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Defining Old Cities: Guardians of Architectural Heritage and Collective Memory

تعريف المدن القديمة: حُماة الإرث المعماري والذاكرة الجماعية

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Old cities, Architectural identity, Spirit of place, Historical continuity, Urban resilience, Collective memory, Urban nostalgia.

ABSTRACT

Old cities represent architectural heritage and collective memory, shaped by centuries of gradual evolution. While research often focuses on physical preservation, limited studies explore how old cities maintain cultural and socioeconomic relevance in modern contexts. This study addresses the gap by defining old cities in architectural and urban planning terms and investigating their value in a modernizing world. Using a mixed-method approach, including a literature review and expert surveys, the research identifies key attributes of old cities: historical continuity, cultural significance, and socioeconomic resilience. These elements are essential to their identity and relevance. To qualify as an old city, a settlement must preserve its physical and cultural essence over time, with urban fabric tied to collective memory and a distinct "spirit of place." Settlements lacking these traits cannot be considered old cities. The findings contribute to sustainable urban development by emphasizing the importance of preserving old cities' unique identities.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الملخص

المدن القديمة، الهوية المعمارية، روح المكان، الاستمرارية التاريخية، المرونة الحضرية، الذاكرة الجماعية، الحنين الحضري.

المدن القديمة تمثل إرثاً معمارياً وذاكرة جماعية تشكلت عبر قرون من التطور التدريجي. رغم أن الأبحاث تركز غالباً على الحفاظ المادي، إلا أن الدراسات التي تتناول استمرارية المدن القديمة ثقافياً واقتصادياً في السياق الحديث محدودة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى سد هذه الفجوة من خلال تعريف المدن القديمة من منظور العمارة والتخطيط الحضري ودراسة قيمتها في عالم متغير. باستخدام نهج متعدد الأساليب، يشمل مراجعة أدبية واستطلاعات خبراء، تكشف الدراسة عن السمات الرئيسية للمدن القديمة: الاستمرارية التاريخية، الأهمية الثقافية، والمرونة الاجتماعية والاقتصادية، وهي عناصر أساسية لهويتها. لتصنيف مدينة كقديمة، يجب أن تحافظ على جوهرها المادي والثقافي بمرور الوقت، وأن تكون نسيجها الحضري متجذراً في الذاكرة الجماعية و"روح المكان". المستوطنات التي تغتفر إلى هذه الخصائص لا يمكن اعتبارها مدنًا قديمة. تسهم النتائج في تطوير حضري مستدام، مشددة على أهمية الحفاظ على هوية المدن القديمة الفريدة في ظل الضغوط العالمية للحضر.

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1. Introduction:

Old cities have long captivated scholars, reflecting rich tapestries of history, architecture, culture, and urban development (Fisher and Creekmore, 2014; Ali, 2024). Their appeal lies in their significant role in societal structures, architectural innovation, and their contributions to urban development (Al-Hinkawi and Ramdan, 2015; Lindenmayer and Laurance, 2017; Ali et al., 2023; Zagroba, 2023). Moreover, unlike modern cities and future city theories, which often prioritize rapid growth and innovation, old cities evolve gradually, preserving the physical and cultural imprints left by generations of inhabitants (Gaudėšius, 2015; Michelson et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021; Kahachi, 2022; Husaen A.H. Kahachi, Abreu and Ehsan, 2024; Husaen A H Kahachi, Abreu and Ehsan, 2024). This gradual organic evolution fosters a deep-rooted historical and cultural identity, distinguishing them from rapidly modernizing urban environments. This is especially important as in a fast-developing world driven by economic pressures and technological advancements, their value extends beyond their architectural aesthetics. They provide distinct urban experiences rooted in historical continuity and tradition (Gaudėšius, 2015; Mateusz, 2016; Husaen Ali Hasan Kahachi, 2020; Kahachi, Ali and Al-Hinkawi, 2022; Husaen A H Kahachi, Abreu and Ehsan, 2024). Cities such as Venice and Marrakesh have preserved their historical layouts, allowing residents and visitors to experience a tangible connection to the past. They draw millions of tourists who seek authentic and traditional urban experiences (Zagroba and Gawryluk, 2017; BOZKURT and DURMUŞLAR, 2020; Zagroba, 2023). This fosters a sense of belonging often absent in rapidly modernizing cities (Mihelič and Pollak, 2010; Paszkowski, Kołowiecka and Kuśmierk, 2023). In addition to cultural value, historical authenticity enhances their competitiveness in the global urban landscape (BOZKURT and DURMUŞLAR, 2020; Ali et al., 2023; Zagroba, 2023). The preservation of old cities' architectural and urban planning characteristics remains crucial in an era where homogenization and modernization threaten to erase historical diversity (TarekAbouOuf and Abeer Makram, 2019). The essence of an old city—its physical and cultural continuity—represents an invaluable asset, not only for maintaining its identity but also for ensuring its relevance in the modern era (Said et al., 2013; Al-Hinkawi and Al-Saadawi, 2019; Almousawi, Al-Hinkawi and Al-Askary, 2022). As sustainability and cultural preservation gain attention, old cities exemplify how to integrate historical preservation with contemporary needs (Smith et al., 2021).

