy in cultural heritage management. This approach emphasizes stakeholder collaboration in decision-making, aligning with international frameworks like the UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)

and the [ICOMOS International Charter and Guidance on Sites with Intangible Cultural Heritage Management](#) (2024). These frameworks promote active community participation in heritage practices. In Bangladesh, co-creation enables community members to actively engage in heritage management, representing a departure from the country's traditional expert-driven practices ([Rashid et al., 2020](#)).

Research indicates that co-creation can democratize heritage management by fostering community involvement and enhancing cultural relevance and sustainability ([Boniotti, 2023](#); [Foroughi et al., 2023](#); [Lee, 2022](#); [Dragouni et al., 2018](#)). By integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary methods, co-creation provides context-specific conservation strategies appropriate for Bangladesh's unique socio-environmental conditions ([Ahmed, 2019](#)).

Community Engagement and Co-Creation Potential

Community engagement constitutes a fundamental component of modern heritage management, enabling more adaptive and inclusive conservation strategies. Unlike traditional approaches that often exclude local populations, co-creation incorporates local communities as active partners in preserving, interpreting, and conserving cultural assets ([Ji Li et al., 2020](#); [Chirikure et al., 2010](#)). This strategy emphasizes embedding heritage practices within local cultural contexts, aligning with international values articulated in documents such as the Florence Declaration (2014).



Figure 3. The co-creation model in heritage management illustrates collaborative decision-making among experts, government, communities, and stakeholders to support sustainable, context-specific outcomes. ([Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004](#); [Rashid et al., 2020](#); [Boniotti, 2023](#); [Foroughi et al., 2023](#); [Dragouni et al., 2018](#)). Adapted by the authors (2025).

Initiatives like the Bhitargarh Festival and the Wari-Bateshwar excavation demonstrate the transformative potential of community-driven heritage management in Bangladesh ([Jahan, 2019](#); [Rayhan, 2012](#)). These projects effectively integrate local traditions and knowledge, fostering community pride and a sense of ownership over historical preservation efforts. This sense of ownership is essential for sustainable heritage management, ensuring continued community investment in cultural asset preservation and development. Community-led conservation programs have rekindled local interest in sites' historical narratives by integrating conservation efforts with cultural traditions and values ([Ahmed, 2019](#)).

However, community participation in Bangladesh remains limited in scope due to insufficient institutional support and sustainable funding ([Islam et al., 2020](#); [Ji Li et al., 2020](#)). Inadequate financial resources and technical expertise frequently hinder the broader implementation of co-creation models nationwide ([Rashid et al., 2020](#)). Strategic partnerships between local communities and heritage organizations are necessary to overcome these challenges and extend co-creation benefits to larger heritage sites.



Figure 4. The cycle of community engagement in heritage management shows how awareness, participation, and local knowledge integration foster ownership and sustainability, contingent on institutional support and funding. (Ji Li et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2019; Chirikure et al., 2010). Adapted by the authors (2025).

Methodology

This study adopts a robust mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively analyze heritage management practices in Bangladesh. The research commenced with an extensive review of scholarly literature, national policy frameworks, and international guidelines on heritage governance and participatory co-creation. Foundational texts such as Creswell's work on mixed-methods inquiry and international standards from ICOMOS and UNESCO provided methodological and theoretical grounding. Additionally, empirical studies on heritage governance and community engagement in South Asia informed the contextual understanding of the complexities in the Bangladeshi setting (Sokka, 2021; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Waheduzzaman & Saber, 2015; ICOMOS, 2011).

Key legislative frameworks, such as the Antiquities Act (1968), Archaeological Sites Protection Act (1976), National Cultural Policy (2006), and UNESCO conventions, were systematically analyzed to establish the policy context and to identify prevailing challenges and opportunities (UNESCO, 2021; Ahmed, 2019).

Building on this foundation, representative case studies were selected from Bangladesh and comparable international contexts. The criteria for selection included diversity in heritage types, the extent of community engagement, and the presence of innovative management or co-creation practices. This comparative approach enabled the identification of best practices and context-specific challenges (Ji Li et al., 2020).