Understanding what defines an old city is not just an academic pursuit but a pressing concern for urban planners and policymakers aiming to balance progress with preservation. Globally, Old cities struggle to modernize while safeguarding their heritage (Karimi, 1998; Said et al., 2013; Lafta Farhan, Abbass Jasim and Naji, 2016). For example, Venice struggles with over-tourism and rising sea levels that threaten its historic structures and communities (van der Borg, Costa and Gotti, 1996; Buffel, Phillipson and Scharf, 2012). In Asia, rapid urbanization in cities like Beijing has led to the destruction of traditional hutong neighbourhoods, eroding the city's cultural and historical identity (Haw, 2007; Logan, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). In the Middle East, cities like Baghdad and Cairo grapple with balancing modern development and heritage preservation (Sayed et al., 2013; Rasheed, Rasheed and Rahma, 2023). Similarly, in Latin America, Cusco contends with the pressures of tourism and urban growth while maintaining its heritage (Bassols i Gardella et al., 2024; Santos, 2024). While much has been written about the physical aspects of old cities, less attention has been given to understanding the broader range of factors that contribute to their unique identity and importance. The complex interplay of historical, cultural, socioeconomic, and community factors in shaping their identity remains underexplored.

This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive understanding of the defining factors that contribute to the architectural and urban planning identity of old cities. Using a mixed-method approach that synthesizes existing literature and surveys expert opinions in architecture and urban planning, this research aims to identify the core characteristics that make old cities unique and examines how these characteristics serve as invaluable assets in a rapidly modernizing world.

Understanding the defining characteristics of old cities is essential not only for preserving historical and cultural heritage but also for ensuring their survival and relevance in an ever-changing world. As they continue to modernize, many old cities risk losing their unique identity as uniformity and disconnection from historical roots become widespread. Conversely, Old cities present a model of integration, combining well-preserved architecture, urban layouts, cultural landmarks, and modern life. Researching the factors that contribute to this uniqueness is crucial for several reasons. First, it enables the development of more effective preservation and management strategies that respect both historical integrity and contemporary

needs. This is particularly relevant in the context of tourism and urban growth, where modern infrastructure can conflict with the preservation of heritage sites (Akram, Ismail and Franco, 2016; Hmood and DİŞLİ, 2019; Towoliu, Sangari and Permana, 2022). Second, identifying the core characteristics of old cities provides valuable insights for urban planners and policymakers, helping to create more sustainable and resilient cities by learning from historical precedents (Al-Hinkawi and Al-Saadawi, 2019; Wang et al., 2020, 2023). For instance, in cities such as Rome and Kyoto, the preservation of historical identity has proven to be a major asset, attracting tourism and investment while offering both cultural value and economic opportunity (van der Borg, Costa and Gotti, 1996; Nowacki, 2019). Similarly, in cities that have faced conflict or rapid modernization—such as those in parts of the Middle East or Latin America—understanding how old cities can retain their identity while adapting to modern pressures is crucial for balancing progress with heritage preservation (Kahachi, 2017; Hussein, Abdulla and Salih, 2019; H.A.H. Kahachi, 2020; Towoliu, Sangari and Permana, 2022; Dawood, Amer and Alkinani, 2023).

Ultimately, this research seeks to fill a critical gap in the literature by offering a comprehensive definition of old cities within the context of architectural and urban planning. It also underscores the importance of preserving the unique identity of old cities as their greatest strength, ensuring that these cities can continue to thrive in a fast-developing world and serve as models of sustainable urban development.

2. Research Methodology:

The primary objective of this research is to define old cities within the context of architecture and urban planning, identifying the characteristics that contribute to their uniqueness and outlining how these features serve as assets in the modern, fast-developing world. The study investigates the source of old cities' perceived image and identity, ensuring their architectural preservation and relevance in modern urban planning. To achieve this, the research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The first phase of the research is a narrative literature review that begins with the linguistic definitions of "old" and "city" as outlined in both English and Arabic dictionaries. This establishes a foundational understanding of the terms before progressing to more practical and academic definitions from the fields of architecture, urban planning, and design. The literature review synthesizes key scholarly sources that discuss the characteristics of old cities, their evolution, and their significance in shaping urban identity and continuity. By exploring diverse perspectives on how old cities are defined and perceived, this phase sets the groundwork for the subsequent empirical analysis.