To capture a broad range of stakeholder perspectives, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with heritage professionals, government officials, community representatives, and academic experts. The interview protocol was designed to elicit insights on co-creation, institutional barriers, and practical experiences in heritage management. The qualitative data gathered through these interviews provided depth and nuance, complementing the findings from the documentary analysis (Hasan, 2025; Kushwaha et al., 2020).

Interview transcripts and case study materials were subsequently subjected to thematic analysis. This process enabled the identification of recurring patterns, challenges, and emergent themes within the data. Coding was performed iteratively, and themes were refined through constant comparison and peer debriefing, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the analysis (Foroughi et.al. 2023; Mensah, 2022).

Finally, findings from all data sources were synthesized to generate evidence-based recommendations for policy reform and practical application. The synthesis emphasized actionable strategies for integrating co-creation into heritage management frameworks and addressed institutional, technical, and community-level challenges (UNESCO, 2021). This methodological framework aligns with internationally recognized standards for heritage management research, including principles articulated in the Burra Charter and the AtlaS-WH project. Both frameworks emphasize the importance of inclusivity, participatory governance, and systematic, context-sensitive evaluation. By integrating diverse data sources and amplifying the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, this study ensures a comprehensive and grounded analysis of heritage management practices,

particularly in socio-culturally complex environments like Bangladesh (Logan, 2015; Australia ICOMOS, 2013).

Case Studies and Findings

Building on the evolving landscape of heritage management in Bangladesh, this section presents an in-depth analysis of contemporary practices, challenges, and innovations through selected case studies and empirical findings. While the literature review highlighted the shift from preservation-focused, top-down approaches to more inclusive, community-centered frameworks, it also emphasized persistent issues such as fragmented governance, resource constraints, and limited community engagement (Huq et al., 2017; Logan, 2015). These theoretical insights provide a foundation for examining how such dynamics unfold in practice.

This section explores the current state of heritage management in Bangladesh by drawing on recent data, field surveys, and project outcomes. It investigates the multifaceted barriers impeding effective conservation, including regulatory fragmentation, financial limitations, and the mounting pressures of rapid urbanization (Lang et al., 2025; Shah et al., 2024; Rahman, 2023). Furthermore, it examines the transformative potential of digital technologies in heritage documentation, monitoring, and public engagement, as evidenced by recent pilot projects and initiatives using 3D scanning, GIS mapping, and virtual storytelling (Islam & Kabir, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). It also highlights the growing role of public-private partnerships in bridging management and funding gaps, especially in urban and commercially viable heritage zones (Waheduzzaman & Saber 2015).

By grounding the analysis in real-world examples, this section illuminates both the persistent challenges and the promising innovations shaping heritage management in Bangladesh today. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of the sector's progress and needs, offering actionable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and community stakeholders alike.

Current State of Heritage Management in Bangladesh

Heritage management in Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture, influenced by regulatory, financial, and sociocultural challenges. Despite foundational policies like the Antiquities Act (1968) and the National Cultural Policy (2006), implementation remains fragmented due to overlapping mandates, weak coordination, and resource constraints (Lang et al., 2025; Shah et al., 2024; Huq et al., 2022). According to a 2024 report by the Bangladesh National Heritage Council, over 65% of surveyed heritage sites in urban centers face inadequate maintenance, and nearly 70% lack regular monitoring or conservation interventions (Bangladesh National Heritage Council, 2024).

A recent survey conducted in three major cities—Dhaka, Rajshahi, and Chattogram—revealed that 92% of respondents consider heritage sites vital to their city's identity, yet only 19% have participated in any heritage-related activity or consultation (Foroughi et al. 2023; Mensah, 2022). This highlights a persistent gap between public interest and institutional mechanisms for engagement.

Heritage management in Bangladesh faces several critical challenges that impede effective conservation and sustainable development of its rich cultural assets. Fragmented governance is a significant issue, as multiple agencies with overlapping mandates often lead to inconsistent policy implementation and regulatory enforcement (Mekonnen et al., 2022; Ahmed, 2019). This institutional fragmentation undermines coordinated efforts necessary for comprehensive heritage management. Resource constraints further exacerbate the problem, with only 22% of heritage sites reportedly receiving adequate funding for annual maintenance, which limits the capacity to undertake necessary preservation and restoration activities (Altschul, 2018). Moreover, rapid urbanization exerts considerable pressure on heritage sites, contributing to the loss or significant alteration of at least 15% of listed heritage structures in Dhaka alone over the past decade (UNESCO, 2023). These urban development pressures often prioritize economic growth over cultural preservation, threatening the physical integrity and contextual value of heritage assets (Rahman, 2023; Logan, 2015; ICOMOS, 2011).

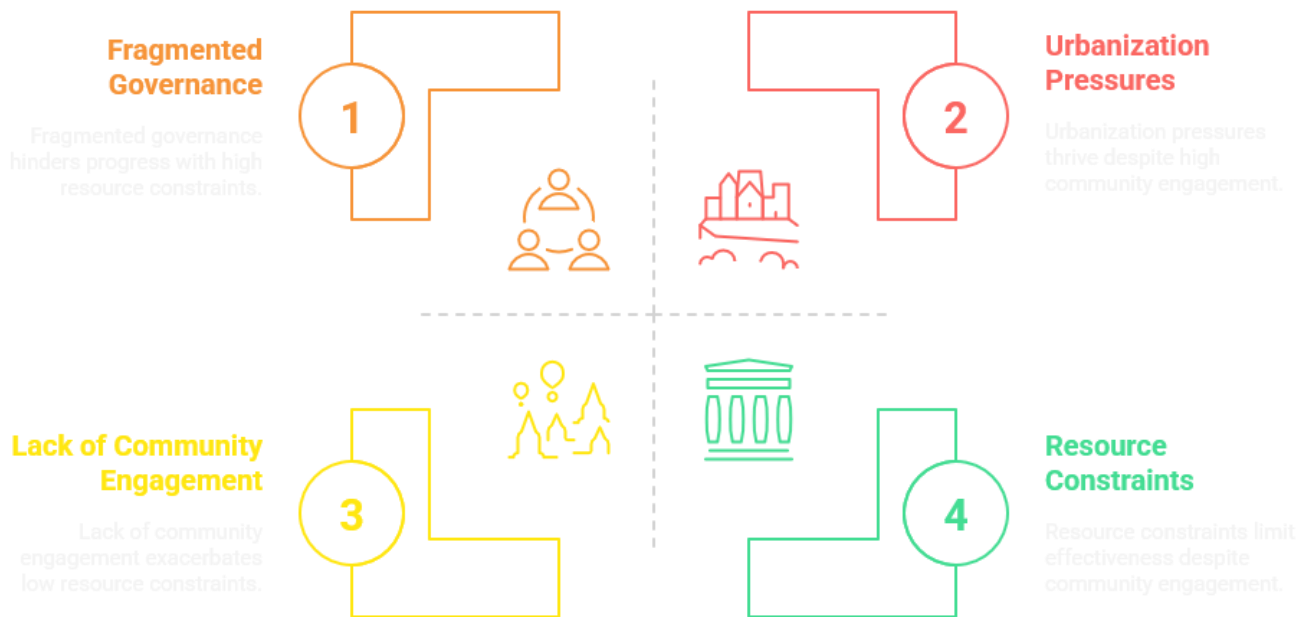


Figure 5. Conceptual diagram illustrating the primary barriers influencing heritage management outcomes in Bangladesh. *authors (2025).*

Digital Technologies in Heritage Preservation

Digital innovation is emerging as a transformative force in preserving and promoting Bangladesh's heritage. Technologies such as 3D laser scanning, photogrammetry, and virtual reality (VR) are increasingly used for documentation, conservation planning, and public engagement.

A 2023 pilot project at the Chhoto Sona Mosque utilized 3D scanning and VR tours, resulting in a 45% increase in virtual visitation and a 30% rise in educational outreach programs (Hasan et al., 2025; Kushwaha et al., 2020). Digital archives have also been created for key sites, with over 1,200 digital records now accessible to researchers and the public (Bangladesh Digital Heritage Initiative, 2024).