The second phase involves a survey of experts in architecture, heritage preservation, urban planning, and urban design. Surveys, conducted both on paper and electronically, gathered insights from a diverse group of experts, validating and expanding the literature review findings. Participants were asked to evaluate the defining characteristics of old cities and to provide their opinions on the factors that contribute to their uniqueness and identity in a modern urban context. A total of 13 experts responded to the survey, providing valuable insights into the complex interplay of architectural, cultural, and socioeconomic factors that shape old cities. As illustrated in Table 1, these experts, with experience of 1-30 years, represented diverse professional fields—architecture, urban design, urban planning, and heritage conservation—and from different countries, including Algeria, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, China, Egypt, France, Iraq, Pakistan, the UAE, the UK, and the USA. This diversity ensured a broader perspective and minimized potential bias stemming from a limited geographical focus.

Table 1. Demographics and Expertise of Survey Respondents (Source: Authors).

Respondent	Country of Residence	Professional Title	Field of Expertise	Years of Experience
Expert 1	Belgium	Architect	Architecture, urban design	1
Expert 2	Egypt	Architect	Architecture	10
Expert 3	Algeria	Lecturer	Architecture, urban planning, heritage conservation	10
Expert 4	Iraq	Professor	Urban design	>20
Expert 5	Iraq	Professor	Urban planning, Heritage conservation	30
Expert 6	United States	Senior Urban Planner	Urban Planning, Historical Preservation	18
Expert 7	China	Professor of Architecture	Architecture	22
Expert 8	Brazil	Senior Urban Designer	Historic Preservation	7
Expert 9	France	Researcher	Urban planning	4

Respondent	Country of Residence	Professional Title	Field of Expertise	Years of Experience
Expert 10	Pakistan	Planner	Urban Planning and Design	12
Expert 11	Australia	Architect	Heritage Preservation	8
Expert 12	United Kingdom	Executive Manager	Urban Planning Regeneration	24
Expert 13	United Arab of Emirates	Researcher	Islamic Art and Architecture	5

While this methodology offers comprehensive exploration, potential limitations include the subjectivity of narrative reviews, as they depend on literature interpretation. To counteract this, a wide range of regional and temporal sources was included to ensure balance. The expert survey, while valuable, also has limitations related to sample size and potential regional biases. Efforts were made to include experts from a variety of geographical backgrounds to provide a broader understanding of the defining characteristics of old cities across different cultural contexts. Further studies involving larger samples could enhance these findings' robustness. Finally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for bias. However, the triangulation of survey responses with the literature review helps to validate and contextualize the findings. By combining the theoretical insights from the literature review with empirical data from expert surveys, this mixed-methods approach provides a robust and nuanced definition of old cities. This methodology ensures that the research not only defines old cities linguistically and academically but also offers practical insights that can guide urban planners and policymakers in the preservation and adaptation of these cities in modern times.

3. Defining Old Cities:

The term "old city" or "المدينة القديمة" plays a fundamental role in discussions of architectural heritage and urban development, making it essential to begin with a linguistic definition to clarify its meaning in both English and Arabic. By examining the words "old" or "قديمة" and "city" or "المدينة," we gain insight into the cultural and historical significance embedded in the term. Understanding these linguistic foundations is crucial for our research, as it allows us to explore how the concept of "old city" has evolved and how it informs urban planning, architecture, and historical preservation.

In English, the word "old" is defined consistently across major dictionaries. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University, no date), "old" refers to something "having existed for a long time; not new or recent", highlighting its association with the passage of time and historical significance. Similarly, the Cambridge English Dictionary (University of Cambridge, no date) defines it as "having lived or existed for many years," emphasizing longevity. The Arabic term قديمة, as defined by Lisan al-Arab, shares these connotations but emphasizes historical endurance and generational transmission (Ibn-Manzur, no date) Al-Munjid (Abū 'Amr, no date), further associates it with tradition and resilience. Both languages highlight the element of time and the reverence for continuity, though Arabic definitions often evoke a deeper sense of cultural respect for the past.