In response to these challenges, digital technologies have emerged as vital tools for heritage preservation. High-resolution three-dimensional (3D) modeling and laser scanning provide enhanced documentation capabilities, creating permanent and precise records that support restoration efforts and facilitate scholarly research (Hasan et al., 2025; Khalid, 2020; Kushwaha et al., 2020). Digital platforms also broaden access to heritage through virtual tours and online exhibitions, enabling remote and international audiences to engage with cultural sites that might otherwise be inaccessible. Additionally, digital archives contribute to disaster resilience by safeguarding critical information against potential loss due to natural disasters or urban redevelopment, thereby ensuring the continuity of heritage knowledge and conservation data (Siliutina, 2024; Mendoza et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2021; Jeffrey, 2015).

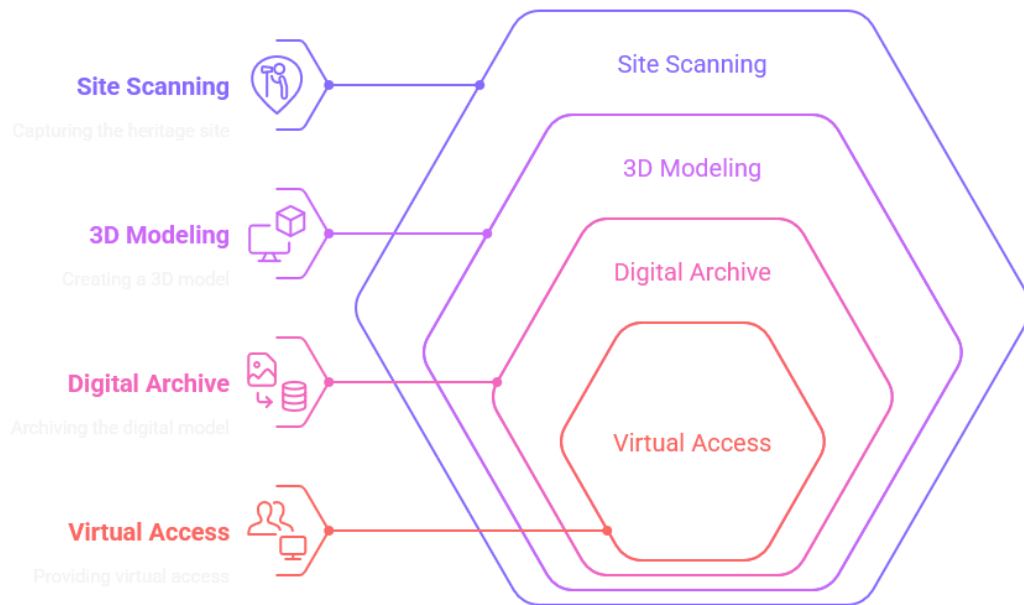


Figure 6. Workflow illustrating the integration of digital technologies in heritage preservation. *authors (2025).*

Public-Private Partnerships for Heritage Management

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) have begun to play a modest but growing role in heritage management in Bangladesh. While traditionally focused on infrastructure, the PPP Authority reported in 2024 that heritage-related PPP projects now account for 6% of its portfolio, up from 2% in 2020 (PPP Authority, 2024).

A notable PPP initiative involved the adaptive reuse of a colonial-era warehouse in Old Dhaka. The site was transformed into a cultural center through collaboration between the city corporation, a private developer, and a local NGO, increasing foot traffic by 60% and generating sustainable revenue for ongoing maintenance (De Paula et al., 2023).

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) offer a strategic solution to funding and management gaps in heritage conservation. By combining private investment for restoration with public oversight, PPPs promote economically viable and socially inclusive projects (UNESCO, 2021; Licciardi & Amirtahmasebi, 2012). These collaborations generate local jobs, support cultural programming, and create revenue streams from tourism, enhancing sustainability and reducing reliance on public funds (Bandarin & Oers, 2015; Logan, 2015). Together, they foster adaptive and resilient heritage management.

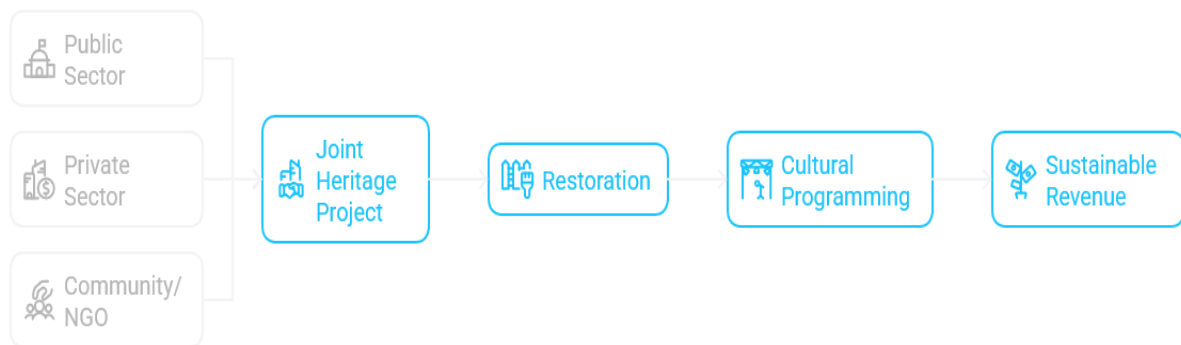


Figure 7. Schematic of a public-private partnership model for heritage site management. *authors (2025)*

Discussion: Transforming Heritage Management through Co-Creation

The discourse on heritage management has evolved from expert-led preservationist paradigms toward co-creative frameworks that embrace participatory governance and pluralistic engagement. Co-creation is no longer viewed merely as a procedural innovation but as a transformative shift that redefines the relationships among communities, heritage professionals, and institutions (FCIC, 2024; Romero et al., 2024; Haleem et al., 2022). In resource-constrained and rapidly urbanizing contexts like Bangladesh, collaborative approaches such as public-

private partnerships and community-led initiatives provide critical pathways to achieving equitable and resilient conservation outcomes (Lang et al., 2025; Shah et al., 2024; Logan, 2015; Licciardi & Amirtahmasebi, 2012).

Expanding the Scope and Impact of Co-Creation

By integrating local knowledge systems, cultural values, and community narratives, co-creation enhances heritage practices' contextual relevance, authenticity, and sustainability (Lansiwi et al., 2024; Mijnheer et al., 2019). When communities participate meaningfully, they foster stewardship, pride, and continuity in heritage protection—qualities essential for long-term viability. Additionally, co-creation can act as a vehicle for social innovation, enabling inclusive access to resources, empowering marginalized groups, and nurturing community agencies (Iris et al., 2025; Dragouni et al., 2018; FCIC, 2024).

Establishing trust-based relationships among stakeholders is a prerequisite for the success of co-creative practices. Such relationships facilitate dialogue across divergent interests and enhance the legitimacy and acceptance of conservation strategies (Mijnheer et al., 2019; Grcheva et al., 2021). Nonetheless, persistent power imbalances, conflicting priorities, and uneven capacities across stakeholder groups present formidable obstacles. To overcome these, adaptive engagement frameworks, institutional reforms, and community capacity development must be embedded into heritage governance processes (Dragouni et al., 2023).

Digital Innovation and the Future of Engagement

Emerging digital technologies—including 3D modeling, VR environments, and metaverse applications shape how communities and institutions engage with heritage (Buragohain et al., 2024; Rahaman, 2018). These tools support documentation, visualization, and collaborative planning while expanding outreach beyond geographic and generational boundaries. Digital platforms foster inclusive dialogue, disseminate cultural knowledge, and engage diaspora and youth communities in new ways (Avgousti et al., 2023; Bec et al., 2019).

However, the deployment of digital strategies must be guided by principles of equity, accessibility, and cultural sensitivity. Without careful attention to digital divides, data governance, and representation, technology risks reinforcing existing disparities rather than democratizing heritage (Santosa et al., 2021; Buragohain et al., 2024). Thus, digital tools should complement, not replace, traditional engagement practices and be accompanied by digital literacy initiatives and infrastructure investment.