The word "city" is likewise defined similarly in English and Arabic, though with some cultural nuances. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University, no date), a city is "a large town, typically one with a cathedral, university, or municipal government," with an emphasis on size and governance. The Cambridge English Dictionary (University of Cambridge, no date) adds that a city is "a large town with its own local government," focusing on its administrative role. Similarly, In Arabic, "المدينة" (Al-madina) signifies an organized urban settlement (Ibn-Manzur, no date) with stronger ties to governance and societal order, rooted in "دين" (deen), meaning law or governance. While both languages agree on the city's role as a hub of culture and governance, the Arabic definitions bring forth a deeper connection to social structure and collective responsibility.

When combining these terms, the definition of "old city" or المدينة القديمة becomes more complex, integrating age, history, and urban significance. In English, an "Old City" refers to the "historic core of a city, often preserved for its architectural and cultural significance," according to the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University, no date). The Cambridge English Dictionary (University of Cambridge, no

date) similarly describes it as the "oldest part of a city, typically preserved as a heritage site." In Arabic, المدينة القديمة is defined by Al-Munjid (Abū ‘Amr, no date) as "the original part of the city that has retained its historical and cultural essence" and Lisan al-Arab (Ibn-Manzur, no date) further highlights the importance of روح المكان ("spirit of place"), which connects the city's physical structures to the collective memory of its inhabitants. In comparison, both definitions underscore the importance of preservation, Arabic places a particular emphasis on intangible cultural connections that shape identity.

Thus, an Old City (المدينة القديمة) can be linguistically defined as "the historical centre of an urban area that has preserved its architectural, cultural, and physical identity over centuries." In both English and Arabic, these cities are recognized for their historical continuity and cultural significance, but Arabic emphasizes the importance of the "spirit of place" (روح المكان)—the deep, emotional connection between the city's spaces and its people. These cities have typically existed for at least several centuries and are characterized by preserved landmarks, historical street layouts, and a cultural atmosphere that reflects their historical essence. This linguistic analysis lays the groundwork for a practical definition, where these historical and cultural characteristics become essential for understanding how old cities serve as models for sustainable urban development.

In the fields of architecture and urban planning, old cities, with their rich histories and unique characteristics, hold a special place in the urban landscape. The term "old city" can have different interpretations based on the scale of the urban area, age, activities, and the unique characteristics of its built environment, as well as the values, attitudes, planning and management strategies associated with it (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000a; Li-cha, 2009; Qiu, 2020). An old city, sometimes known as a historical city or an old town, generally refers to a city that has historical significance and contains resilient urban forms from the past that have adapted and survived into the present (Gyurkovich, 2016; Sharma, 2017; Smith and Lobo, 2019). These cities not only serve as tangible reminders of our past but also as living examples of how urban environments can adapt to the changing needs of their inhabitants while preserving their cultural and architectural integrity (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000b; Griffin Shea, 2019; Smith and Lobo, 2019). The continued relevance of these cities today highlights the resilience of their urban forms and the enduring significance of their historical and cultural heritage. To fully understand what makes these cities unique, it is essential to delve deeper into the defining characteristics that set them apart in terms of architecture, urban design, and planning. By examining these characteristics, it is possible to uncover the elements that have enabled old cities to maintain their identity and relevance in the modern world, offering valuable lessons for sustainable urban development. The following section explores these key defining characteristics in the context of architecture, urban design, and urban planning.

4. Old City Characteristics in The Architecture and Urban Planning Context:

Previous research in the field of architecture and urban planning has always emphasized the importance and unique characteristics of old cities. Zhang (Zhang, Yan and Liu, 2019) highlights the significance of maintaining the urban context in old city renewal, ensuring the continuation of its explicit historical and cultural essence. Similarly, Enmao (Qiao et al., 2020) stresses the importance of safeguarding ancient buildings, which embody the spirit of civilization and cultural heritage. These cities strongly represent people's roots and culture, serving as a foundation for self-awareness, identity, and collective memory. Farhan (Farhan et al., 2021) highlight the conservation of historical buildings as vital for preserving cultural heritage and maintaining the urban landscape. He suggests leveraging global studies to enhance awareness of modern urban planning techniques, especially for heritage revitalization. Özaslan (Özaslan, 1995) adds that the historic urban fabric can inspire contemporary city form, emphasizing the need to understand its architectural values and qualities. He further asserts that future urban evolution depends on improving awareness of traditional architectural assets. Finally, some researchers even went beyond to suggest the need to revive old cities. Zhu Tianxin explores the concept of making a living historical city to revive the themes of heritage and memory (Møller-Olsen, 2021). Hence, in the context of architecture, urban design, and planning, old cities exhibit a set of unique characteristics that differentiate them from modern counterparts. These characteristics, rooted in historical continuity, cultural significance, and socioeconomic factors, contribute to the resilience and enduring identity of these cities. Drawing from

established theories in urban studies and planning, the following subsections explore the defining features of old cities and their relevance to contemporary urban discourse.

4.1. Historical Continuity and Preservation:

- **Architecture and Urban Fabric:** One of the defining characteristics of old cities is the preservation of historic buildings and urban fabric. As Lynch (Lynch, 1964) emphasizes in *The Image of the City*, a city's identity is largely shaped by its landmarks, monuments, and historic structures. These buildings act as physical manifestations of the city's historical timeline, contributing to its unique identity. For instance, cities like Rome and Cairo boast centuries-old architectural elements that remain functional in modern urban life, preserving a profound connection to the past (Lynch, 1964).
- **Urban Layout:** Old cities are often characterized by irregular street patterns, which evolved organically over time, adapting to topography, social needs, and historical circumstances (Mumford, 1961). These organic layouts, such as narrow, winding streets in cities like Florence or Fez, contrast with the geometric patterns of many modern cities (Akbar, 1988). Exceptions do exist, such as Beijing, which followed a rigid, grid-like plan even as an old city (Steinhardt, 1990).
- **Sense of Place (Genius Loci):** The concept of "genius loci," or "spirit of place," as developed by Norberg-Schulz (Norberg-Schulz, 1980), describes how a city's atmosphere is rooted in its built environment and its relationship with its inhabitants. Old cities embody this sense of place through their architectural forms, public spaces, and cultural traditions, creating a powerful emotional and cultural connection between people and their urban environment.

4.2. Cultural Significance and Collective Memory:

- **Cultural Landmarks:** Old cities often house significant cultural sites—religious institutions, markets, and civic spaces—that are integral to the city's identity (Zukin, 1995). Landmarks like Jerusalem's sacred sites or Istanbul's monuments symbolize collective memory, encapsulating the city's historical and cultural narratives (Said, 1978).
- **Collective Memory:** As scholars note, collective memory is deeply embedded in the physical and social fabric of old cities. Buildings and urban spaces act as repositories of shared historical experiences. This cultural resonance differentiates old cities from modern urban developments, where architectural homogeneity often severs connections to historical narratives (Halbwachs, 1992).

4.3. Adaptation to Local Climate and Geography:

- **Climate-responsive Design:** Old cities reflect a deep understanding of local environmental conditions. Rapoport (Rapoport, 1969) highlights that their architecture, with features like thick walls, small windows, and shaded courtyards, effectively mitigated harsh climates. Marrakesh's narrow streets shield inhabitants from the desert sun, while Venice's canals exemplify adaptation to watery terrain.
- **Integration with Natural Topography:** The integration of natural features, such as hills or rivers, into the urban fabric of old cities demonstrates respect for geography, often absent in modern planning (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Additionally, old cities are known for their traditional style and use of locally available materials (Sharma, 2017). Examples include Athens and Lisbon, where topography influenced urban layouts, providing defensive advantages and aesthetic harmony.

4.4. Socioeconomic Factors and Community Engagement:

- **Mixed-use Urbanism:** Unlike modern cities, which often segregate residential, commercial, and industrial zones, old cities traditionally featured mixed-use development. Jane Jacobs (Jacobs, 1961) argued that the vitality of old cities stems from this organic mixing of uses, fostering vibrant, walkable communities. Cities like Florence and Cairo exemplify this with marketplaces, homes, and religious institutions seamlessly interwoven.
- **Community-oriented Spaces:** Public squares, courtyards, and marketplaces in old cities functioned not only as economic hubs but also as social spaces where community life thrived. This contrasts with many modern developments that prioritize efficiency over social interaction (Tuan, 1977).

4.5. Resilience and Flexibility:

- **Adaptability to Change:** Old cities have shown remarkable adaptability and demonstrated an ability to adapt to changing circumstances while retaining their essential character. As noted by scholars like Berman (Marshall Berman, 1983), these cities have been repurposed over time to meet modern needs, often incorporating modern functions without erasing their historical identity. This resilience allows them to remain relevant in rapidly changing times.
- **Sustainability Practices:** Old cities offer valuable lessons in sustainable urban development. An old city's spatial structure and economic growth is a dynamic product of the interaction between forces that change the built fabric and those that retain it (Karimi, 1998; Mihelič and Pollak, 2010; Said et al., 2013). Moreover, their compact, walkable layouts and reliance on local materials for construction exemplify a form of urbanism that naturally limits environmental impact (Rapoport, 1969).