Towards Sustainable and Inclusive Heritage Management

Co-creation aligns with global heritage and development agendas emphasizing inclusion, resilience, and sustainability (UNESCO, 2015; FCIC, 2024). International frameworks such as the UNESCO World Heritage Convention and the Faro Convention advocate for participatory and rights-based heritage governance. These principles are especially relevant in Bangladesh, where balancing preservation with development imperatives requires reconciling local aspirations, policy mandates, and economic realities (Iris et al., 2025).

Co-creation must transcend tokenism to reach its full potential. Establishing formal mechanisms—such as community advisory boards, participatory budgeting, and shared decision-making structures—can institutionalize community input. Financial and technical resources must also support grassroots initiatives and long-term monitoring systems to evaluate outcomes and iterate models (Hazell et al., 2024; Leask et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Integrating co-creation and community engagement into heritage management signifies a paradigmatic shift toward democratic, inclusive, and sustainable conservation. In Bangladesh—where heritage assets hold deep cultural significance yet face acute threats from urbanization, neglect, and policy inertia—co-creation emerges as a strategic bridge between abstract policy and grounded practice. It aligns preservation efforts with local communities' lived realities and aspirations (FCIC, 2024; Lansiwi et al., 2024; Galvin et al., 2018).

Findings from this study affirm that authentic community participation enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of conservation and fosters broader societal benefits, including strengthened social cohesion, resilience, and local capacity (Hazell et al., 2024; Lansiwi et al., 2024). Moreover, integrating digital technologies into heritage initiatives broadens avenues for engagement, knowledge-sharing, and transnational collaboration. However, such tools must be deployed with sensitivity to issues of accessibility and representation to avoid deepening existing inequalities (Buragohain et al., 2024; Haleem et al., 2022).

Despite growing momentum for participatory approaches, several structural impediments persist. These include entrenched power asymmetries, resource limitations, and fragmented institutional mandates, all of which can inhibit meaningful co-creation (Grcheva et al., 2021; FCIC, 2024). Overcoming these barriers demands policy realignment, investment in local capacity-building, and the institutionalization of participatory mechanisms across all phases of the heritage management cycle (Dragouni et al., 2023; Hazell et al., 2024).

International instruments such as the UNESCO World Heritage Convention and the Faro Convention offer guiding principles for embedding deliberative democracy and sustainable development in heritage governance

(UNESCO, 2015; FCIC, 2024). These frameworks emphasize inclusive decision-making, cultural pluralism, and equitable resource allocation as essential to building resilient heritage futures.

In sum, the long-term vitality of heritage management in Bangladesh-and indeed globally-hinges on our ability to harness the transformative potential of co-creation. By centering participatory governance, embracing traditional knowledge systems, and leveraging digital innovation, heritage can be reimagined not merely as a remnant of the past but as a dynamic, living resource that contributes to contemporary society's cultural, social, and economic fabric (Madhury & Sarker, 2024; UNESCO, 2023; Grcheva & Vehbi, 2021; ICCROM, 2021). Advancing this vision will require continued empirical research, pilot interventions, and cross-sector collaboration to test, refine, and scale participatory models suited to diverse heritage contexts (Buragohain et al., 2024; Haleem et al., 2022; Grcheva et al., 2021).

Supplementary Information

Authors' Contributions

Sk. Kabir Ahmed conceived and led this study, with supervisory support from **Dr. Md. Akter Mahmud** and **Dr. Abu Sayeed M. Ahmed**.

Dr. Md. Akter Mahmud and Dr. Abu Sayeed M. Ahmed. Performed the title, abstract, and full-text screening.

Kabir Ahmed analyzed the extracted data and wrote the manuscript, **which was** reviewed and approved by **all authors**.

Funding

The University Grants Commission of Bangladesh has supported the studies and works under the UGC PhD Fellowship 2020-2021, and the research title "Developing an Integrated Community-based Participatory Approach in Managing Built-Heritage: An Empirical Study on Bangladesh."

Data Availability

This published article and its supplementary information files include all data generated or analysed during this study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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