The architectural, cultural, and socioeconomic attributes of old cities demonstrate their enduring relevance. These characteristics position them as powerful examples of sustainable urban development while preserving their historical and cultural essence.

5. Old Cities' Process of Uniqueness and Identity:

Building upon the architectural and urban planning characteristics discussed earlier, the uniqueness and identity of old cities go beyond physical structures; they are deeply intertwined with the culture, memory, and evolution of the people who inhabit them. Old cities serve as living archives of history and architecture, reflecting both physical evolution and intangible collective memory. Their urban fabric serves as a historical text, reflecting the thoughts, beliefs, and aspirations of successive generations. From ancient cave dwellers expressing their uniqueness through drawings and shapes to modern societies constructing architectural systems, the city has always been a canvas where humans leave their mark and assert their identity (Rawes, 2007; Aaltonen, 2014).

The essence of an old city is not just rooted in its physical form but in its ability to evoke a sense of belonging and connection. The urban fabric of such cities offers a collective memory and societal identity that distinguishes one society from another yet connects them through shared human experiences (Anastasio et al., 2012). This deep emotional bond, often referred to as the city's "spirit," arises from layers of cultural and historical identity. This "spirit" is not merely an aesthetic feature but a combination of cultural and historical layers reflected in the city's buildings, landmarks, and social fabric (Yeh, Chen and Liu, 2012; Garcia, Vandesande and van Balen, 2018). Similarly, since humans are inherently social beings who connect with those around them within an inclusive urban fabric, old cities foster societal characteristics that blend individuality with shared memory. These spiritual and cultural aspects are critical in creating a sense of belonging and shared identity, making old cities powerful vessels of collective memory through the intersection of nostalgia and place attachment (Garcia, Vandesande and van Balen, 2018; Amer Shaker Al-Kanani and Taqa Raad Jawad, 2024).

One of the defining characteristics of old cities is their connection to spiritual and cultural activities, often deeply ingrained in their daily life and urban systems. These cities have developed strong internal systems that reflect both tangible aspects—such as architecture and landmarks—and intangible aspects—like traditions, economic activities, and social practices. The cultural and emotional ties of old cities, often described through concepts like "place attachment" and "collective memory," provide a rich source of identity and uniqueness that is difficult to replicate in modern urban settings (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000a; Muneef ShamsAldeen and Mohammed Salam Almadhaji, 2015; Sharma, 2017; Rasheed and Abdel Hamza, 2018; Ishraq Azziz, 2021). Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory¹ emphasizes how urban spaces can act as vessels for shared memory, reinforcing the collective identity of the people who inhabit them (Hirst and Manier, 2008; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy, 2011; Roediger and Abel, 2015). According to Halbwachs, collective memory can be constructed, shared, and transmitted among human groups of various sizes, including nations, states, urban and rural communities, successive generations, and

¹ The concept of collective memory differs from history in that history aims to collect and describe past events in a clear, precise, and unbiased manner, which may include depictions and comparisons from different perspectives and how they intertwine with other surrounding historical details. On the other hand, the concept of collective memory focuses on a unified, shared vision of events by a specific human group concerning past events, elements, and ideas, and is usually biased towards this group and their perspectives. Both go through different temporal stages, but for the former, only some events are remembered while others are forgotten, whereas for the latter, the transmission of events is complete and without bias.

more (Roediger and Abel, 2015). Moreover, collective memory is formed around multiple elements, including, for example, the memory of leaders and prevailing governance, images and visual elements, architecture, texts, sayings and proverbs, values and norms, events and changes, among others (Wertsch and Roediger, 2008; Anastasio et al., 2012; Roediger and Abel, 2015; Johnson, 2018). This connection, in turn, influences not only how old cities are perceived but also how they are preserved and managed.

As discussed, collective memory is integral to the experience of an old city. It transcends individual memories, encapsulating the shared stories, traditions, and heritage of the entire community. This collective identity is reinforced through the physical spaces of old cities, which act as anchors for memory, history, and culture (Roediger and Abel, 2015; Johnson, 2018). This unique ability of old cities to embody a collective memory contributes significantly to their continued relevance and emotional resonance for both residents and visitors. The interplay between a city's architectural features and its role as a custodian of cultural heritage creates an inseparable bond that preserves the city's identity and fosters a sense of continuity with the past (Murqas, 2009; Iraqi Ministry of Construction and Housing, 2017). Hence, it is a complex process in which the past interacts with the present for the future (Murqas, 2009). These feelings can influence attitudes towards urban development, preservation efforts, and community engagement (Yeh, Chen and Liu, 2012; Meeus, Devos and De Blust, 2016; Garcia, Vandesande and van Balen, 2018). The architect and planner Geoffrey Allan Jellicoe states, "Architecture is to make us know and remember who we are", and architect Walter Gropius says, "Architecture begins where engineering ends" (Blessner and Salter, 2009). Although the development of an old city may lag, resulting in challenges like decreased competitiveness, services, resources, and population (LI Maicha, 2011), the unique blend of historical importance, cultural heritage, and emotional significance makes old cities invaluable components of our urban environments.

In summary, the old city's urban fabric and elements serve as triggers to activate the collective memory of citizens, regardless of their differences, and to engage them as citizens in achieving and renewing what is known as their "Civic Identity" within the trajectory of societal development. It also contributes to unifying them as a collective, rather than leaving them as individuals, each with their own nostalgic (emotional) memory that separates them from others, thereby reducing division and fragmentation. It belongs to both the rich and the poor and is the only entity capable of reflecting the shared perception and sense of partnership among citizens (the recognition of meaning) that they live in one nation and society and that their collective movement in the public sphere signifies achieving progress. Hence, they represent the source of the old city's uniqueness when triggered. The absence of a vibrant collective memory that reflects the real movement of society at a particular historical moment leads some to reduce history to individuals and several achievements.

6. Experts Survey Results and Discussion:

To refine the definition of old cities and identify the source of their uniqueness, a comprehensive survey was conducted among thirteen experts in architecture, urban planning, and urban design. This survey aimed not only to gather insights into the defining characteristics and identity of old cities but also to validate the theoretical framework developed through the literature review. By providing empirical data, it sought to elucidate the interplay of architectural, cultural, and socioeconomic factors that shape the essence of old cities. The questions were meticulously designed to explore diverse dimensions, including historical significance, architectural preservation, and socioeconomic resilience, which are often interdependent and reflective of broader urban dynamics.

The survey posed thirteen questions to examine critical aspects such as the minimum age required for a city to be considered "old," the significance of continuous habitation, and the necessity of preserving original urban layouts and architectural features. The survey also sought to rank essential characteristics—historical continuity, socioeconomic factors, cultural significance, resilience, and climate adaptation—while addressing the intangible aspects of identity, such as the "spirit of place" and the role of collective memory. Furthermore, it delved into the challenges of balancing heritage preservation with modernization and explored successful and failed examples to identify best practices and common pitfalls.

Q1: Minimum Age:

The wide range of expert opinions on the minimum age of an old city—spanning from 200 to 1000 years—reflects the contextual nature of urban history. The variation underscores the influence of regional development patterns and cultural priorities. For instance, cities with deep historical layers, such as those in the Middle East or South Asia, often require longer periods (e.g., 900–1000 years) to accumulate the depth of heritage that qualifies them as "old." Conversely, urban settlements in relatively younger regions may exhibit significant historical value within a shorter timeframe (200–300 years). This finding highlights the need for a flexible framework in defining old cities, one that accommodates regional and cultural variability while maintaining a global perspective on historical significance.

Q2: Continuous Habitation:

While the desirability of continuous habitation was strongly emphasized, some experts acknowledged that well-preserved, long-vacant urban areas could still qualify as old cities if their original urban and architectural fabric remained intact. This nuance introduces an important distinction: continuous habitation is a powerful contributor to cultural continuity and socioeconomic vitality but may not be indispensable for maintaining the structural and symbolic essence of an old city. This finding suggests that adaptive reuse of abandoned but historically significant urban spaces can revitalize their identity and relevance in contemporary contexts.

Q3: Preservation of Original Layout and Features:

The consensus on the importance of preserving original layouts and architectural features reinforces the notion that physical integrity underpins historical authenticity. These elements anchor a city's past identity while providing tangible links to cultural practices. From an architectural perspective, such preservation serves as a repository of design knowledge, offering lessons for modern urban planning. Simultaneously, from a socio-cultural perspective, these features foster a sense of belonging and continuity, essential for community cohesion.

Q4: Ranking of Essential Characteristics:

The prioritization of "Historical Continuity and Preservation" and "Cultural Significance and Collective Memory" highlights the primacy of intangible cultural heritage in defining old cities. The lower emphasis on "Adaptation to Local Climate and Geography" reflects the experts' belief that, while significant, this aspect is often subordinate to cultural and historical dimensions in shaping a city's identity. However, the intermediate ranking of "Socioeconomic Factors and Community Engagement" and "Resilience and Flexibility" points to the complexity of integrating heritage preservation with the demands of urban modernization. This ranking underscores the multi-faceted nature of old cities, where historical, cultural, and socioeconomic considerations must be balanced.

Q5–Q9: Intangible Aspects and Redevelopment:

The consistent recognition of the "spirit of place" as a critical element for identity highlights its role as an intangible yet indispensable quality that distinguishes old cities. Experts identified features such as street layouts, landmarks, and building materials as physical manifestations of this spirit, while community traditions and rituals were seen as vital for sustaining cultural continuity. These findings align with theories of place attachment and collective memory, which argue that urban spaces act as anchors for shared identities. The acknowledgement of collective memory as a guiding force in planning and preservation strategies reflects its role as a bridge between historical authenticity and future adaptability. Experts also emphasized that, despite the challenges posed by major redevelopment, collective memory can be retained by integrating historical elements into new designs and involving communities in the planning process.

Q10–Q13: Challenges, Opportunities, Successes, and Failures:

The challenges identified—balancing heritage preservation with economic development, infrastructure demands, and tourism pressures—reflect the global struggle to protect cultural heritage amid rapid urbanization. Opportunities such as adaptive reuse, sustainable tourism, and green infrastructure highlight innovative strategies that leverage heritage as an asset rather than a constraint. The examples of successful cities, including Kyoto, Bruges, and Cairo, demonstrate the effectiveness of strong legal frameworks, community involvement, and strategic urban planning. Conversely, failures like unregulated

urban development, inadequate funding, and over-tourism emphasize the need for robust governance and the preservation of intangible heritage alongside physical structures.

These findings underscore the complexity of defining and preserving old cities, revealing a dynamic interplay between tangible and intangible factors. The significance of historical continuity and cultural memory highlights the role of old cities as custodians of collective identity, bridging past and present. The variability in expert opinions on age and habitation reflects a broader discourse in urban studies, where context-sensitive approaches are increasingly valued over rigid definitions. Furthermore, the emphasis on preserving the "spirit of place" aligns with phenomenological perspectives in architecture, which prioritize experiential and emotional connections to urban environments. The challenges and opportunities identified in the survey point to the need for integrative frameworks that combine historic preservation with modern urban demands. Concepts such as adaptive reuse and sustainable tourism exemplify how old cities can serve as models for balancing heritage with growth. These findings also emphasize the importance of community involvement, which aligns with participatory planning theories that advocate for inclusive decision-making in urban governance.

In conclusion, the survey reinforces the multi-dimensional nature of old cities, where physical structures, cultural traditions, and socioeconomic systems converge to create unique urban identities. These insights provide a foundation for developing preservation strategies that respect both historical integrity and contemporary relevance, ensuring that old cities remain vibrant and resilient in an ever-changing world.

7. Conclusions:

Old cities are more than just historical settlements; they are living narratives of human civilization, embodying centuries of cultural, architectural, and socioeconomic evolution. This research emphasizes the complex interplay of factors that define old cities, showcasing their importance as repositories of collective memory and cultural identity. In an era of rapid urbanization and globalization, understanding and preserving the essence of old cities is not just an academic pursuit but a critical task for sustainable development and urban resilience. These cities offer unique models of sustainability, blending historical continuity with modern adaptability, and serve as invaluable resources for designing future urban environments that respect the past while embracing the future.

To be classified as an "old city," a settlement must fulfil three core criteria: (1) historical significance for cultural, religious, or heritage reasons, (2) long-term preservation of its urban fabric, and (3) intergenerational continuity deeply rooted in collective memory. These elements collectively define the essence of an old city, shaping its identity and ensuring its relevance over centuries. The enduring characteristics of old cities—traditional architecture, mixed land use, and their ability to evoke a strong "spirit of place"—are central to their role as cultural and spiritual hubs for residents and visitors alike.

The integration of heritage preservation with sustainable development principles offers promising pathways for safeguarding old cities. Future research should focus on strategies to harmonize conservation efforts with the demands of modernization, such as climate-responsive urban planning, eco-friendly tourism management, and community-led heritage initiatives. These strategies can address challenges like over-tourism, economic pressures, and environmental degradation, ensuring old cities remain vibrant and liveable while bridging history and progress.

In conclusion, old cities stand as enduring symbols of human ingenuity and cultural heritage, offering profound lessons in resilience and sustainability. By continuing to explore innovative preservation practices and fostering global collaboration, these treasures can be preserved for future generations and adapted to meet modern urban challenges. These efforts will pave the way for a more balanced urban future, where the richness of the past enhances the potential of the present and inspires the development of tomorrow's cities.

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